

Pentecost and Speaking in Tongues

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 2:1-11
<i>Response</i>	Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 12:3B-7, 12-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 20:19-23

Today's feast is one of the greatest feasts of the liturgical year. It is the feast of Pentecost. So we are looking at the readings for Pentecost Sunday in Year A, and if you look here we will begin with the Gospel. In a way that was similar to the readings for the Solemnity of the Ascension, the Gospel for today is from the Gospel of St. John and it is a little puzzling because you might wonder why we are reading this Gospel on the Feast of Pentecost. Well let's look at it together and we will try to explain it. In John 20:19-23 we read these words:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."¹

So that's our Gospel reading for Pentecost. It might sound a little strange because obviously this Gospel reading is taking place on Easter Sunday, not Pentecost

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Sunday, because it says right there “on the evening of that day” — meaning the evening of Easter Sunday — the day that Mary Magdalene, Peter and John went out to find the empty tomb. That's when this event takes place. So why is the Church giving us this account on Pentecost Sunday? Well the answer is twofold. First, it's because the Gospels don't have accounts of what happened on Pentecost Sunday — that can only be found in the book of Acts. So that's going to be given to us in the first reading for today. Secondly, the Church chooses John's Gospel for Year A in particular because of the reference to the Holy Spirit, to the giving of the Holy Spirit. So if you look there again, as we just saw, when Jesus appears to the apostles, he breathed on them and he says “receive the Holy Spirit.” If you look at that passage, and if you go back in the tradition, this passage from John has always been interpreted — at least in the fourth century in the writings of St. Cyril of Jerusalem — as a kind of “anticipation of what will happen at Pentecost.” So what St. Cyril said is that the apostles on Easter Sunday receive the Holy Spirit in part, particularly with the power to forgive and retain sins, and it points forward to the fact that at Pentecost they will receive it “in the fullness of God's Spirit.” In other words, what is given to them now as a power, will be given to them slowly in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost.

So the Church gives us this reading as a kind of anticipation of Pentecost, but she couples it with the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, which is the full narrative of the account of Pentecost. So let's go back and look at the first reading there in Acts 2:1-11. This is the first reading for the feast of Pentecost:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native

language? Par'thians and Medes and E'lamites and residents of Mesopota'mia, Judea and Cappado'cia, Pontus and Asia, Phryg'ia and Pamphyl'ia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyre'ne, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

So that is the reading for Acts 2:1-11. Now there's so much we could talk about with this passage. It is really, really rich, but I just want to focus here on three key elements. Number one, when Luke introduces the passage and he says the day of Pentecost, what was that day? What would it have meant to a first century Jew? Obviously we as Catholics know the feast of Pentecost today as one of the feasts of the liturgical year. We tend to refer to it as the birthday of the Church, that's what the feast of Pentecost is. But Pentecost was, first and foremost, a Jewish holiday, a Jewish feast day, so what does it mean to them? Secondly, why does the Holy Spirit descend upon them in tongues as of fire? We saw the Holy Spirit descend in other forms at other times — like at the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove — so what's the significance of this time the Holy Spirit coming upon them in tongues as of fire? Why doesn't he come down in the form of a dove like at Jesus' baptism? What's the meaning of tongues of fire? And then third and finally, what is the result of the descent of the Holy Spirit? What is all this about the miracle of them speaking in tongues? What does that mean in context in the book of Acts for them to have this miraculous sign of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to speak in tongues in Acts 2. So let's look at each one of those in succession.

First, Pentecost was a Jewish feast. The word in Greek, *pentecostē*, literally means the 50th. So it was the celebration of the 50th day after the offering of the sheaf during Passover. So the first meaning for the festival of Pentecost was a harvest festival. It was a day where they would offer up the firstfruits of the spring harvest to God in thanksgiving, and because it was a great harvest festival, it was a pilgrimage festival as well. The law in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy required that every single adult male would come to Jerusalem — it says this in Deuteronomy 16 — and that they would keep not just the feast of Passover every year, but that 50 days later they would celebrate the feast of Pentecost, which in Hebrew by the way was not called Pentecost, it was called the feast of *Shebuoth*, which means the feast of weeks. In other words, the seven

sevens, so it was the feast of sevens. 7×7 is 49, so it was seven weeks after Passover. Then on the 50th day, they would keep this great harvest festival and they would bring bread and they would offer it up to God in the temple along with other sacrifices. So it was a harvest festival, it was a spring festival, and it was also — and this is really important — in Jewish tradition, a festival of remembrance. It was a memorial feast where the Jews would celebrate the giving of the law to Israel at Mount Sinai. So in Jewish tradition, Passover celebrated the deliverance of Israel from Egypt on the night of the Passover with the Angel of Death, and Pentecost, 50 days later, celebrated the arrival of the Israelites at Mount Sinai in the desert and the reception of the law, the 10 Commandments, on Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus 19-20. So that's what Jews were doing. If it's Pentecost day, everybody is in Jerusalem to offer up the spring harvest, but they are also there to remember the descent of God upon Mount Sinai in the giving of the law in the book of Exodus.

So with that in mind we can now answer the second question. Why does the Holy Spirit descend upon the apostles in tongues as of fire? Well the answer is really simple. If you go back to the book of Exodus 19, it says this about the day that the Jews remembered on Pentecost. In Exodus 19:18, it's describing God coming down upon Mount Sinai to give the Israelites the law. In verse 18 it says “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.” So there we have it. Just as in the Old Testament, the Lord came down from heaven and descended upon Israel in fire to give them the old law, so now too in the New Testament on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends upon the apostles in tongues as of fire, not to give them the old law, which was written on tablets of stone, but to give them the new law, which is written on the tablets of their hearts. He's now going to put his law within them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So this is a very important point because it shows us two things. First, that Pentecost is like a new Mount Sinai, but secondly, also, that the Holy Spirit is divine. It shows the divinity of the Holy Spirit, because in the Old Testament it was the Lord — Yahweh was the Hebrew name for God — who descended upon Mount Sinai in fire. So now it's the spirit who descends upon the apostles in fire at the feast of Pentecost. So this is the great coming of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised the disciples. That if he went away, he would send them the Spirit, he would send them the Paraclete, he would send them the Advocate, who would

come to dwell with them and to make his home in them in a new and radical way with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So that is the second question.

The third question, what about the gift of tongues? What about the miracle of tongues in Acts 2? There are lots of debates about what speaking in tongues means in the New Testament, because the miracle of speaking in tongues is mentioned not just in the book of Acts, but it is also mentioned in St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in chapters 12, 13, and 14. I'm not going to be able to get into St. Paul's teaching on speaking in tongues in First Corinthians, but what I am just going to focus on is the meaning of the gift of tongues in the book of Acts. If you look at the book of Acts in context, very clearly here several things stand out. First, when the disciples begin to speak in tongues, they are clearly speaking in other languages. *Hetereis glōssais* is the Greek expression. So just like a glossary is a book that explains the English language to us, the English tongue, so too here they're speaking in other tongues, other languages, and you can see that in verse 7 when it says “are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?” The Greek word there is *dialektō*, so in other words “our own native dialect.”

So what appears to be happening here is that Jesus' disciples, who were all Galileans, are speaking their language, which is probably Aramaic — although there is some debate about that — but the people hearing it are hearing it in their own native tongues, whether they be from Persia, Media, Cappadocia, Asia or Egypt; they are hearing it in their own language. So this is clearly some kind of miraculous gift. The Holy Spirit has now enabled the apostles to speak about the wonders of God — in other words to say what God has done and has accomplished — but enabled the audience to understand them in their own language. Now why does God do that? What is the significance of this miracle of tongues in the Acts of the Apostles? Well I think most people recognize that this is the beginning of the Gospel being brought to all the ends of the earth. In other words, the good news of the new covenant isn't just for one people. It isn't just for Israel, it is going to be for Israel and for the nations. It is going to be for all the nations of the world. But I would also point out that from a Jewish perspective, something deeper is going on here, because if you were a first century Jew, you would know another famous story that involved multiple tongues. And that is the story of the Tower of Babel. So although the readings for the Sunday of Pentecost do not have anything from

the book of Genesis, if you look at the readings for the vigil of Pentecost, the first reading for that vigil is actually from Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel. So if you go back to Genesis 11 for just a second, I will read this. You all know the story of the Tower of Babel, even children's Bibles contain it. Basically the whole earth is said to have one language and just a few words, and human beings gather together and they say "come...let us make a name for ourselves...let's build a tower and its top will reach to the heavens." This is kind of an expression of their pride and their desire not to glorify God, but to glorify humanity, to glorify themselves. And what happens is, in Genesis 11:7, God says this:

"Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

There is actually a pun there in Hebrew. The word *Bävel* sounds like *balal*, which is the word for confuse. So they called it *Bävel* because there God *balal-ed* their speech, he confused their speech. So that's the story of Genesis 11. What does that have to do with Pentecost? Well it's quite simple. What Pentecost is from an ancient Jewish perspective — remember the apostles were all Jewish Christians so they would've known the Scriptures well — is the reversal of the Tower of Babel. It's the undoing of the sin of Babel. So just as human beings in their pride sought to unite humanity and to unite the world through their own power, God now is going to show them, after the division of Babel, that the only way the world will truly be united is not through human effort and through human pride and human power, but through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the Church. So God, in Genesis 11, confuses the speech of the people, he multiplies the languages precisely so that language now becomes a barrier to human unity, so that you cannot make one single nation, one single people, come together through pure political power that would unite the entire world, because language is such a difficult barrier, such an impediment. And if you've ever tried to travel to other countries where you can't speak the language, you will find out real quick what a barrier language really can be. And even if you learn the language, sometimes there are still barriers, because you misunderstand one another. Well now what's

happening in the feast of Pentecost is that those barriers are being overcome. Not through human means, but through divine means. Those divisions are being overcome not through the power of human beings, but through the power of the Holy Spirit who has now come. The third person of the Trinity has now come to indwell the Church.

And that explains the readings for the rest of this Mass. So if you look at Psalm 104 — I won't read the whole Psalm, it's a beautiful Psalm with the refrain "Lord, Send out your Spirit, and Renew the Face of the Earth." And in Psalm 104:30 we have this image where it says "when you Lord send forth your spirit," and the Hebrew word there is *ruah*, it means spirit, or breath, or wind; it can mean all three of those things. "Sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the earth." That, in the Old Testament context, is a prayer for God to renew creation through the gift of his Spirit. Because if you look at the beginning of creation, God's Spirit is hovering over the waters, so the prayer is to renew creation. Well that is fulfilled really in Pentecost because God's spirit now comes down and he begins to make everyone know. He makes them a new creation through the indwelling of the Spirit.

The same thing is true of 1 Corinthians 12:3-7. If you look, there is a short section from Paul's letter on the variety of gifts that are given to the Church. In 1 Corinthians 12:3 it says:

I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

So if you pause there, in this case what Paul is referring to in the Greek language — he uses the term *charismatōn* for gifts — when he uses the term different gifts — this is where we get the language of charismatic gifts — is these gifts of the Holy Spirit that God gives to the Church. Why? For the common good. For the building up of the body of Christ, just like we see in the Acts of the Apostles. Why do the apostles get this gift of tongues to be able to speak and be heard in other

languages? Well it is not just so that they can show off their powers. It is not for the sake of sensationalism or display, it is for the sake of the Gospel. It's in order to bring the good news to the nations and build up the body of Christ. And in fact, Paul goes on to say in verse 12, "just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit." That is a fascinating image there of drinking the spirit. So the Spirit is depicted as fire but also as water. By the way, if you look at the rest of Acts — which we didn't read — the image of being intoxicated actually comes up. Because when people see them speaking in tongues and hear people interpreting them, they say that they're just drunk. Some of the nonbelievers, some of the skeptics, say they are just drunk. Obviously they are not drunk, but there is a sense in which they are intoxicated. They been made to drink of the Holy Spirit, they are filled with the Spirit and now have these powers to speak the Gospel in other tongues.

In closing then, what do we make of this feast? Well I would like to close with a couple of comments from the Catechism. The Catechism has a beautiful section on the mystery of Pentecost. It is just a few paragraphs, but it's really rich and it makes two points about the mystery of Pentecost that I'd like to highlight for us. First, the connection between Pentecost and Easter. As you probably know if you pay attention to the liturgical season, Pentecost brings the Easter season to a close. But the Catechism says something more about this. It says that in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Christ's "Passover is fulfilled." So his Passover is his passion and his death that he undergoes during the feast of Passover. But it's important that we not stop there, because Jesus' passion and his death wasn't the end of the story. It was ultimately ordered toward his resurrection from the dead (the reunion of his soul to his body), his ascension into heaven (the entry of his humanity into the life the Trinity, into the heavenly realm), but then it doesn't stop there, the final goal of Jesus' passion and death and resurrection was the giving of the Holy Spirit. That's the ultimate climax of salvation history. Because in the giving of the Holy Spirit, now the third person has been sent into the world. The third person of the Holy Trinity now comes into the world in a new way to indwell the Church, to indwell the apostles, and to begin his mission in the world of bringing the redemption that Christ won on the cross to the world through the

Church and through the sacraments. So this is a very important feast. It is nothing less than the fulfillment of Easter.

Secondly, the Catechism also says something really important about the mystery of the Trinity, which we will be coming to when we get to the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. It says that on Pentecost something unprecedented happened. “On that day the Holy Trinity is fully revealed” (CCC 732). Up this point, God began to give signs and hints and shadows, prefigurations, of the mystery of the Trinity, but the Trinity has not yet been fully revealed until the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, comes upon the apostles in Pentecost; comes upon them in tongues as of fire and makes known his presence in a visible and powerful and supernatural way. So in a sense, Pentecost is a Trinitarian feast, it is not just a feast of the Holy Spirit. And then finally, this is the feast, as I said in the beginning, of the birthday of the Church. St. Augustine had a great insight on this that I would like to read to you. From one of his sermons, sermon 271, Augustine said this about the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost:

The tongues in which they spoke as the Holy Spirit filled them were a foreshadowing of the Church’s preaching of the Gospel in the tongues of all the nations. After the flood, in pride and defiance of the Lord, an impious generation erected a high tower and so brought about the division of the human race into many language groups... At Pentecost, by contrast, the humble piety of believers brought all these diverse languages into the unity of the Church. What discord had scattered, love was to gather together.²

That is a beautiful quote and that's really the mission of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the Holy Spirit is to bring the love of God into the world and to unite the world not through power, not through pride, but through divine charity.

² Augustine, Sermon 271; trans. E. Barnecut, 1992, p. 73