

That Day of Pentecost

May 28, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

I often think when I hear the passage read this morning from the Acts of the Apostles how the adrenalin must have been pumping within the disciples that Day of Pentecost. We sang a hymn on Easter Day called the Festival Canticle. It begins, *This is the Feast of Victory for our God*, and so it was! But this is the Day of Pentecost! This was *their* Victory! This is *our* victory! This is like graduation day, and for those getting out of school, life can't get much better than that!

During the ten days from the Ascension, the disciples of Jesus elected a successor to Judas, but, other than that, they mostly sat around and waited. Then, all of a sudden everything broke loose! There was a tornado like sound out of the heavens; tongues of fire danced over their heads; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and the Church was on its way! It *truly* must have been an experience to behold!

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In a spiritual sense they were on fire. A tremendous wave of joy swept over them all. Far and wide over the city, the city that had rejected Jesus and put him on a cross, they proclaimed that he had risen and ascended, that he was the Messiah and Lord. The promised Spirit had come to them.

Look what the Holy Spirit did to Peter. Peter had been a sorry coward, as we look back to the night of the betrayal. The Holy Spirit gave him the courage of a lion and he preached the Resurrection throughout the whole city. He converted. He baptized. He told the Jewish leaders they had crucified their long expected king and, as might be expected, they were furious enough to throw him into jail. At another time, in another city, he gave his life for the sake of his Lord.

And look what the Holy Spirit did to Stephen. The Apostles chose and ordained Stephen the first Deacon to look after the widows and the poor. In a flash, he

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saw that God loved all people and wanted them to come to him, not just the Jews. He preached this; he proved it by scripture. A mob seized Stephen, took him out of the city and stoned him to death, and as he died he asked that they be forgiven.

And consider Barnabas. The other disciples were afraid of Paul and with good reason. Paul had put a goodly number of them in prison prior to his conversion, but Barnabas believed in him, brought him to the Apostles and told them how Paul had seen the Lord on the road to Damascus. Then, look at the action of the Holy Spirit throughout the whole history of the Church. The Holy Spirit was with the early Christians in the catacombs of Rome. The Spirit was with the missionaries as they moved away from the Mediterranean into the forbidding North. The Spirit was with the countless thousands who died for their faith in all parts of the world, and who is to say that the Holy Spirit was *not* with those who sought to

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reform the Church in the 16th Century? The Spirit was with those who tried and succeeded in establishing the Church on this continent. And the Holy Spirit is with us today in all the madness and confusion of our society, if we will just *stop*...and *listen*....and *hear* the voice of God through his Holy Spirit.

Consider the word *Spirit*. It comes to our language from the Latin word *spiritus*, which can mean *spirit*, but it can also mean *wind* and *breath*. The Greek word used to describe the Spirit is *pneuma*, which likewise means *wind* or *breath*. Strangely enough, exactly the same is true of the Hebrew language, so, in all three of the languages that played so important a part in the history of early Christianity, *spirit* is closely linked either with the wind that blows in from the sea or down from the mountains, or with the breath which fills our lungs and animates our bodies.

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It is the striking characteristic of the air we breathe that it is common air. I can't make a little corner of air up here, which is strictly for me, while the choir has a separate air, rarified and of better quality than mine to be sure, while you have your own air. All of us, any group of people, however divergent, must breathe the same air when they gather in the same place. This image is taken by St. Paul and applied in the most vivid and detailed way to the social life of the Christian community. The Christian community, he writes, can be described as the Body of Christ, in which all members share in the one life-giving breath of the Spirit (I Cor. 12:27), and are united to one another within a fellowship that is so *sensitive*, that when one member suffers, all members suffer; when one member is honored, all members rejoice with that member (v.26). Such a fellowship is a new phenomenon in the world and the quality of its life is called *love*, love in the truest and purest sense. Love in the New Testament sense is the very life breath of the

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fellowship of the Body of Christ. It was Christ who breathed on that first group of his disciples and bade them to receive this sacred spirit of love. And, it is this Holy Spirit of God that breathes on us and bids that we do the same.

The down side of course, is that just as our community reflects our response to the Holy Spirit, it is we who can diminish, or even destroy, this bond of fellowship. In his classic *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis has the *evil one* set out to destroy the Church, not by attacking it from the outside, but by planting the seeds of disaffection within individual members from each other. I've oversimplified this, but by our thoughtlessness, criticism, insensitivity for those around us, even those sitting next to us, this fellowship we enjoy, could vanish. We cannot *ignore* the Spirit. We must not *deny* the Spirit.

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Through successive generations in the long history of the Church, the Holy Spirit has been glorifying Christ, bringing his words to remembrance, applying them to new situations, guiding our thoughts and ideas into all truth. This Feast of Pentecost for us today is much more than an attempt to bring to life a distant, incomprehensible event. Pentecost is an affirmation that, in this age of ours, we *believe* in the presence of the Spirit of God, that the Holy Spirit *is* the Spirit of Truth, and it is through dependence, *patient* dependence upon the Spirit alone, that we may enter into the purpose and meaning of life.

And, so it is, in this seeking of the Spirit, this *love* for the Spirit, that the words of another hymn come to mind: “*O, Comforter, draw near; within our hearts appear, and kindle them, thy holy flame bestowing.*”

(Hymn #516, Down Ampney)

AMEN.