

PENTECOST

I may be wrong but I don't think today's feast means that much to most people. If we're told it is important we'll take that on faith, but we don't really **feel** it. It doesn't get into the blood like Christmas or Easter. For one thing the word "Pentecost" doesn't grab us much. It's a word from somebody else's vocabulary. And then the Holy Spirit himself is fairly insubstantial. The symbols we associate with him like wind or fire or breath or dove - even though they may be appropriate in themselves - have nothing like the appeal of a baby in a manger or even a body on a cross. And the most disturbing thing, I think, is that the account of the Spirit's coming in the Acts of the Apostles really stretches our belief. So many unlikely things happening all at once.... A fireworks display of the miraculous.... Wind in their ears..... tongues of fire on their heads..... foreign languages at their beck and call ! It's simply not the real world as we know it. Even by the standards of the miraculous it seems to be well over the top.

The first thing we need to understand is that the coming of the Holy Spirit was an interior experience. It was an experience of soul and heart and mind. But because it was such an intense experience, St Luke felt compelled to describe it in terms of movement and image and sound. The Holy Spirit came in fact. He also came in metaphor. He came to the disciples *like* the wind, lifting them up, carrying them along, propelling them onwards - not physically, but figuratively. And he does it for us too. He is the wind on our backs, the help we need over obstacles, the little push we need when we're stalling. He is the fire in our lives as well, in the enthusiasm he engenders, the warmth he imparts, the evil he isolates and destroys. But for all the energy he generates - wind and fire - there is no violence in his coming. He comes to us not in the swoop of the hawk but in the gentleness of the dove. He comes with a universal message too. That's the significance of the speaking in foreign tongues. The Good News is for all people. The Gospel is to be internationalised. It's a time to be up and doing. In the life of the apostles gathered in that upper room, in the life of the infant Church for whom Luke was writing, a new era has begun.

So what does it all mean for us ? Well probably the best thing to do is not to worry too much about **how** it happened at Pentecost, but **what** happened ! You know yourself, from reading the story that the most remarkable thing about the coming of the Holy Spirit was the enormous impact he made on the disciples of Jesus. He literally changed them for life. He took a group of people who were cowering behind closed doors,

shook the hell – sorry, shook the timidity – out of them and gave them the courage to put their lives on the line. Will the hare turn around and face the hounds ? Well, with the Holy Spirit to stand behind them, that’s what the disciples did. Where fear had reigned, fortitude too over. The greatest gift the Holy Spirit gave the disciples was a bit of backbone. Led by Peter, who had backed off pretty quickly on an earlier occasion, they stood up straight, faced a formidable crowd and preached Christ crucified and risen. “God raised this man to life”, Peter told them, “and all of us are witnesses to that.” They had found their voices, rediscovered their vocation, embarked on their mission. They had been raised to life by the Spirit.

Our message for Pentecost is in their example. We need to be raised to life too – to a new level of commitment. Pentecost is about enthusiasm, about momentum, about a courageous missionary spirit. It’s not a time for hiding behind closed doors – even if all we have on the other side is apathy or indifference. Every time we feel inclined to complain or be concerned about the state of our world - the Spirit of Pentecost is on our backs. Could the problem be for us that we have grown flabby – well-meaning but ineffectual ? Letting things drift – especially on the devotional side - careless about Sunday Mass, sacraments, prayer in the home..... a middle-aged faith that has lost its youthful fitness, perhaps ?

Give it a thought. We are meant to be Pentecostal people. To have a sense of purpose. If our faith happened to bump into somebody, would the other person be conscious of a collision ? As inheritors of an explosive beginning and a history of missionary endeavour, we don’t have the right to be casual. He is our Holy Spirit too.