

May 31st, 2020: Pentecost Sunday, Mass during the Day: Year A

First Reading: Acts 2.1-11

Responsorial Psalm: Ps 104.1ab+24ac, 29b-30, 31+34 (R. 30)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 12.3b-7, 12-13

Gospel: John 20.19-23

Homily by Fr. Robert Weaver

In baseball, you know beforehand when you have to “step up to the plate” and face the pitcher but as for life in general the call to “step up to the plate” and face some sort of challenge often comes quickly and without warning. I had one such challenge a number of years ago when I was working at the University of Windsor.

It came when we were interviewing a candidate for a position in our School. The candidate visited the campus and presented some of his research to a group of us so we could assess his work. His research was impressive but then somewhere along the line he said something derogatory about the Catholic Faith. I don't remember exactly what he said but I think he suggested that the Church was very negative or judgmental in her teachings. In any case, it did not sit well with me.

I do not recall my exact words but when the opportune time came, I addressed the presenter's comments and told him that Catholicism actually emphasizes God's mercy. And then something very interesting occurred - he expressed regret for his earlier comments. I thank God that I spoke the truth that day and stated what needed to be said. And as I look back on it, what this “stepping up to the plate” was really about was my cooperating with and experiencing **the power of the Holy Spirit**. I am sure you have had similar experiences, when you just know that the Holy Spirit is guiding your words and actions.

As Catholic-Christians, experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit is nothing new to us – it goes way back to the earliest days of the Church.

In fact, in last week's first reading taken from Acts 1, the Risen Jesus told his Apostles that "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8).

When Jesus said this, he was pointing toward the great event we are celebrating today – Pentecost Sunday, in which there was a glorious outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of God on the day of Pentecost not long after Jesus's Ascension. (see: https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_441.cfm).

So, what is this day of Pentecost that we hear about in today's first reading which is taken from Acts 2? As you may recall from my homily several weeks ago, I mentioned that Pentecost was a momentous feast amongst the Jewish people for which they would travel to Jerusalem and offer to God the first loaves of bread from their spring wheat crop in thanksgiving for his blessings. Pentecost was also a celebration of God giving the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people through their leader Moses (see: Ignatius Catholic Study Bible; Pitre Summary).

It is helpful for us to consider God's giving of the Ten Commandments; this is described in the OT Book of Exodus (19). Exodus says that "Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stationed themselves at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was all wrapped in smoke, for the LORD came down upon it in fire" (vv.17-18a).

Now let's turn to today's first reading, which describes a day of Pentecost that happened long after Moses received the Ten Commandments. As we hear, "[d]ivided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit..." Whereas in the OT God came down on the mountain in fire, in the NT Acts of the Apostles the Holy Spirit, who is God, descends upon the Apostles and others in tongues of fire.

And with God showing himself as fire on Pentecost something truly marvelous happened, as the many people gathered together from

different regions could all understand what others were saying about “God’s deeds of power” as though the words were in their own native tongue (see: <http://www.intercessionnyc.org/the-feast-of-the-pentecost>: Pitre Summary).

This glorious event on Pentecost clearly demonstrated how the Good News of Jesus Christ is for every person on earth and how God calls men and women to devote their lives to spreading this saving Truth to others. One great example of this is St. Paul, who stated that “...I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone...” (Rom 1:16).

The word “power” that Paul uses here originates from the Greek word *dunamis*, from which the English word dynamite is derived. Jesus also uses this word when he talks about the Holy Spirit coming upon the Apostles in Acts 1. So, we can think about the Holy Spirit as being like dynamite in that He continually sparks change - not in a destructive way but in a transformative and glorious way (See: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/gods-dynamite.html>).

There is much that can be said about Paul but today I would like to highlight his speech to a council of elders who met in Athens, Greece. This is described in Acts 17. To these elders Paul said “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way”. He mentioned this because Athens was full of shrines dedicated to false gods (vv. 22-23; See Ignatius Catholic Study Bible).

But then Paul “laid out” the truth for his listeners, proclaiming that “[t]he God who made the world ...does not live in shrines made by human hands.” Soon after that Paul began talking about the resurrection of the dead – our glorious belief that just as Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, so shall we someday. When the crowd heard Paul’s teaching, “some scoffed, but others said ‘We will hear you again about this’” (vv. 24, 31b-32).

What a powerful scene! We can imagine these elders laughing and making fun of Paul but some of them opened up to the truth.

After this Paul kept going, he kept on spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ – he was fueled by the dynamite of the Holy Spirit and there was no way he was going to quit despite all the obstacles and opposition he faced.

For us today Paul is a shining example from the early Church to prayerfully imitate. We are reminded of this by the words found in today's opening prayer, right at the beginning of Mass: "O God...pour out, we pray, the gifts of the Holy Spirit...and with the divine grace that was at work when the Gospel was first proclaimed fill now once more the hearts of believers." The hearts of believers – this means you and me!

At the beginning of my homily I talked about "stepping up" to the plate and relying upon the power of the Holy Spirit to meet those often-unexpected challenges. For instance, we can be at work, at school, or just socializing and someone will say or do something that really contradicts our beliefs about God, or about the right to life, or the truth about the nature of marriage and the human person. In such cases it is vital that we call upon the Holy Spirit and he will guide us to speak and act truthfully, clearly and respectfully. As Jesus says, "...I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict" (Lk 21:15).

Now, there may be times when we falter and do not proclaim or live out the truth in the way we are called to. And if this happens, then we ask for God's forgiveness and we carry on, always trusting in the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit who is with us and in us. So, let us never, ever, fall into discouragement, for we know "...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11). Come, Holy Spirit, come!