

The Great Communicator

In the name of him who has ascended to his throne in glory and now rules and reigns over all, dear friends in Christ: this morning's second reading from the book of Acts picks up where last week's first reading left off. We find the faithful few, some 120 in number, gathered together on a Sunday morning. They are worshipping, praying, reading the sacred Scriptures, and otherwise doing what Jesus told them to do, which was to wait.

And I don't know about you, but I hate waiting. If I had been one of their group, I could see myself pestering the disciples with questions. "So, Peter, tell me again what it is we're waiting for? Right, right: the coming of the Holy Spirit. Okay. And remind me again, what is it that he's going to do for us? Oh, yeah; Jesus said that: he's going to clothe us with power from on high. All right. Say, what exactly does that mean? What kind of power are we going to get? ... Wait, what? You're not sure? Well, then how are we going to know when it happens?" Yeah, I could see myself becoming a real pain in the neck. Probably get myself thrown out of the group if the wait had been very long. Fortunately for me, I wasn't there. And fortunately for them, the wait wasn't very long.

The day of Pentecost came. It was ten days after our Lord's ascension into heaven and fifty days after his resurrection from the dead. More importantly, it was one of the three major pilgrim festivals held in Jerusalem each year. That assured there would be many visitors on hand. You see, just about every city of significant size throughout the Near Eastern and Mediterranean world had a community of Jews living within it. And some of these Jews would have traveled to Jerusalem for the feast. For them it was like going home for Christmas. The point is that when the Lord performed this, his next great move on behalf of his people, he wanted a broad audience on hand: an audience that would take the things they saw and heard and learned about Jesus back to where they came from. Thus the Good News of the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ would receive immediate broadcast throughout the entire Roman world. The Lord knew what he was doing by having the disciples wait until Pentecost.

And there were theological reasons for the wait as well. The Feast of Pentecost was the celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. In that regard, it was sort of like Thanksgiving. The people rejoiced that the Lord had again provided them with the grain that would make the bread that they lived on for another year. But there's a close biblical connection between bread and God's Word. The latter is the true Bread of Life that feeds hungry souls and causes them to live forever. This year at Pentecost *that* Bread of Life was going to be vastly elevated because it was going to be explained and expounded in a way it never had before. It was going to be filled with its true life-giving content, which is Jesus Christ. People were going to be shown that the Scriptures are all about him and God's promise of salvation through faith in him.

Another thing that was commemorated at Pentecost was the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. Recall that the Lord first spoke to Moses on that mountain from a burning bush – a bush that was not consumed by the fire. It was that strange sight that caused Moses to turn aside to see what was going on. From the flaming apparition, the Lord told Moses to go to Egypt where the Israelites were enslaved. The Lord further told Moses that through him, he was going to rescue Israel from their bondage. When he did, Moses was to lead the people back here to Sinai, where the Lord would appear again in fire and speak to them all. Sure enough, fifty days

after the Passover – the great Old Testament salvation event – Moses and the Israelites arrived at the mountain. The Lord God descended in the form of a great fire and he spoke to them. His Word came to them directly. And now, at *this* Pentecost – fifty days after the great New Testament salvation event: the death and resurrection of Jesus – it was going to happen again.

It begins with the sound of a mighty rushing wind from heaven. It calls to mind the evening of Jesus' resurrection when he first appeared to the disciples in the upper room. Then we're told "Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'." Now Jesus is doing it again, breathing on them the Holy Spirit, this time from his exalted throne above; and this time with far more power than before. A visible flame appears in the room – just as at Sinai. But this time it divides itself into tongues of fire that come to rest on the heads of the disciples. Immediately they begin to speak forth God's Word in a bunch of different languages. Each one of the disciples has become a burning bush from which God speaks directly. And just as the burning bush caused Moses to go investigate the strange sight, so now the sound of the great wind and the disciples speaking in different languages attracts a large crowd that wants to know what's going on.

What *is* going on? Communication. Divine communication. God is speaking. Through the mouths of the disciples, God is speaking directly to the hearts of those who hear. You know, former President Reagan was called "the Great Communicator". He earned that title on account of his folksy way of speaking that cut through the usual political rhetoric and double-speak. He used memorable metaphors and spoke in terms that the average guy on the street could relate to and understand. It's a gift that not everyone has. But with all due respect to our former president, he didn't hold a candle to the Holy Spirit who is the One who truly deserves the title "the Great Communicator."

This is the Holy Spirit's vital contribution to God's work of salvation. God the Father is person of the Trinity who gets it all going. To him is attributed the work of creation. His is the plan, the design, and the direction of all things. He's in charge. God the Son is the person of the Trinity who actually works salvation by taking on himself human flesh and blood, living a perfect human life on our behalf, and then by offering that perfect life as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. But here's the thing: without the Holy Spirit performing his critical role none of that would do us a lick of good. The Scriptures are abundantly clear on this point. No one without the Spirit is able to understand the things of the Spirit. That is to say religious truth – the Gospel of salvation – cannot be known or believed in unless the Spirit reveals it to you. Saving faith in Jesus is not something we can generate in ourselves. It is instead generated in us by the work of the Spirit. Without the Spirit doing his work, anyone preaching the truth about Jesus to you might as well be speaking a different language. You're not going to get it. And you certainly won't believe it.

Why? It's because we are by nature sinners in rebellion against God. Our minds are darkened to his truth. We're surrounded by a thick barrier of myths, distortions, and misunderstandings that pass as human wisdom, but are in truth the deadly lies of Satan.

It's the Spirit's work to break through those barriers. We see this illustrated in the way the disciples are empowered by the Spirit to speak in different languages. The visitors to Jerusalem were all practitioners of the Jewish faith. Most of them were Jews by natural descent as well, although some were proselytes, that is, Gentile converts to the Jewish religion. But all of them would have spoken the native language of the lands they were from. Those would have been their primary languages. Now it happens that in the first century most people also had a working knowledge of Koine Greek. That was the language of international commerce and

trade. To be sure, the New Testament was originally written in Koine Greek because it was the language most everyone understood to some degree. But it wasn't the language of their hearts. Few people used Koine Greek for thinking. I experienced something like this when I lived in Brazil for two years. I had to use Portuguese to communicate. I got pretty good at it; but I still did all my thinking in English. That was the language of my heart.

And here we see the Spirit enabling the disciples to do just that: miraculously to speak to people's hearts in their own native dialects. But that's only part of the miracle. The far more important part is that through their words the Holy Spirit was creating faith in the hearts of many of those who heard. They too became filled with the Spirit. And they too became witnesses to God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Some others, as we heard, resisted the Spirit's work. They heard the sound of the great wind, they saw the sign of the disciples speaking clearly in languages they never learned, and they made fun of it all. They supposed the disciples were intoxicated.

Peter attempts to set them straight. And in doing so, he reveals yet another aspect of the Holy Spirit's work: namely, the Spirit empowers believers to understand the Scriptures and make connections and applications they could not have made by their own natural abilities. Peter demonstrates this by applying the passage he quotes from the prophet Joel to the events unfolding before the eyes of the crowd. It's an example of what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel and how the Spirit would guide the disciples into all truth. It's hardly possible that Peter, a fisherman by trade, could have had this particular passage ready on the tip of his tongue to explain what was going on. But empowered by the Spirit he's given instant recall and the ability to see and explain how this prophecy was being fulfilled.

And, I should say, still is being fulfilled. No, we don't get the outward manifestations of the Spirit's work in our day. We don't hear the mighty wind. We don't see the tongues of fire. But that's okay. The Spirit of God is not in the wind. Nor is he in the fire. The Spirit of God is in the speaking of God's Word. That's where he is with his power to create faith in Jesus and enlighten hearts and minds to understand the Scriptures and see how they are all about Jesus and his work of salvation.

Thus the miracle of Pentecost goes on. Through the ministry of the Church and the witness of God's people the Spirit is still being poured out. God's Great Communicator is doing his work among us and for us. Therefore let us not resist his advances. Instead, let us eagerly open our lives to him, and let this be our constant prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!