

HOMILY – PENTECOST (2020)

Each of the readings today gives us a particular *perspective* on the gift of the Holy Spirit and what it means for us.

For St Luke in the *Acts of the Apostles* – the text that I will focus on this morning – Pentecost is, among other things, the reversal of the tower of Babel. Of course you remember that story of the Old Testament, an explanation of the origin of different languages, in which human beings became alienated from each other because of their arrogance in building a tower to reach God.

For St Luke, at Pentecost the Spirit broke down the walls of language between people of different nationalities, because the Spirit bridged the gap between God and humanity not by our efforts, but by God's condescension, God's lowering of himself to come down to our level and speak to us.

The Spirit for St Luke is what unites, what makes communication between all people, and between God and people, possible, what makes the Church truly *Catholic*, that is, universal.

To live by the Spirit, then, has certain consequences for our way of life. It is put rather beautifully in an unknown work, probably from the second century, known as the *Letter to Diognetus*. In part it reads:

Christians are indistinguishable from other folk either by nationality, language, or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food, and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share

their meals, but not their wives. They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law...

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body...

God has entered our world in two great acts of reaching out: first, sending his Son in the person of Jesus, a particular person at a particular time – 2000 years ago – and to a particular place – Palestine. And second, he also entered and enters our world at all places and all times through the power of his Spirit. Without the teaching of Jesus, we could not recognise the Spirit, but without the Spirit we would not listen to the teaching of Jesus.

The challenge for us, of course, is precisely to live according to the Spirit, to be, as the *Letter to Diognetus* puts it, as Christians to be to the world what the soul is to the body.

Next week we will celebrate this great mystery of the unity of God in the three persons as we celebrate Trinity Sunday. I must leave further reflections on the Spirit till then.

– Martin Wallace, O.P.
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