

A Reflection: Pentecost 2020

Today we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the 120 disciples of Jesus, including Mary and the apostles, who obeying Jesus' command, waited in the Cenacle in Jerusalem in prayer "for the promise [or gift] of the Father."

The Father's gift, the coming of the Holy Spirit, in the tradition given us by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles took place on the day of the celebration of the Jewish feast of Pentecost or Weeks. This feast was celebrated 50 days after Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread and while initially a harvest festival when a choicest portion of its produce was offered in the Temple, by the 1st century AD it also commemorated "the day the Lord gave the Law on Mount Sinai to the Jewish people."

Thus we see similarities in Luke's description of the descent of the Spirit on the disciples and that of the theophany or divine self-manifestation at the giving of the Law. On Sinai there was thunder, lightning and the shaking of the mountain; at Jerusalem there was the roar of a mighty wind and fire.

Linking today's feast with the memorial of the giving of the Law enables us to see how it fulfils the Jewish Pentecost. In line with the prophets who looked forward to a new law engraved on the hearts of God's people, the Spirit writes the new law, not on stone tablets, but on the heart of the believer. In the Christian tradition what is primary in the New Law is the grace and freedom of the Holy Spirit. Thus St Thomas Aquinas would say, "The feast of Pentecost, when the Old Law was given has been succeeded by the Pentecost in which was given the law of the Spirit of life."

We also celebrate this day as the birth of the Church. Luke begins his Gospel with the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, and thus Mary conceiving Jesus. He begins the *Acts of the Apostles* with the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples empowering them to preach the Good News and celebrate the sacraments, and so to give birth to the community of believers, the Church.

Importantly too, today we recall that at Pentecost a new dimension of our Christian life was revealed: The Christian is one who believes in Jesus and so lives in the Spirit.

Paul reminds us of our life in the Spirit in our second reading when he says "In the one Spirit we were all baptized ... and one Spirit was given to us all to drink." This echoes what he had earlier told the Christians at Rome - "The Spirit of God has made his home in you."

The Holy Spirit is the Divine Personal Presence, distinct from the Father and the Son, dwelling within us, enlightening and inspiring us. The Spirit guides by empowering us to grasp and live the freedom of the New Law as taught by Jesus.

The Spirit also guides us through the gifts and charisms he distributes to each one of us for the good of all. As St Paul reminds us today: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

So today we celebrate the Father's gift of the Holy Spirit which gives birth to the Church and makes the Christian life a life in the Spirit.

Fr David Willis OP