

## PENTECOST

Year "A", May 11/08

(Acts 2: 1-11; I Corinthians 12: 3-7, 12-13; John 20: 19-23)

### Introduction

A very unpopular employer put up a suggestion box in his factory and invited everyone to make use of it. A few days later he emptied it. As he looked over the suggestions he had received he scratched his head and said: "I wish they wouldn't be so vague. What kind of kite do they mean? What lake are they thinking of?" Well there is nothing vague about the message of today's readings. This is the birthday of the Church, and the symbols we meet in the readings, symbols like wind, fire and breath, give us a very clear picture of what it means for us to be the Church of Jesus Christ. What do the symbols show us?

### They Show Us That the Church is the Presence of Christ in the World

When a priest is sent to a parish, he comes with a letter of appointment from the bishop. That letter indicates that the priest represents the bishop and in some ways acts with the authority of the bishop. In a similar way Jesus gives a letter to us, his Church community, in today's *Gospel*. He says to us: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The Church speaks and acts with the authority of Christ. This is made clearer in the *first reading*, where we hear about *wind* and *fire*. These are symbols of the Holy Spirit; they show that the presence of the Holy Spirit among us empowers us so that Jesus can teach and act through us. Then in the Gospel Jesus *breathes* on the apostles. This shows that he makes the Church to be more than just a human community. The Spirit makes it something divine, a living extension of Christ in the world.

### They Show That the Church is Meant to be a Source of Unity Among People

A highly-respected Protestant Biblical scholar, Oscar Cullman, remarks in one of his books on what a remarkable group of people the apostles were. They included people as diverse as Simon, who is referred to as a Zealot, and Matthew, who is referred to as a tax collector. The Zealots were a guerilla group seeking to undermine the Roman force that was occupying Palestine; they were resistance fighters. The tax collectors were people who worked for the Roman army; they were collaborators. Yet these two people, Simon and Matthew, lived and worked together in peace and unity as apostles of Jesus.

We are shown that same peace and unity presented as a gift to the entire Church. For when the Holy Spirit descends on the Church community on Pentecost, they become capable of talking in such a way that people of every language can understand them. The point is that the Spirit unites people; the Spirit uses the Church as a source of unity for our divided world. Think of some of how this happens. The Holy Spirit enables us to treat other people in a whole new way. By our respect for every person's human dignity, by our spirit of tolerance for others, and by our just treatment of every person, no matter who that person is, Jesus works through us to bring unity to our world.

### They Show That the Church is Sent to Help Our World

When the Risen Christ appeared to the disciples in that Gospel reading they were behind locked doors. They were in what today we might call a safe house. Jesus sends them out of that room, armed with the power to forgive sins, and to be a source of blessing

to others. This makes it clear that the Church is not a sort of hothouse meant to protect us from the world. Rather we are to abandon any spirit of isolationism and to be an active part of our world. We are all given gifts by the Holy Spirit so we can do this, there where we are, in our own place in the world, wherever we live or work. In practice this means many things.

For one thing it means we should preach the Gospel, by speaking boldly about our faith and also by inviting inactive Catholics to come back to Church. It also means we should pursue justice, by being active in politics and in various community ventures so that through them we can work to make our country and our community more human and more humane. It means we should bring a whole new attitude to work, to possessions, to this earth. It means we should practise compassion, by, for example, reaching out to assist people who are struggling to get along, single mothers, young people in trouble. It means we should be prophetic, and that includes speaking out and acting against the real evils in our culture. We must never be afraid of being different, or being in some ways counter-cultural. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers us.

### Conclusion

Years ago I was struck by someone saying that we begin to die the day we are born. Of course it's true. As we grow, we also grow older and then we grow old. There is a wonderful line in Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church* however that says the Holy Spirit living in the Church makes the Church constantly *grow young*. We can see it for ourselves; the Church keeps manifesting signs of new life. Today's feast is a feast of hope. The Holy Spirit is present and active in our midst.