

### 3rd Sunday of Easter, Year A

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In today's First Reading we hear part of Peter's speech to the crowd present in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Peter and his companions had just had an extraordinary experience of the presence and power of Jesus' Spirit. Peter speaks of Jesus' ministry and of his crucifixion on the occasion of the feast of Passover. He goes on to testify that he and his companions are witnesses to the truth that 'God raised Jesus up'. He then adds the words which I would like to reflect on with you today, telling the crowd that the risen and glorified Jesus 'received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit'(Acts 2:33), the Spirit that, as the crowd could witness for themselves, was inspiring and encouraging the small band of apostles. What Spirit is this that can be received by Jesus and given by him to his disciples only after his resurrection?

You might recall a comment in John's Gospel. Jesus was promising that rivers of flowing water would flow from him into the hearts of believers. John adds: 'He said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus had not yet been glorified'(John 7:37-39). The same question arises: What Spirit is this that can be received by Jesus and given by him to his disciples only after his resurrection?

From one point of view the answer is obvious. Sharing our human condition, Jesus, like the rest of us, grew in knowledge of God as his human experience developed. In today's First Reading, Peter is telling us that Jesus experienced the fullness of communion with God only when he passed through death. Every time Jesus loved he was sharing with others the Spirit of love that bound him to God his Father. Only when he was glorified could he share with us the fullness of this love-communion. From our human point of view this is profoundly significant. We can respond to God only in so far as we know God. Before the time of Jesus there were many erroneous or imperfect understandings of God. Once people experienced Jesus they were able to see revealed in him the real, living God, the God who is love. This is something that each of us can verify for ourselves. As we come to a closer knowledge of Jesus, we are able to recognise more clearly the action of God's Holy Spirit in our lives and we are able to respond more intimately to God, by opening our hearts to welcome the gift of the Spirit. All this is obvious enough.

However, it is here that we are likely to make a mistake. Because we are more able to receive God's Spirit - the fullness of the Spirit of love which Jesus received at his resurrection - we might find ourselves mistakenly thinking that God has changed and that God is now more open to give, as though God was offering less love before Jesus than God offered after. To identify the error in this kind of thinking, we must make a

distinction between God's offering and our ability to receive.

God does not exist in time. God does not change. God has no past and no future. God simply is. This is what we mean by the word 'eternal'. Jesus revealed who God is, and so he reveals who God always has been since the beginning of the human race. God is not offering more love now than before. God is not offering more love to the followers of Jesus than he is offering to others, whether they lived before the time of Jesus or since. Rather, Jesus reveals fully what God has always been offering and continues to offer to every person conceived into this world.

But as we all know, we can offer love, but if people do not know or do not welcome our love it just hangs there, unaccepted. Jesus made an enormous difference to our world because he showed us so simply and so beautifully and so unmistakably that God is love and that God offers to everyone the love-Spirit that will enable every one of us, if we welcome it, to share in God's embrace. Jesus showed this during his life. He showed it most wonderfully on the cross, and when he himself entered into the fullness of God's embrace at his resurrection, he pours out this love over the whole world, drawing everyone to know God and to enjoy God's love.

As we have always known, the measure of the value of our life is the way we respond to God's love and radiate this love out to others. People have been doing this in an imperfect but wonderful way from the beginning of time, and people are still doing it in every part of our world, whatever their religion or race. Those who lived and died before the time of Jesus were not being offered any less love by God and they were judged by the way they responded to love as they knew it. It is the same today. People who do not know Jesus are not being offered any less love. The problem is that not knowing Jesus they do not know the extent and quality of God's love and this inhibits their ability to welcome love and to respond to it. Similarly with people who are given a false or imperfect understanding of Jesus.

If I am right in these observations, it shows up the limitation of imagining that all those who died before Jesus were somehow stacked up, awaiting the resurrection when, as we are accustomed to say, Jesus opened the gates of heaven. Isn't it better to say that Jesus showed us how open the gates of heaven are, and, by sharing his experience with us, he enabled us to respond in a beautiful way to God's constant offer of love? Rather than think of him opening the gates of heaven, we might think of him as opening our hearts to receive what God is always pouring out upon us through the always open gates of heaven?

Another mistake we make is to imagine that after death we are still somehow living in time, with the result that we imagine that there are hosts of souls somewhere waiting for the end of the world in order to be reunited to their bodies at the final resurrection. This is only an image and it would seem to me a most unhelpful image. Everything that

ever is present to God. The end of time is also present to God. Once we leave the realm of space and time we are present to God. There is no time, no waiting.

To say that God is love and that God is always offering his Spirit of love to everyone does not in any way take from the importance of Jesus. Jesus is about revealing who God is and making it possible for us to know what God is offering, and to welcome it. In the course of time (or as Paul expresses it: 'When the fullness of time had come', Galatians 4:4), there was conceived into this world a man who was perfectly open to God's love and who responded so perfectly that he was a perfect expression of the communion of love which is the very being of God. Jesus, of course, grew into this. In the words of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'God made him perfect through suffering'(Hebrews 2:10), 'and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'(Hebrews 5:10). Through his obedience he grew in his experience of God and he revealed God more and more till in his self-giving, love-giving and life-giving on the cross he gave perfect human expression to who God is and to how God relates to us. Jesus fully experienced God's love only in the life of glory that was given to him when God raised him from the dead. This is what Peter is asserting in today's reading.

Jesus is the Lover who shows us that God is Love. In giving us his Spirit he makes it possible for us to experience the Loving that he experiences towards God and towards us. Jesus is the Way we must follow because he reveals the true, living God and so the eternal life which is God's gift (John 14:6). Jesus is our model. He reveals who God is and who we are called to be as human beings created by love. But he is more. He shares his Spirit with us making it possible for us to live as he lives. Hence the importance of the Christian church, the community of those who live by his Spirit and who continue the healing, liberating and saving mission of Jesus. Here lies the wonder of our vocation.

What a grace it is to know Jesus, for he shows us convincingly that God is love and thereby frees us from the fears that can cause us to spend our time seeking to escape from reality. We need Jesus to reveal to us who we are as human beings and the kinds of values by which we can live. We need to belong to the community that lives by his Spirit and to grow in our communion with him through sharing the life of that community.

Why not take time off today to hold in our minds and hearts the many ways in which we experience the Spirit of Jesus in our lives? Why not recall Jesus' plea that we share this experience with others, so that the Gospel will reach everyone living on this planet? By way of conclusion let us reflect on the gift of the Spirit that we receive in the sacraments.

When we are baptised into the community, Jesus folds us in his protective and loving embrace just as truly as he enfolded the little children in the Gospel; just as truly as he embraced the leper; just as truly as he embraced all those who welcomed his love. When we are confirmed, he offers us the fullness of his communion with God in the

Spirit just as truly as he offered this Spirit to the community of believers from his pierced heart on the cross; just as truly as his disciples experienced his love at the first Pentecost. The sacrament of Marriage and the sacrament of Holy Orders highlight the fact that all the ways in which we love and serve each other are blessed and consecrated by God. They are sacraments of God's love enabling us to be instruments of grace to each other. Because of our human weakness we have the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of reconciliation to heal our daily wounds and the sacrament of anointing to surround us when, through life-threatening illness or the feebleness of age, we experience a special need for God's healing and sustaining grace. The climax of all the sacraments is that of the Eucharist in which time stops and we are present as Jesus offers himself to the Father and to us on Calvary and as he pours out his love-Spirit upon us from his pierced heart. Today as we celebrate the Eucharist may we, like the two men in today's Gospel, recognise Jesus in the Breaking of Bread.