

Day of Pentecost

May 31, 2009

Along with Christmas and Easter, today, the Day of Pentecost, is one of the three principle Feast of the Church's year. Pentecost is about the coming of the Holy Spirit; and this morning I want to say a few things about God the Holy Spirit, but from a fairly narrow perspective, from our perspective as the Church, and the role of the Spirit in the life and work of the Church. There's a whole lot more to say about the Spirit; but there will be more sermons.

Even so, there's a lot here. The Holy Spirit is very much about the life and work and mission of the Church. It was on the Day of Pentecost, which we just heard about from Acts, that the Church first did its thing. On that day the first sermon was preached, the first converts were made, the first Christian Baptisms occurred, and the Church began to devote itself to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Our life begins with the breath of the spirit.

One of my favorite ways to get at this is by talking about a big piece of the Old Testament background to the Day of Pentecost. Doing this, as many of you know, takes us all the way back to those wonderful early chapters in Genesis, to one of the most fascinating stories in this special part of the Bible—the story of the Tower of Babel. Remember the story?

Like all the stories in this part of the Bible, this is not about time or history as we know them. It's about the good old days, that different sort of time when great stories happen, at the very beginning when everything was better—the world was freshly minted, oil was around \$100 a barrel, there were no recessions. Way back then.

In that Golden Age, Genesis says, the whole earth had one language, and just a few words. So people could communicate, they could understand each other.

Back then it was easier to be together, and there weren't all the divisions and distances and disagreements and such. What people did they did together; and they got along; and everybody liked everybody else.

Now, it isn't hard to see that we're not talking history here. But we are talking theology—and that's even better. Babel is really a second Garden of Eden story—a story that says, quite correctly, that we are created to be more than we are right now, and to be better than we are right now. The Babel story says, again correctly, that we are created to understand each other; we are created to get along—we are created to live in love and charity with our neighbors. The life God created us for, and that God wants for us, is a little bit like all the earth having one language, and just a few words. Not a bad image, really.

Alas, into this happy state of affairs comes sin. It's the sin of pride, which is also the sin of the man and the woman in the garden of Eden. The people want to be like God; so they set out to build a tower that reaches all the way to heaven where God is—a tower that will make them famous, powerful and important—just like God, the same level as God. (Remember the two lies the serpent told Adam and Eve in the garden? Genesis says they were the first lies ever told; and you can be sure that every time you hear them they are still lies. The first is “you will not die”. That's a lie; it's always a lie. The second is “you will be like God”. Well, the Tower of Babel is about the second lie, it is about trying to be like God.)

So, the people set out to build this mighty tower that will make them great like God is great. But God looks down at all of the ruckus and decides that this simply will not do; that the people's pride isn't good for them; and that consequences are in order. So, the result of their sin, of their attempt to be like God, is that things go bad. A good world is ruined.

That's why, the story says, people now have lots of different languages, and can't understand one another anymore. They're scattered all over the face of the earth, and they discover the divisions that come with great distances and different homelands, with different customs and different cultures. The original harmony, the original shared life, these are lost.

Now, is that us, or what? What makes Babel such a powerful story is that it describes, so eloquently and with such depth and insight, what human life is really like now—what it looks like to be a person in our world. This is who we are.

See why this story is so much a part of the feast of Pentecost? What the account in Acts does is insist that the coming of the Holy Spirit means that the story of Babel is replaced by a new story, a different story—the story of Jesus and of his Church. The Spirit that Jesus sends, the Spirit that comes to begin the life and work of the Church, that spirit is about restoring human beings from where we are now to the way we are created to be. In the moment of the Spirit's coming, at the Church's first breath, people are able to understand each other; and the ancient divisions of language, race, culture, and distance, the ancient pain of isolation and loneliness, these are—for a glorious and prophetic moment—overcome. People are restored to unity with God in Christ. What's broken is fixed.

Now, as with all great moments of glory, the Day of Pentecost is primarily a glimpse ahead, a peek at what things will be like when the last roads have been walked, when everything is completed, and God's will is fully done. It shows us the finished version of a work that is still in process.

All of this is about saying that the Holy Spirit is given so that the Church may have life to continue its work of being the Body of Christ for the world; so that we can carry out our mission. That's what's central. That's why we talk about the Church in the third paragraph of the Creed, the paragraph about the Holy Spirit. That's why we are asked to re-affirm our Baptismal Covenant on the feast of Pentecost, and that's why one of the places anyone is most likely to find the Holy Spirit is when reaching out to others in the name of Jesus.

You see, when we let it, everything about the life of the Church, everything that gives us direction, and energy, and strength—this not only builds us up, it also pushes us out—out of our selves and outward toward ministry and mission. We, and everything about us, exist primarily for the sake of our mission. The world is in a mess, (like the story of Babel says) and an important part of what we are about is doing our little part in our little patch toward healing that. To that end, and to make that possible, we are given the gift of God the Holy Spirit.

All of that is pretty overwhelming, but it is true. This is who we are. This is what we are called to do. We are part of the new story—not the story of Babel, but the story of the Spirit. And God is giving us, and God will continue to give us, all that we need to make it possible for us do what we are called to do.

REAFFIRM BAPTISMAL COVENANT