

May 20, 2018

Pentecost

There are three possible Gospel texts for the Feast of Pentecost. The first, John 7:37-39 is for the Vigil Mass. Either John 14:15-16, 23b-26 or John 20:19-23 are texts for Masses on the Feast.

John 7:37-39 (For the Vigil Mass)

On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'" He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

Background:

This reading is especially appropriate because Pentecost is the last day of the Easter Season—the season when most adults and children are received into the Church through the waters of baptism. During this season, many communities invite the entire community to remember their own baptism by inviting the congregation to renew their Baptismal commitment and then sprinkling them with water from the font.

This Gospel text is very short. The feast that is referred to in the first verse is the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. It was the third and most favored festival that Jewish men were to attend during the year. During the feast, simple structures were built that reminded the people of their dwellings during their time in the desert. The roof was typically covered with branches that would obscure the sun but permit one to see the stars at night. The feast was celebrated when most of the harvest had been gathered. Each night the people gathered around an altar waving palm branches and the priest poured water that was brought from the pool of Siloam, thanking God for the rain that produced the harvest and the water that flowed from the rock into the desert. It was on the last day of this celebration that Jesus stood and declared that he was the living water and invited all to come to him.

As the early Christians adopted the Jewish feast of Booths as an expression of their relationship with God, Jesus becomes the water through whom they now have eternal life with God.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of coming to the end of a celebration, vacation, or time with a friend?
2. What is your experience of coming to the last day of the Easter Season?
3. Have there been occasions when you were particularly aware of water as a gift?
4. How do you hear today Jesus' instruction to the disciples, "Let anyone who thirsts, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from him'"?

5. Can you take some time to talk to God about what God desires of you on this feast of Pentecost, or about your relationship to the church, or about some other idea or feeling that arose within you as you heard this gospel?

John 14:15-16, 23b-26 (For the Feast)

[Jesus said to the disciples:] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always.

"Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; yet the word you hear is not mine but that of the Father who sent me. "I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name--he will teach you everything and remind you of all that (I) told you.

Background:

The fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel returns to Jesus' farewell address. The reading is meant to prepare the disciples for a time when Jesus will no longer be with them. The text focuses on love that motivates one to obedience. The fundamental message of Jesus is self-sacrificing love, which was the heart of both Jesus' teaching and the way he lived his life. When one loves God in this manner, they are obedient to God, and both Jesus and God dwell with them.

The other theme found in this text is the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While not a complete theological explanation, the text does offer some important insights. There is an intimate relationship between them, but they are distinctly different. The Father and the Son will dwell with the faithful, but they are distinct, for the Father has sent the Son. The Father will also send the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit comes in the name of Jesus to remind them of all that Jesus has taught them.

Reflections Questions:

1. Are there significant people for you who have relationships coming to an end during this season of graduation, marriages, and other life-changing events? What are your hopes or desires for those people? What would you like to say to them?
2. Who are the people you love? Who are the people you obey? What is the difference?
3. What do you think Jesus is saying to the disciples by promising to send them the "Advocate to be with you always?"
4. As you hear these words of Jesus, what desire for you do you hear being spoken?
5. Can you take some time to speak to God about whatever it is you hear God saying to you in this text?

John 20:19-23 (For the Feast)

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Background:

The third Gospel text for Pentecost is also from John's Gospel. The text presents a different kind of experience of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples than is found in the Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11 (the first reading for Masses on the Feast).

The disciples have gathered on the first day of the week, that same day as the resurrection. The Sabbath was celebrated on the last day of the week and looked backward over the past week. It was also an occasion to remember what God had done in their history. The first day of the week looks forward to the week ahead. Jesus' presence with them now is not about the past events of his death and resurrection, but about what they are being commissioned to do from this point forward.

While the disciples have gathered in fear, they are sent out just as the Father sent Jesus. They have some real reasons to be afraid that those who arrested, tried, and crucified Jesus may move against them, too. However, the presence of the risen Lord is not impeded by the physical restraint of a locked door. But he is the same Jesus who was crucified, and he shows them his wounds. He stands in their midst, not above or apart, and greets them with, "peace." This greeting is the common greeting of the day, and it is also a prayer for health, prosperity, and all good that comes with the end times. Jesus stands among them as the fulfillment of that greeting. Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit - an action that mirrors God breathing life into Adam. The disciples receive the power to both bind and forgive sins. The expression names the two extremes, like north and south, or body and blood, and it is intended to communicate the full range of power between the two extremes. In John's Gospel, sin is defined as the refusal to accept Jesus and his teaching. By asking the disciples to be agents of forgiveness, Jesus is commissioning them to be agents to reach out to those who have rejected Jesus and his teachings. The text seems to use the energy that is present when two opposites are brought together to describe the new energy that is released by God upon the disciples.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you know people who primarily live life for the future? Do you know people who primarily live life out of the past? Which are you more like?
2. Do you know people who primarily live life in fear? Do you also know people who primarily live life with hope? Which are you more like?

3. Have there been occasions when you were aware of dangers or risks but you acted in a way that did not let fear dominate your actions? What was your motivation?
4. How do you experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in your own life?
5. Have there been times when the Holy Spirit seemed to be present in a dramatic way and times when the Spirit has been gently present to you... as gentle as your own breath?
6. How has God sent Jesus into the world? If you are sent in that same way, what does that mean for you?
7. Can you take time now to talk with God about your awareness of God's presence in your life, your desire to be an instrument of peace and reconciliation for another, or the fear that keeps you locked up?

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Excerpts from the Readings for May 20, 2018, Pentecost Sunday (Mass during the Day)

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. Suddenly there came a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. There were devout Jews from every nation staying in Jerusalem. At the sound, they gathered in a crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God."

Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord, my God, you are great indeed!
How manifold are your works, O Lord! the earth is full of your creatures;
May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord be glad in his works!
Pleasing to him be my theme; I will be glad in the Lord.
If you take away their breath, they perish and return to their dust.
When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth.

Brothers and sisters: No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Excerpts from Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34; 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13; and John 20:19-23

