

THE EMMAUS SERIES

Pentecost Sunday, Year A

Acts 2: 1-11

1 Corinthians 12: 3-7, 12-13

John 20: 19-23

In the one Spirit we were all baptised

The liturgies of the Easter season bring home to us the work of the Holy Spirit in the Saviour's Paschal Mystery. Our New Testament readings have made frequent mention of the Holy Spirit, looking forward to the coming of the Spirit as its final culmination.

Luke's account of the coming of the Spirit upon the apostles associates this coming with the 'day of Pentecost', a Jewish festival celebrated fifty days after Passover – a harvest festival that later became a celebration of the giving of the Law to Moses. The basis of Luke's vivid dramatisation may well have been the fact that, on this popular festival, the apostles – still uncertain how to undertake the enormous mission they had been given – joined the pilgrims crowding Jerusalem, and for the first time found the courage to proclaim their faith in the Risen Lord. In the joy and success they found on this occasion, they recognised the 'baptism with the Holy Spirit' they had been promised. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke tells the story of the Church of the beginnings using a device in use at the time by writers of popular history – taking important events in the history they are presenting, and dramatising them in a way that brings out their far-reaching significance. Thus, in Luke's account, what begins as an event on one room of the city – 'a noise that filled the whole house', 'something that seemed like tongues of fire', the apostles 'speaking in foreign languages' – suddenly involves the whole crowded city, as faith in the Risen Lord is preached 'to devout men from every nation under heaven'. As Luke's dramatisation continues in the passage that follows our reading, Peter's preaching leads to the baptising of three thousand people – a number designed to bring out the momentous nature of what is taking place, and the universal mission that will flow from it, rather than giving a precise historical detail. As we know, Luke is writing a sequel to his gospel: the story of the Holy Spirit's life-giving guidance of the early Church. In later ages, our instinct has been sound, in celebrating Pentecost as the birthday of the Church.

The other readings point to other dimensions of the workings of the Spirit in our lives. Our life in Christ is filled, from beginning to end, with God's generous gifts. And all of these gifts come from 'one and the same Spirit' – from our faith in Christ as our 'Lord and God', to the individual contributions we are able to make to the life of our community.

In John's gospel, as we are reminded in today's reading, the Spirit was given on the evening of Resurrection Day itself. 'Peace be with you', Jesus repeats, and 'breathing on them' he says, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'. John's gospel reminds us that if the Spirit is responsible for the great things in which God is present in the life of the Church, the Spirit is also evident in our personal lives, in the true 'peace' and contentment that comes to those who give themselves generously to the Lord. In John's gospel, Jesus, at the Last Supper, associates the gift of the Spirit he promises with a peace that is his special gift: 'My own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give this is my gift to you' (Jn 14:27),

How varied are the gifts of the Spirit. In this era of change and renewal, let us become more aware of our dependence upon them.

John Thornhill sm