

## **Pentecost Sunday - Mass During the Day**

(Year B)

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| <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   |

This Sunday the church celebrates one of the great feasts of the liturgical year. You could call it, in a sense, the feast of the Holy Spirit because it's the celebration of the gift of the Spirit to the Apostles on the Feast of Pentecost. Some people even refer to this as the birthday of the church, and so what we are going to do today is we are going to look at the Feast of Pentecost and we are going to ask ourselves, what is the meaning of Pentecost in the life of the mission of the church, and how is it connected to the Jewish festival of Pentecost in the Old Testament, and then also, why does the church give us the gospel of Jesus breathing on the disciples and giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit on this particular feast day? So there a number of questions revolving around that. Before I do, just a quick note and something to think about. If you look at the Old Testament calendar from the book of Leviticus 23, the Jews had an annual cycle of festivals and feasts just like we Catholics do. They had seven major festivals in the book of Leviticus: festivals like Passover, First Fruits, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Day of Atonement, that kind of thing.

What is interesting is that of those festivals, two of them have come over into the new covenant. One is Passover, which we celebrate at Easter. If you recall, the word Easter in Latin is pascha, that is simply Passover. The second though is Pentecost itself. Pentecost was a Jewish festival before it became a Christian festival. So obviously those two feasts come over in to the new covenant because they are important. So we are going to look at that today in some detail and try to unpack

this festival, which sometimes gets overlooked by Christians; we don't give it as much importance as it really has. In the same way, the Holy Spirit sometimes gets overlooked by Christians as we ponder the mystery of the Trinity. It is kind of the forgotten member of the Holy Trinity in some circles and in some cases. So let's look here at the gospel for today. The church gives us the gospel from the Gospel of John 20:19-23, and again although we are in Year B this shouldn't come as a big surprise because one of the characteristics of the Easter season that we've seen over the last seven weeks is that the church has been repeatedly choosing from St. John's Gospel. And, in a sense because Pentecost brings the Easter season to its climax, she does that again one more time with John chapter 20:19-23. This is a story we've seen before. It's the breathing on the disciples, the giving of the Holy Spirit to disciples, although in this case we are going to look at it from a slightly different angle. So here's what the gospel for today says:

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."<sup>1</sup>

Now in some past videos we've looked at that very same passage as the foundation for the sacrament of Reconciliation, as Christ giving the Apostles the power to forgive and retain sins. That's certainly an important part of this text, but that's not the primary reason the church chooses this passage for Pentecost Sunday. So today I will focus on those elements that are tied into the festival of Pentecost. There are three key elements here I want to highlight. The first is the act of Jesus breathing on the disciples. In the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, the Hebrew word for spirit and the Greek word for spirit are also the same word as for breath.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

So in Hebrew, *ruach* is the word for spirit or breath, and in Greek the word *pneuma*, from which we get the English word pneumatic, something that's pneumatic like a pneumatic drill that is powered by air or by breath so to speak, or by a spirit in the sense that it has its own animating power. That word *pneuma* means spirit or breath. So when Jesus breathes on the disciples, that's a very concrete way of expressing the gift of the Spirit to them. That's the first element here.

Second, Jesus explicitly says, in addition to that spirit centered act, he also says the words “receive the Holy Spirit.” The Greek there is *pneuma hagion*. *Hagios* means holy in Greek, *pneuma* means breath or spirit or wind, and what we see here is a fulfillment of something Jesus has promised earlier in the gospel. If you go back to John 13, 14 and 15, the Last Supper discourse, one of the things Jesus does during the Last Supper is that he tells the disciples I'm going to go away and then I am going to come back again and then I'm going to give you the gift of the Spirit, *pneuma*. He also calls him the Advocate or the Paraclete, but that's actually an alternate Gospel reading for today from John 15. What he says is that the spirit is going to lead you into all truth, but I have to go away first before I can give you the spirit. So one of the things the church is doing here by selecting this gospel passage is giving us the fulfillment, so to speak, of Jesus' promise to the disciples that he would give them the gift of the Spirit after he underwent his passion, his death and his resurrection. So he says here receive the Holy Spirit. So that's the second element here.

The third element, and in some ways this is the easiest to overlook but, as we are going to see in a minute it's one of the most important, is the element of mission. So notice, when Jesus breathes on the disciples and gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit, he is not simply giving them the power to forgive and retain sins — although that is certainly primary and very much the focus — but notice what he also says to them, “as the Father sent me, even so I send you.” So in a real sense Jesus here is commissioning the disciples, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, making them into Apostles, because *apóstolos*, the Greek word apostle, literally means one whom is sent. So someone sent is an apostle. And in this case they are being sent with the same mission that Christ had, which was the mission that he received from the father and was empowered by the Spirit to accomplish in his public ministry all the way back to his baptism. He is now giving the spirit to them

in order to send them out to accomplish the same mission, the mission of bringing the good news to the world.

And in this case I want to highlight the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 730 actually brings out this element when it says about this passage for this week, it says:

“From this hour onward [meaning from the hour that Jesus breathed on the disciples], the mission of Christ and the Spirit becomes the mission of the Church: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.”

Okay, so with that in mind, the reason, as we are going to see in a moment, that the church picks this gospel for Pentecost, the climax of the Easter season, is because Pentecost is all about the apostles being anointed with the spirit so that they can go out on mission; so that they can be sent out to proclaim the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so those are the elements of this gospel text that are important to highlight.

Now with all that in mind let's turn back to the first reading for this week which is, like the rest of the Easter season, taken from the Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11. It is one of the most important passages in Acts, it's the description of the feast of Pentecost itself and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. So although it is familiar, let's read it through together and we will highlight some key elements:

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?"

And this is one of those passages where if you are a lector you don't want to get assigned this text because it's got all these names, but I'll try to work through them for you:

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's the reading for this week. Now there is so much we could say about this but I'll try to highlight what I think are the most important elements. Number one, Pentecost itself. That first verse, "when the day of Pentecost had come," in order to understand everything that is happening right here you have to know what that means, when the day of Pentecost had come. So let's break that down. The first point, just the word Pentecost. It is a Greek word, it comes from the Greek word meaning 50th, as in the 50th day after Passover. So remember the feast of Passover was when Jesus was put to death, crucified, resurrected; so the Jews would count seven weeks from Passover,  $7 \times 7 = 49$ , and then add one day to that and on that 50th day they would celebrate a great feast. Now in Greek it's called Pentecost, in Hebrew in the Old Testament it was called the Feast of Weeks, or *Shebuoth* in Hebrew because the Hebrew name focuses on the seven weeks of the season that took place between Passover and Pentecost, or between Passover and the Feast of Weeks. Now Pentecost or Weeks was a very important Jewish festival because it was one of the three festivals that was a pilgrimage feast. In other words, adult Jewish males were obligated by the law to go up to Jerusalem to the sanctuary in order to bring an offering, to offer sacrifice on that day. So there were three festivals you had to travel to Jerusalem for: Passover, Pentecost and then Tabernacles in the fall. At that festival the Jews would celebrate the spring harvest. So just as at Passover, the first sheaf of grain would be cut down and offered in the

temple on a day call First Fruits, 50 days later they would bring in the full harvest of that spring and they would celebrate that during the Feast of Pentecost. So this was a harvest festival, it was a very joyful festival. You can imagine it is spring-time so it is going to be beautiful in Judea, in Jerusalem, in the Holy Land, and that description of the festival is really laid out in the book of Leviticus 23.

So if you want to go look at that for a kind of more detailed description of that harvest sacrifice that will be offered to God, the first fruits so to speak of the spring harvest being brought to him in thanksgiving for providing for his people. That's the kind of agricultural dimension of Pentecost that comes from the Old Testament, but there's another dimension to it too and most of the Jewish feasts had this. They would have an agricultural dimension but they would also have a salvation-historical dimension. In other words, they would also act as a memorial of some event from salvation history. So Passover was the memorial of the night of Passover when the Israelites were delivered from Pharaoh. Pentecost, in Jewish tradition, became the memorial of arriving at Mount Sinai and receiving the law from God in the book of Exodus 19 and 20. So for example, in one Jewish tradition from the Babylonian Talmud it says that Pentecost is "the day on which the Torah was given" to Israel, meaning the day on which the 10 Commandments were given to Israel when they were at Mount Sinai and Moses went up the mountain and got the Decalogue, got the 10 commitments from God. So this was a very important feast in the history of Israel.

Now what's interesting is it's only in light of that Jewish tradition that we can understand the second element of Luke's account and Acts, which is the Holy Spirit descending in tongues as of fire. This is kind of strange, you want to ask yourself whenever the Holy Spirit appears and he takes the form, why does he take the form that he does? For example, put it this way, why doesn't the Holy Spirit descend in the form of doves upon the Apostles at Pentecost? Why is it tongues of fire? Now I think most of us can kind of on a simple level think well it is because they begin to speak in tongues and the Holy Spirit is like a flame, a fire equipping them to do that. And that's true, but from a Jewish perspective there's more going on here that is actually tied to the Festival of Weeks, because if you go back to the book of Exodus 19 and you actually look at the biblical account of when Moses received the law, you are going to notice something significant, a parallel. So let's go back there

for just a second in Exodus 19:16-18. This is the description of them receiving the law at Mount Sinai. For example, this is the scripture that would have been read in the synagogue on the Jewish Festival of Weeks, just to give you an example. This is what it says:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire...

Then it goes on to narrate how out of that fire God speaks and Moses goes and receives the law, he receives the Ten Commandments, he receives the Torah, the Decalogue. Now notice the parallel here. In the Old Testament account of Mt. Sinai, the Lord descends upon Israelites, which are twelve tribes, in fire. In the new covenant account of Pentecost in Acts, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles and the first Christians in tongues of fire. So what we have here in every way is really a new giving of the law, it's a new Mount Sinai in essence. That's what Pentecost is from an ancient Jewish perspective. So whereas in the Old Testament God came down on the mountain in fire, in the New Testament the Holy Spirit comes down in fire, which by the way tells us that not only is the Father God, not only is Jesus God, but it also reveals the divinity of the Holy Spirit, that the Holy Spirit is the Lord. He is the same one who came down in fire in the Old Testament. Now he's coming down upon the Apostles in the New Testament. So there we have revealed the divinity of the Holy Spirit. What also is going on here though is whereas in the Old Testament they received the law in tablets of stone that were written with the finger of God, now the Holy Spirit comes down and indwells the Apostles, so that the law, the new law of the new covenant, is going to be written on their hearts, to be infused into them. They are going to receive that gift interiorly, and that's one of the major differences between the old covenant and the new covenant, is the interiority of the new covenant. They are going to be empowered by the Holy Spirit himself to keep the law and to proclaim the good news. So what's happening here on Mount Zion, Jerusalem, is a new Mount Sinai, it's a

new Pentecost that is going to be ordered toward the new covenant and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So I think this is really fascinating because it just goes to show that the idea that this is the birthday of the church is really a very appropriate way of describing what happens at Pentecost, especially when you think back to some of our earlier readings. You will recall a few weeks back we saw that in Acts 1 Luke says that there were 120 believers who had gathered together after the ascension and who were waiting for the gift of the Spirit. Well what's 120? It's 12×10, so what we have there is a kind of new Israel. You had 12 tribes in the Old Testament, now that's coming to fulfillment in the church, which is going to be organized on the foundation of the 12 Apostles. So it's a new Sinai, it's a new Israel, it's a new Pentecost, it's the birthday of the church.

The third and final element I want to highlight here has to do with the speaking in tongues, because this is one I get questions about all the time. The reason being is that if you look in the letters of St. Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14, Paul will talk about speaking “in tongues.” He used the Greek word *glossolalia*. *Glōssa* meaning tongue, *lalia* is to speak. So speaking in tongues is something Paul will talk about. And Paul, although this is debated too, seems to be referring to a kind of supernatural speech, an undecipherable language that requires a gift of the Holy Spirit even to be able to interpret it, or to be able to understand it. Now if that's what Paul's talking about, and again that's debated, but let's just consider that to be the majority interpretation for now, and it is, there is a difference between what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians and what Luke is describing here in Acts, because in context, what Luke appears to be describing here is not an indecipherable language, like a spiritual language, but rather a supernatural gift of being able to speak in other human languages and be heard as such so that the gospel can be proclaimed to all nations. You can actually see this if you look carefully at Acts 2:8 there when it says — if you go back to the reading — each of the people gathered says “how is it that we hear each of us in his own native language.” And the Greek there is *idia dialketō*, we get the word dialect from that. So they are each hearing them in their own dialect, they're hearing them in their own language, even though they have been from all these different nations here. So what appears to be going on here is that the Apostles have been given the gift of speaking in tongues,



which is just the Greek word for other languages, like a foreign tongue means a foreign language, so that the good news can be proclaimed to all the nations of the world. So that appears to be what is going on here in Acts 2, which I mentioned this in previous videos, but just as a side note, is a kind of undoing of the Tower of Babel, in which humanity was divided through the multiplication of languages; so now the Holy Spirit is going to reunify humanity through the church. Alright, that's the first reading.

What about the Responsorial Psalm for today? In this case it is from Psalm 104, one of my favorite Psalms, a very beautiful Psalm. In Psalm 104:30, this is one verse I would like to highlight here for the day, it says this about God, it says:

When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created;  
and thou renewest the face of the ground [or the face of the earth].

That expression there, send forth your spirit, is the very same Hebrew word I was talking about earlier, *ruach*. It means spirit, it means breath, and it means wind, all three of those. So that it is the breath of God through which the whole world is created in Genesis 1, it is the wind of God that goes across the face of the earth — thing about how powerful winds can be — those of us in Louisiana know full well from hurricanes that wind is very beautiful when it's a light breeze and very dangerous when there is a hurricane — so it kind of expresses the power of God and his sovereignty over creation. And of course the spirit of God refers to the fact that God is not a material being, he is transcendent, he is above the material world, he is the author of creation. So all of that is expressed in this very beautiful image here of “send forth your spirit...and renew the face of the earth,” which is what he's going to do in Acts 2 through the church. The church will then, in a sense, be blown by the spirit to the four winds in order to — double pun there, I just realized that — blown by spirit to the four winds in order to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Alright, with all that said I would just like to end with a couple elements from the living tradition. There is a beautiful text from the Venerable Bede. Bede lived in the early Middle Ages, he was one of the last of the Church Fathers, in the sense of the fathers of the first 7 to 8 centuries — that's when they are usually dated to.

He was one of the great Scripture commentators in the whole history of the church. And Bede in his commentary on Acts said this about the tongues of fire:

Now the Holy Spirit appeared *in fire and in tongues because all those whom he fills he makes simultaneously to burn and to speak—to burn because of him and to speak about him*. And at the same time he indicated that the holy church, when it had spread to the ends of the earth, was to speak in the languages of all nations.<sup>2</sup>

So what Bede points to here is that before Pentecost the Apostles were afraid, after Pentecost they are on fire, they are on fire with the Holy Spirit. But they're not just on fire, they are on fire to speak of him. So the fact that he descends in tongues as of fire, points to the fact that he's going to animate their speech, he is going to give them the power to not be afraid and to go out and boldly proclaim the gospel to every nation on earth, to the ends of all the earth, which brings me to my final point. This is not from the living tradition of the ancient church, but from the recent teachings of the Catholic Church in the Catechism. One of the things that I love to talk about is the Sacrament of Confirmation, and if I had time I could do a whole presentation just on how Confirmation is tied to the Feast of Pentecost, but I want to highlight here just in a summary way what the church has to say about this. If you look at all the readings we have had for today, whether it's John 20 when Jesus breathes on the disciples and sends them out on mission, or whether it's Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit descends in tongues of fire and gives them the ability to proclaim, all of the readings for today are focused on how the Holy Spirit gives us the power and the grace to be sent on mission, to go out and bear witness to Christ. And it is interesting that the Catechism says it's precisely that power, that grace that the Apostles received at Pentecost, which is the same grace that we receive in the Sacrament of Confirmation. This is what the church teaches:

It is evident from its celebration that the effect of *the sacrament of Confirmation is the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as once granted to the apostles on the day of Pentecost...* It gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of

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<sup>2</sup> Venerable Bede, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2.3A; trans. in F. Martin, 2006, 22

Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.<sup>3</sup>

I just bring that up in closing because in my experience Confirmation is one of those sacraments about which there's a lot of confusion. One theologian back in the 80s said that confirmation was a sacrament "in search of a theology." In other words, we have the sacrament but we don't theologically grasp in its fullness what this sacrament means, what it's all about, and so I would just point us to the Catechism here as giving us a very clear and profound understanding, which is that Confirmation is the sacrament that perpetuates in us the grace of Pentecost. So in a way similar to the fact that through Baptism we are incorporated into Jesus' Paschal Mystery, the Passover mystery of his passion, death and resurrection; when we are baptized we die with Christ, we enter into his Passover mystery. So in Confirmation we enter into the Pentecost mystery, the mystery of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the church and the church being sent into mission into all the world. So Baptism and Confirmation are parts of one whole, just like Passover and Pentecost were parts of one whole in Judaism. Passover was the beginning of the harvest festival, Pentecost was the climax of the harvest festival, and in the case of the church, baptism initiates us into Jesus' Passover, Confirmation fulfills that and then sends us out on mission to the world. So it really is a sacrament of evangelization. If you look throughout the centuries that is one of the reasons why it was traditional in the Latin West for bishops to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation on the Feast of Pentecost. In other words, we would be confirmed on Pentecost as a way of remembering that connection with the grace of the Holy Spirit that the Apostles received on their first Pentecost. So I just bring that up as something to ponder and pray about as we try to live out the fruits of this Easter season. We have been journeying for seven weeks now up to this day, this great feast of the Holy Spirit. Let's not forget now that this season has come to an end, that it really is just the beginning, it's the Holy Spirit now being given to us so that we can go out and share the gospel every day as part of our ordinary lives as Christians and as witnesses to Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1302-1303.