

Spirit of the Living God, melt me, mould me, fill me, use me!

Pentecost Sunday – Cycle A – May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23

“Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.”

Prologue: The readings of Pentecost Sunday can have deep significance today since the situation of the disciples in the gospel passage according to St John is very similar to ours in India, today—“The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews” We could as well paraphrase this for today and say, sadly, “The houses where Jesus’ disciples lived were on lockdown for fear of the Covid-19 pandemic.” There is urgent need for Jesus to enter, to give us His peace, to blow His Spirit into us, and send us out on a *Missio Dei*: mission of reconciliation.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost—Greek, meaning, ‘fiftieth day’—came next in festive importance only to the Jewish Passover, which preceded it by seven weeks. It was basically a harvest feast for expressing thanks to God for the first fruits of the wheat crop, which were offered to Yahweh on that day. Later, more religious and historical significance was attached to it, since it began to commemorate the giving of the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai. At that event, a mighty sound—same word as in Acts 2:2—was heard, which turned into fire emitting a voice proclaiming the Law. The event was designated as ‘Day of the Assembly’ (see Deut 9:10; Ex 19:18). The Latin ‘*ecclesia*’—from which we get the English words ‘ecclesial’ and ‘ecclesiastical’—means ‘assembly’, which connotes ‘church’ or ‘those assembled around the Lord, Jesus’. So, in both the aforementioned commemorations, there is the aspect of new harvest, new birth, new life, new law. In sum, Pentecost is the birthday of the Church since a tearful and fearful bunch of disciples are ‘born again’ as a brave company of missionaries. Notably, just as Mother Mary gave birth to the earthly body of Jesus, so is Mother Mary again present at the ‘birthing’ of this ‘Mystical Body’ of Jesus, the Church (see Acts 1:14). This little detail is fitting since today is the last day of May dedicated to Mary and the Holy Rosary. In the first reading from Acts, the author puns on the word ‘*glossa*’ that can mean both, ‘tongue’ and ‘language’. The miracle of Pentecost is that, when ‘tongues’ of fire descend upon the disciples, they speak one ‘language’ understood by all! Just as fire is used to melt and purify metals, the Spirit’s fire **melts** and **moulds** the disciples into new persons: full of faith, fearless, ready to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. At the creation of the first human being, Adam, “God formed man from the dust of the ground” (Gen 2:7a). Here, at the start of human life, we have God’s action of moulding man, very much like a potter moulds clay.
2. The gospel reading, which describes the Johannine Pentecost, begins on a dark, dismal and fearful note. It is evening. Doors are locked. Disciples are frightened: couldn’t those who tortured and crucified Jesus come after us, too? Paralysis of fears, doubts, shadows of death. Enter the Crucified-Risen Jesus. He says, “Peace be with you!” twice (vv.19,21); but does not stop there. They are not expected to be peaceful, passive and self-absorbed. No, “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit!’” Jesus brings to birth his new body, the Church, as the historical continuation of himself, his presence, by breathing on them. Compare this with the birthing of humankind (Gen 2:7b,7c) where God not only moulds the first human being, but “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being”.

Just as God's Spirit filled Adam, the 'man of dust', with the breath of life at creation, so does Jesus breathe God's Spirit into his sinful and fearful followers. The effect? They are now **filled**, with new breath, new fire, new life. From a batch of individuals, they are born anew *as Church*.

3. It's not enough their sinfulness and fearfulness are melted away, they are moulded and filled with Spirit; but the time has now come for them to be **used**. Jesus sends them out to *be* his presence in the world and to do what he has been doing: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you!". They are commissioned for reconciliation: forgiving and retaining of sins. The Father → The Son → The Spirit will always be the driving force in this *Missio Dei*, with them serving only as instruments. They will always have 'feet of clay', so to say, since they are 'mere mortals' moulded from the dust, to which they will return.... But God will be *in* them and *with* them, as their ever-present power, provider and propeller.

Linking the 2nd Reading with the theme of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit

The newborn Church, according to Paul, is not some magical, 'mechanical' gadget like some super computer or robot programmed to perform millions of functions efficiently, but it is an '*organic body*', like the human body. Hence, "just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (v.12). So, each 'member' of the Church-Body must use his/her gifts given by the Spirit for the smooth functioning not only of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, but of the whole universe, God's Body, so to say. Church is made up of different peoples with various charisms and diverse functions—all working for the one and same goal: to *be* Christ in the world and to "forgive ... and retain ...": reconciliation! Note also that the listing of nations in today's first reading (vv.9-11) is founded on a list of countries corresponding to all the Zodiac-signs, thus, "every nation under heaven." At Babel, "the Lord confused the language of all the earth" (Gen 11:9); at Pentecost, the Spirit made one language intelligible to all. A Church marked by unity-in-diversity: *melted, moulded, filled, sent out!*

Three Birthday Gifts Given by the Spirit to the Church:

The Gift of Tongues and The Gift of Prophecy: Many people think that speaking in strange tongues is the ultimate sign of the Spirit's presence. Not really! Paul writes: "Those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them ... on the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement ... those who prophesy build up the church" (1 Cor 14:1-4).

The Gift of Love: "The greatest is love" (1 Cor 13:13) ... So, "Pursue love..." (1 Cor 14:14)

In Lighter Vein: A mechanic was changing the cylinder heads from the motor of a car when he saw a famous heart surgeon in his garage. "Hello doctor!" said the mechanic, arguing "See, I also open hearts, take valves out, and put in new parts. How come you get paid so much and I so little for basically doing the same work?" The surgeon smiled and said, "Try repairing when the engine is running!" Car assemblage is a matter of mechanics; Church 'assembly' is of body-parts: organic!

Prayer: Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.... melt me, mould me, fill me, use me, Amen!"
