

20140608PentecostSunday

Today we round off more than seven weeks of celebrating the Paschal Mystery: Passion and Death – Resurrection – Ascension, Exaltation – Coming of the Holy Spirit. Today, with the exceptions of Baptisms and funerals, the Easter Candle burns for the last time on a Sunday in 2014.

Pentecost has so many concepts and ideas that I could preach about. One is the comparison between Pentecost and Babel. Pentecost is seen as the reversal of Babel. What was the confusion of Tongues at Babel causing the abandonment of the building of that infamous tower, has now been changed to complete understanding by those present on that first Pentecost Sunday in Jerusalem. Those from all over the known world could understand what was being said by the disciples. Although a lovely image and comparison, there is little from the ancient historical and religious texts to suggest that Luke or his audience would have made such a connection.

There is, however, more evidence for linking the Pentecost event with the renewal of the Sinai covenant. Ancient Jewish sources suggest that Moses was given the law at Sinai in the third month of the year and Pentecost was a festival of the bringing in of the Harvest which was also celebrated in the third month of the Jewish calendar. This suggests a link between the giving of the law and Pentecost and in fact Pentecost became more of festival of thanksgiving for the giving of the Law by the time Jesus came.

Luke in his description of Pentecost that was our first reading this morning gives clues that suggest a similarity between the two events. The sound, fire, and speech in the Pentecost narrative were phenomena associated with the Sinai theophany, the experience of God by Moses in Exodus 19. ¹⁶On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. ¹⁹As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. This is linked, of course, to the covenant of God with God's people. And with Luke's description we can see that he is thinking of Pentecost in terms of a "new covenant" ; a new covenant spoke of in Jeremiah 31:31–34 ³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

In the coming of the Spirit in Acts, Luke is echoing the theophany scenes of the OT, in which God's presence is accompanied by similar signs of fire and wind. Luke also tells us that "*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem*" The nations are listed and I always feel sorry for the poor lay reader who draws the short straw and has to rattle off the names of those nations! But in that list are all the nations of the known world which symbolize that the mission of the Jerusalem church was a universal one.

But there is another important OT reference, this time given by Peter in his sermon after the event. Peter's interpretation of the Pentecost experience is nearly three times longer than the narrative account detailing the event itself. It starts at v14 and ends at v43. It makes reference to Joel 3:1-5 which acts as a bridge to what precedes and what follows it. One could say that the Joel prophecy serves as the authoritative interpretation of the Pentecost event.

Joel speaks about a radical new community and Peter says this is realized in the earliest Christian community. The first thing to notice about this new community – both Joel and Peter indicate it, is its remarkably inclusive. It is gender inclusive: "your sons" and "your daughters" (2:17); "servants -- both male and female" (2:18). It is age inclusive: "your young people" and "your old people" (2:17). And, with that list of nations it demonstrates that this new community that Peter talks about is destined to be ethnically inclusive as well.

In making these connections, Luke seeks to demonstrate that the early church has been faithful to the traditions of Moses. Membership in this radically inclusive community is available everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord.

The identity of this “Lord” is explored in the second part of this sermon from v22 onwards which is not part of today’s reading. The call to be saved occurs at v37-41.

Now, we are all aware of Pentecostalism which was (and is) grounded on the belief, drawn from its interpretation of Acts 2, that speaking in tongues is the physical manifestation of a person having received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In Pentecostalism they make a distinction between baptism in the Spirit and baptism of conversion.

Today we are going to be baptizing two new members of our community, Joey and Kayleigh. One of the inward graces of the sacrament of baptism is gift of the Holy Spirit. We pray as we bless the water of baptism that God will send God’s Holy Spirit upon them to bring them to new birth in the family of God’s church. So, will our newly baptized babies speak in tongues – like the disciples on that first Pentecost Sunday? At the preparation I tell the parents and godparents that their child has the Spirit of God but that Spirit will only become manifest when opportunity is given for the Spirit to grow and mature in that child. We cannot tell God how God should respond. I cannot say to God – “Wait until I’ve poured water over the person’s head before he or she can talk in tongues.” No, sometimes baptism precedes reception of the Spirit sometimes baptism follows reception of the Spirit; sometimes it accompanies baptism in the name of Jesus and the laying on of hands - examples of all these can be found in the Book of Acts.

With the giving of the Spirit comes the authority to speak and act in the name of Jesus. John tells us this in the Gospel this morning. “If you forgive sins, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” This is not just a reference to the Sacrament of Confession and Absolution or as it is called today the sacrament of Reconciliation. Forgiving sin, reconciling people with God is the very core of the work of Christ and the Christian mission. The disciples are now the Body of Christ, the ongoing visible presence of Christ in the world.

This Body, the church, will experience injuries and wounds and disease... It will wander at times far from God. It will need healing and forgiveness and reconciliation. It will also try to bring the same healing and reconciliation to a broken world.

So, on the one hand, we are called to be deeply united in our faith in Christ and in our love for each other. At the same time, each one of us has a unique gift. It is through this gift or gifts that we serve and build up the community. They are not just for ourselves, or for our families and friends. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Paul tells us that we are like a body. Each body has many members, each with its own particular function, yet they all are ordered to one purpose – the good functioning of the body as a whole. So it is with the Christian community, which is the Body of Christ. Each member is to be aware of his or her particular gift. This gift indicates the role the member has to play in building up the whole Body, the whole community.

Today let us ask God to send his Spirit into our hearts and into the hearts of Joey and Kayleigh. Filled with that Spirit, may we each individually make our contribution to the community to which we belong. And, as a community, may we give clear and unmistakable witness to the Truth and Love of God, revealed to us in Jesus our Lord.