

Commentary to the Solemnity of Pentecost – Year A –

The Spirit: Hope For A New World

Introduction



The natural phenomena that impress most the imagination of man—fire, lightning, hurricane, earthquake, thunder (Ex 19:16-19)—are used in the Bible to describe the manifestations of God.

The sacred authors used images also to present the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. They said that the Spirit is a breath of life (Gn 2:7), the rain that irrigates the land and transforms the desert into a garden (Is 32:15; 44:3), a force that restores life (Ex 37:1-14), the rumble of the sky, wind that strongly blows, thunder, tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-3). All vigorous images that suggest the idea of uncontrollable bursts of strength.

Where the Spirit comes radical upheavals and transformation always happen: barriers fall, doors are opened wide; all the towers built by human hands and designed by “the wisdom of this world” shake; fear, passivity, and quietism disappear; initiatives are developed and courageous decisions are made.

Who is dissatisfied and aspires the renewal of the world and of man can count on the Spirit: nothing can resist its power. One day the prophet Jeremiah asked himself discouragingly: “Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard his spots? And can you do good, you who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer 13:23). Yes—one can answer him—every prodigy is possible where the Spirit of God erupts.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“The Spirit of the Lord fills the earth and renews the face of the earth.”

First Reading: Acts 2:1-11

Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them alone and that he would send the Spirit (Jn 14:16,26). Today we celebrate the feast of this gift of the Risen One.

Reading the passage from the Acts we are amazed by the numerous “prodigies” that occurred on the day of Pentecost: thunder and strong wind, flames of fire coming down from heaven, the apostles who speak all languages.

We also wonder why God has waited fifty days before sending his Spirit upon the disciples.

To understand this page of theology (not news) we need to delve a little into the symbolic language used by the author.

Luke places the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost. Yet, in today’s Gospel, John tells us that Jesus imparted the Spirit on the day of the resurrection (Jn 20:22). How do one explain this lack of agreement on the date?

We must say clearly: the paschal mystery is unique. Death, Resurrection, Ascension and the gift of the Spirit took place in the same moment, in the moment of Jesus’ death. Recounting what happened on Calvary on that Good Friday, John says “he bowed his head and Jesus gave up the Spirit” (Jn 19:30).

Why, then, this unique, sublime, ineffable mystery of Easter was presented by Luke as if it had happened in three successive moments? He did it to help us understand the many aspects.

John has placed the outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Easter to show that the Spirit is the gift of the Risen One. Now we see why Luke situates it in the context of the feast of Pentecost.

Pentecost was a very ancient Jewish holiday, celebrated fifty days after Easter. It commemorated the arrival of the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. We all remember what happened in that place: Moses climbed the mountain; he encountered God and received the Law to be transmitted to his people.

The Israelites were very proud of this gift. They said that before them, God had offered the Law to other peoples. They had refused it, preferring to continue with their vices and excesses. To thank God for this predilection, the Israelites had set up a feast: the Pentecost. Saying that Spirit descended upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, Luke wants to teach that the Spirit has replaced the old law and became the new law for the Christian.

To explain what he means we resort to a comparison. One day Jesus said: “Do you ever pick grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?” (Mt 7:16) It would be foolish to imagine that surrounding the bramble with attention, pruning it, creating around it a milder climate would make it produce grapes. However, if—with a marvel of genetic engineering—one could turn it into a vine, then any external

intervention would not be necessary. The bramble would spontaneously produce grapes.

Before receiving the outpouring of the Spirit, the world was like a big bramble. God had given people great directions—a set of rules, precepts, many recommendations. He expected fruits, the work of justice and love (Mt 21:18-19), but these have not arrived because the tree was bad: “No poor tree bears good fruit... and the evil person draws evil things from the evil stored in his heart” (Lk 6:43,45).

What did God do then? He decided to change the hearts of people. With a new heart—he thought—they would no longer have need of any external law. They would have done good by following the impulses coming from within them.

Here’s what the law of the Spirit is: it is the new heart; it is God’s life. When it enters in a person, it transforms him and from bramble, it becomes a fruitful tree, able to spontaneously produce the works of God.

When a person is filled with the Spirit, something unheard of happens in him. He loves with the love of God himself. From that moment “he does not need someone to teach him” (1 Jn 2:27); he won’t require another law. John comes to say that the man animated by the Spirit becomes even incapable of sinning: “Those born of God do not sin, for the seed of God remains in them; they cannot sin because they are born of God” (1 Jn 3:9).

And the thunder, the wind, the fire? But it’s clear: we are going to see in the book of Exodus phenomena which accompanied the gift of the old law: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning and a dense cloud over the mountain. All the people in the camp trembled” (Ex 19:16). “All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning and heard the blast of the trumpet and saw the mountain smoking” (Ex 20:18).

The rabbis said that at Sinai, on the day of Pentecost, when God gave the Law, his words took the form of seventy tongues of fire, indicating that the Torah was destined to all peoples (thought to be exactly seventy at that time).

If the old law was given in the midst of thunder, lightning, flames of fire... how could Luke present in a different way the gift of the Spirit—the new law? If he wanted to be understood he had to use the same images.

And the many languages ??spoken by the apostles?

Probably Luke refers to a very common phenomenon in the early church. After receiving the Spirit, the believers began to praise God in a state of exaltation. As if in ecstasy, they uttered strange words in other languages.

Luke has used this phenomenon in a symbolic sense to teach about the universality of the church. The Spirit is a gift meant for all persons and all peoples. Faced with this gift of God, all barriers of language, race and tribe collapse. On the day of Pentecost, the opposite of what happened at Babel occurred (Gn 11:1-9). People began to misunderstand and to distance from each other. Here the Spirit puts into action an opposite movement. He brings together those who are scattered.

Whoever lets himself be guided by the word of the gospel and by the Spirit speaks a language that everyone understands and everyone joins in: the language of love. It is the Spirit who transforms mankind into one family where all understand and love each other.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7,12-13

What causes divisions within the community? Envy, reciprocal jealousy. Those who have good qualities (intelligent, strong, good health, have studied...) instead of humbly putting their talents at the service of the brothers and sisters, they begin to expect honorary titles. They demand more respect and believe they are entitled to privileges. They want to occupy the first places. Thus the ministries of the community, from opportunities to serve, become opportunities to establish, assert their power and prestige.

In the community of Corinth, Christians were no better than those of today. They were committing the same sins; they had the same defects. Specifically, they were divided because of the different charisms (that is, of the various gifts) that each had received from God.

Paul writes to these Christians to remind them that the many gifts, qualities that each of them has, are not given to create divisions, but to promote unity. Paul says: "the Spirit reveals his presence in each one with a gift that is also a service" (v. 7). And this is so because the source of all gifts is one: the Spirit. Paul says: "There is a diversity of gifts, but the Spirit is the same" (v. 4).

To clarify this idea of unity and mutual service, Paul uses the comparison of the body.

Christians form one body, made up of many members. Each part must perform its function for the good of the whole organism. So it happens with different gifts of which every member of the community is enriched: they serve so that everyone can show to others his love through humble availability to serve.

Gospel: John 20:19-23

For the first Christians, the first day of the week is important because it is the day of the Lord (Rev 1:10). It is that day in which the community usually reunites to break the Eucharistic bread (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).

It is evening. The temporal indication with which the evangelical passage starts is precious. Perhaps it indicates the late hour in which the early Christians were used to gather for their celebration.

The doors are locked for fear of the Jews (v. 19). Jesus certainly did not announce triumphs and easy life to this disciples. "You will have trouble in the world," he said (Jn 16:33). However, the main reason for insisting on closed doors (Jn 20:26) is theological. John wants to make it clear that the Risen One is the same Jesus that the apostles have seen, known, heard, touched, but is in a different

condition. He is not back to his previous life (as Lazarus did). He enters into a completely new existence.

The body is no longer made of physical atoms. It is imperceptible to the verification of the senses.

The resurrection of the flesh is not equivalent to the resuscitation of a corpse. It is the mysterious blossoming of a new life from a finite being. Paul explains this fact through the image of the seed. He says that “the body is sown in decomposition; it will be raised never more to die. It is sown in humiliation, but it will be raised for glory. It is buried in weakness, but the resurrection shall be with power. When buried it is a natural body, but it will be raised as a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:42-44).

When Jesus shows his hands and his side, the disciples rejoice. A surprising reaction: they should be sad seeing the signs of his passion and death. Instead, they rejoice, not because they find themselves in front of the Jesus whom they accompanied along the roads of Palestine, but because they see the Lord (v. 20). They realize that the Risen One, who is revealing himself to them, is the same Jesus who gave his life.

John places the manifestations of the Risen One in the context of the first day of the week. He wants to tell the Christians of his community that they too can meet the Lord. They will not encounter Jesus of Nazareth with the physical body he had in this world, but the Risen One, every time they come together “in the Lord’s day”.

After having twice addressed them the greeting: Peace be with you! (vv. 19-21) Jesus gives His Spirit to the disciples and confers them the power to forgive sins (vv. 21-23).

The disciples are sent to fulfill a mission: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

When he was in the world, Jesus made the face and the love of the Father present (Jn 12:45). Now, having left this world, he continues his work through the disciples to whom he confers his Spirit.

Welcoming him was welcoming the Father who sent him, now welcoming his envoys is welcoming him (Jn 13:20).

To understand the mission entrusted to the apostles, the forgiveness of sins through the outpouring of the Spirit, we must refer to the religious conceptions of the people of Israel and to the words of the prophets.

At the time of Jesus, it was widely thought that the people were acting badly. They defiled themselves with their idols. They were unclean because they were moved by an evil spirit. We wondered when God would intervene to rescue them and to instill in them a good spirit.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul makes a dramatic description of the miserable condition of the person who is at the mercy of the evil spirit: “I cannot explain what is happening to me because I do not do what I want, but on the contrary, the very things I hate. I know that what is right does not abide in me, I mean in my flesh. I can want to do what is right, but I am unable to do it. In fact, I do not do the good I want, but the evil I hate” (Rom 7:15-19).

Through the mouth of the prophets God promised the gift of a new spirit, of His Spirit: “Then I shall pour pure water over you and you shall be made clean—cleansed from the defilement of all your idols. I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I shall remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I shall put my spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and keep my laws” (Ezk 36:25-27).

This outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord would renew the world. He will flood it—said the prophet Ezekiel—like a rushing torrent of water which, when it enters the desert, makes it fruitful and turns it into a garden. “Near the river on both banks there will be all kinds of fruit trees will foliage that will not wither and fruit that will never fail; each month they will bear a fresh crop because the water comes from the temple. The fruit will be good to eat and the leaves will be used for healing” (Ezk 47:12). They are delightful images that admirably describe the life-giving work of the Spirit.

On Easter day these prophecies are fulfilled. In a symbolic gesture—Jesus breathed on them—the Spirit is consigned. This breath recalls the moment of creation, when “the Lord God formed man, dust drawn from the clay, and breathed into his nostrils a breath of life” (Gn 2:7). The breath of Jesus creates the new man. This man is no more a victim of the forces that lead to evil but is animated by a new energy that drives him to do good.

Where the Spirit goes evil is won, sin is forgiven—cancelled, destroyed—and the new man modeled on the person of Christ is born.

The mission that the Risen One entrusts to his disciples is to forgive sins, thus continuing his work as the “Lamb of God, who came to take away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29).

What does it mean to forgive sins? These words have been interpreted—in the right way, but limited—as the conferment of the power to absolve from sins to the apostles. It’s not the only way to forgive, that is, to neutralize in order to overcome sin. The rights conferred by Jesus is much more extensive and covers all the disciples who are animated by his Spirit: it is that of cleansing the world of every form of evil.

The powers are not two—to forgive or to retain—at the discretion of the confessor that evaluates each case. The power is only one, that of annihilating, in all ways, sin. But this can also be not forgiven, if the disciple is not committed to creating the conditions that all may open their hearts to the action of the Spirit, the sin is not remitted.

- See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.EyZxLpE5.dpuf>

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