

## Pentecost, Year A

According to an ancient Greek legend, Prometheus brought fire from heaven and gave it as a gift to the human race. Alluding to this myth, the famous Jesuit paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in an essay on the 'Evolution of Chastity'(1934), wrote: 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire'.

Jesus saw that his mission in life was to set this fire blazing: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!'(Luke 12:49). He knew that God is Love and he gave himself in love to attract us to do the same, and to harness for God the immense energies of love that fill this wonderful world of ours. We are made for love, but there are forces outside ourselves and forces within that stifle love by trapping us in fear and seducing us along ways that do not lead to love, but keep us bound to our own fickle desires. It is the final act of Jesus' gift of love that we are celebrating today. From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary the fire of love was poured out upon his disciples gathered in prayer.

In today's First Reading, Luke places this love-gift against the background of the Jewish feast of Pentecost – a feast that celebrated the gift of the Law on Mount Sinai. Moses gave us the Law, but Jesus gives us the Spirit of God's love that makes it possible for us to do God's will – to love God with all our heart, soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. In the dramatic language of the liturgy, Luke pictures each person receiving this gift in a unique way: tongues of fire alight on each disciple drawing each one into a special love-relationship with God and making it possible for each one to share this love-gift in his/her own way. Set on fire by the powerful love coming from the heart of Jesus, the disciples were able to go out to the whole world, represented in our scene by people from all parts of the Roman Empire and beyond, and speak with them the language that everyone can understand, the language which everyone is wanting to hear, the language of love. With the gift of the Spirit the Church is born, the Church that is 'Catholic', for it is to carry on the universal mission of Jesus to set all hearts on fire.

'The tongues of fire separated and came to rest on each one's head'. We each have to learn to love in our own way. We each have our own contribution to make, our own way of speaking the word, our own way of singing the song. What keeps the community together as church is the fact that it is Jesus' word that we are speaking; it is Jesus' song of love that we are singing; it is his Spirit that fires our hearts. Saint Irenaeus, writing in the second century, says that 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation'(AH IV.14.2). The music of the symphony comes from the heart of Jesus. The music is of love.

The Responsorial Psalm reminds us that when we fail to see God's face we wither; when we see it we revive and the earth revives with us. To change the image: when we are not warmed by the love of the heart of God we die of cold. When the tongues of fire enter our hearts we are filled with life and moved to share this fire with others. The psalm concludes with the prayer: 'May the glory of the Lord endure for ever'. In the light of today's theme, we could pray: 'May the world experience people who are aglow with the fire of Jesus' Spirit.

In today's Second Reading, Paul reminds us that each of us has a special gift from the Spirit, that

each of us has a special mission from the risen Lord and that we are enabled to carry out this mission because of the power of God's love that inspires and motivates us. Since there is only one Spirit, one Lord and one God we are drawn into communion with each other and our living and our loving is for the common good. In the words of Irenaeus we are contributing towards the 'symphony of salvation'. Pope Paul VI speaks of building 'a civilisation of love'. The Church encourages us to establish smaller and so more welcoming communities in which we can experience the Spirit, live out our faith in tangible ways, and both find and help to create small orchestras of love where our children can enjoy the experience of Jesus' Spirit binding us into communities of love. From these smaller communities we come together to the parish Eucharist to be nourished at the table of the Lord and to encourage each other to find ways to carry on Jesus' mission of love to the world.

Today's Entrance Antiphon sets the mood for the Mass. We are reminded that 'the Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world'. In our response to the psalm we have just prayed: 'Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth'. We are daily given sickening reminders that the face of the earth can be very ugly. To the extent that our own personal lives are also disturbed, we can easily get the impression that everything is falling apart. Today's feast refuses to allow us to stay with such a despondent view. It is so important that we keep reminding ourselves of this truth that we acclaim in every Mass: 'heaven and earth are filled with your glory'. This is because, in the image of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Holy Spirit is bending over our world with warm breast and bright wings.

In today's First Reading, as we have seen, Luke relates the gift of the Spirit to the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. In the Gospel, John speaks of the same gift, but in a simpler and more homely way. The setting is the Eucharist. The disciples are gathered on the first day of the week, as we are here today. Jesus is among them, as he is here among us, and he offers them, as he offers us, the gift of peace – a peace which is far deeper than the hurts and disturbances, indeed the torments, that we sometimes suffer. It is the peace of knowing that we are sharing in the communion of divine love that comes from his heart.

This peace did not come easily to Jesus. He shows us the wounds in his hands and side, the wounds that he suffered because he refused to stop playing with fire; he refused to stop loving us. The peace he offers us will not always come easily to us. We, too, suffer hurt. That is why he offers us his Spirit, to strengthen and encourage us and to make it possible for us to rise above our hurts and continue to discover in ourselves the freedom to love. That is why he asks us to forgive: to give and give and give again and not succumb to the temptation to return hurt for hurt.

Today we are given the gift of Jesus' own Spirit. Others saw a leper; Jesus saw a man loved by God and longing to be welcomed into the community. He embraced him. Others saw a prostitute; Jesus saw a woman who had so much loving to give and to receive. Others saw a criminal dying on a cross; Jesus saw a man who longed for peace and communion with God. He wept as we weep, but he refused to despair. He struggled in agony, as we struggle in agony, but he refused to stop pleading with God.

If we pray for the Spirit of God to come down upon us, but find that the world looks just as bleak tomorrow, let us not give up. We know that when we love others we cannot force them to love

us back. Neither can God. God is all-powerful, which means that there is no limit to what God's love can do. But precisely because God is love, God will not, indeed cannot, force people to receive his love or to respond to it. There is only one heart and life over which each of us does have some control, and that is our own. We have made mistakes in love, but, as the Gospel assures us, Jesus gives us his Spirit to forgive our sins and to purify our hearts so that we can learn from our mistakes and get on with loving as best we can, fired by the love that fills the heart of Jesus.

A special poem called a Sequence has been composed for today's liturgy. You will find it in your Sunday missal. May I suggest that you take some time off and read through the prayer slowly, stopping to reflect on how it might be real for you. I think you will find it very helpful, as it describes rather beautifully various aspects of the Spirit of Jesus and invites this Spirit to make our hearts like his, that we may be on earth the heart of God. For your convenience I add a copy of the sequence here:

### **Sequence for Pentecost**

attributed to Stephen Langdon (died 1228)

Holy Spirit, Lord of light, from the clear celestial height, your pure beaming radiance give.  
Come, Father of the poor, come with treasures which endure, come, light of all that live!

You, of all consolers best, you, the soul's delightful guest, such refreshing peace bestow.  
You in toil are comfort sweet; pleasant coolness in the heat; solace in the midst of woe.

Light immortal, light divine, visit now these hearts of thine and our inmost being fill.  
If you take your grace away, nothing pure in us will stay, all our good is turned to ill.

Heal our wounds, our strength renew; on our dryness pour your dew; wash the stains of sin  
away.

Bend the stubborn heart and will; melt the frozen; warm the chill; guide the steps that go astray.

We pray you, we who evermore you confess and you adore, with your sevenfold gifts descend:  
Give us comfort when we die; give us life with you on high; give us joys that never end.