

Pentecost (c)**Acts 2.1-11; 1 Cor 12.4-13****23 May 2010****Fr. Patrick S. Allen**

We keep today this great feast of Pentecost, when, just as Jesus our Lord promised, God the Holy Spirit descended with an explosion of signs and wonders, and empowered Christ's disciples for the work of bearing witness – that is the event we celebrate and ponder today.

And that, of course, is what the Church is about; it is what the Church does, and what I hope we are doing today: we are engaged in an ongoing task, both among ourselves and to and for the world – a task of remembering. Life in the Church, and the message the Church proclaims, is a kind of perpetual history lesson. Because, we believe and confess, God has acted in history.

So, the message the Church proclaims is not primarily about a proper attitude with which to approach life, although it includes that. And it is not primarily about a set of disciplines and rules for living, which if you follow them assiduously enough will lead to peace and prosperity, health and wealth – although the Christian life includes and is greatly aided by disciplines: prayer and fasting, reading and meditating on God's holy Word, self-examination and repentance, silence and solitude and the giving of alms.

But the core Christian message – the Christian “thing” – is the proclamation of, and the rumination upon, and living out the implications of, certain events in history concerning Jesus of Nazareth. Which is why we call the Christian message the “Gospel,” which is just an old English word meaning “good news.” As in, “I have some good news for you.” Something has happened. God has acted.

In just a few minutes we will stand together and recite a summary of that history in the Apostles' Creed, of those events whereby God has acted to deliver us from sin and death: that Jesus, who is God the Son, was conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary; that he suffered under Pontius Pilate and was crucified, dead, and buried; that on the third day he rose again; and that he ascended into heaven. All these things, as we remind ourselves in the Nicene Creed, were and are “for us and our salvation.”

On this day, on Pentecost, we consider and celebrate the last of those great Gospel events, those “for us and our salvation” happenings. So we might ask, *How does this event, the coming of the Holy Ghost, deliver us? How is it “for us and for our salvation”?* We ought to have these questions. Had our lesson from Acts this morning extended just one verse further, we would have read that those who witnessed those miraculous events on the morning the Spirit descended “were amazed and perplexed, and they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

One way to answer that question is simply to ask, what happened? So what did happen that long-ago morning? Jesus' disciples, who were gathered together in obedience to his command, began to speak. And what were they talking about? This is important, but it seems to me often overlooked, because immediately and understandably we focus on the miraculous mode of their speaking, but then miss what they were actually saying – which is ironic because the effect of that morning's miracle was to make communication clear and easy, not to obscure it.

So what were these Spirit-inspired disciples talking about? Well, the Church's great and perpetual history lesson begins: St. Luke tells us that those who to their amazement and perplexity, heard the disciples said, *Are not all these speaking Galilleans? And how is it we hear, each of us in his own native language...? We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.*

The mighty works of God. Standard Jewish terminology for those great events in history in which God acted to deliver his covenant people: the call of Abraham, the preservation of Joseph, the Passover and redemption from the house of bondage in the land of Egypt, the divine victory at Jericho – all those events which, these disciples were now proclaiming, reached their climax and fulfillment in the Incarnation and life, the blessed passion and precious death, the mighty resurrection and glorious ascension of Jesus Christ.

Some years ago – I guess it must have been the early- or mid- 90's, my brother attended an Orlando Magic basketball game. And as he is wont to do, he was sticking pretty close to the concession stand, when who should show up but Hulk Hogan, six-time World Wrestling Federation champion. Now, the Hulkster is pretty hard to miss, what with the massive physical bulk, tank tops, peroxided hair, and thickly sprayed-on tan. But that evening there was no chance of missing Mr. Hogan because he had with him a kind of lackey-*slash*-publicist, who made sure that everyone within shouting distance was aware of the Hulk's presence and activities: "Here he is! The Champion! Hulk Hogan!" In a bellowing voice he called attention to everything Hogan did: "Did you see that? He ordered a Coke! Way to go, Hulk! Look! A cheeseburger! Great choice, Hulk!"

Now, I want you to know that I am fully aware that this is possibly the worst illustration in the long history of Pentecost preaching. But maybe in this publicist's work we see the shadow – a very faint shadow, I grant you – but the merest shadow of the Holy Spirit's work, which is to glorify the Son.

The work of the Holy Spirit, the effect of his presence, is to direct us to and illumine for us the history of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit directs us to Jesus, he draws our gaze to Jesus, he moves us to follow Jesus. I will not take the time (and you can thank me after Mass), but we could run right through the New Testament and see time after time the Holy Spirit coming and filling God's servants – Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, Peter, Paul, the entire first Christian community gathered together in Jerusalem – and always with this same result: they begin to speak; they begin to declare the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ – that for us and our salvation he suffered, that he died, that he rose again, that he ascended to the Father.

That is what happens when the Spirit comes, but it is true that this descent of the Spirit at Pentecost is unique in the miracles it involves: the fire, the sound like a mighty rushing wind, and especially this miracle of tongues, of languages, so that all these "devout Jews from every nation" could hear and understand as the disciples declared the mighty works of God.

And that tells us that this history, these mighty works of God in Christ, are not just for the privileged few, but for all men and all women, in all places, in all conditions – which of course is just the conclusion that St. Paul draws in our epistle lesson: God's people are one, without regard to race or wealth or any condition – "Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" – for all are baptized into one Body, and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Do we want the Spirit's power in our lives? In our life together as a community of disciples? Then we must give ourselves to the Spirit's work, which is to empower the Church to proclaim with our words, with the mutually giving, mutually submitting, self-emptying, sacrificial manner of our life together – to proclaim the mighty works of God in Jesus Christ, to take up the history lesson.

I have been calling it a history lesson because it is about real events, but they are not events which remain remotely, discretely, and safely, in the past. William Faulkner fairly well summed up what it means to have a Southerner's view of the world when he said, "The past is not dead; in fact, it's not even past." In a much truer, real, deeper way than Mr. Faulkner imagined, in the Church this history of Jesus is not dead, and in

eternal fact it is not even past. As the Reformer (hold on to your funny hat, Fr. Clark) John Calvin said, it is the work of the Spirit to unite those things which are separated in time in space. The Holy Spirit makes this history present; he opens our hearts to see in these things God's overpowering and redeeming love, and incorporates us into that history and into that love - the ongoing drama of God reconciling the world to himself in the Church.

He makes these things present. In the Spirit's power, even our Lord is present on this Altar, giving himself to and for us, as we take and offer bread and wine in remembrance of him. The Spirit makes these things present and will do so now as, in obedience to Christ's command, we confer upon little Miley the Sacrament of Baptism. There, at the font, in the power of the Spirit, she will be buried with Christ in baptism, and raised with him to new and eternal life, and marked as Christ's own forever.