

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, May 8th 2016

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

The readings for the Ascension of the Lord predict the coming of a new age in the history of the world: the Age of the Holy Spirit! And this coming is accompanied by a new power from God.

Listen to Jesus' final words to his disciples before ascending to his Father as recorded in Acts of the Apostles: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Luke's Gospel account of the Ascension echoes Acts, "And behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:49).

Paul reiterates Luke and Acts. Recall that Paul knew what it was like to live without this power. He himself experienced this power for the first time in his encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians:

May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe (Eph 1: 18-19).

The "surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe" is the presence of the Holy Spirit!

Remember John's Last Supper discourse. Jesus attempts to comfort his followers even while predicting his departure, "But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16:8).

This truth of the coming of the New Age of the Holy Spirit is present in the New Testament and is also woven throughout traditional Christian catechesis. Baptismal catechesis proclaims a new birth by water and the Spirit. Confirmation catechesis promises a new coming of the Spirit to strengthen us as adult Christians.

Paul's Letter to the Galatians witnesses to the Fruits of the Spirit as he experienced them after his conversion: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And we are all familiar with the Sevenfold Gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord.

I believe most of us are comfortable acknowledging intellectually the presence of the Holy Spirit. But I also believe that many of us have not identified this presence in our daily personal experience. I did not until I was thirty-five years old.

This liturgical season offers the invitation to name and to be grateful for the presence of the Spirit in ordinary daily experience. For instance, as I struggle to express appropriately the insights for this reflection am I aware of the multiple gifts of the Spirit at work? Surely the Gifts of the Spirit: wisdom,

counsel and knowledge. Surely the Fruits of the Spirit: love, generosity and patience.

Jesus has indeed fulfilled the promise he made to his disciples at the Last Supper! Now our daily lives are replete with the presence of the Spirit.

During this Post-Resurrection season we have a special invitation to pause and be grateful for this presence: “Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age, alleluia” (Communion Antiphon).

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