

## “Fire in the Soul”

Welcome to the Day of Pentecost. This Feast day is the fiftieth day after Easter and in Greek Pentecost means fiftieth. Christians borrowed this Greek word from the Greek name for the Jewish Festival of Shavuot, which is a harvest festival fifty-one days after the Passover. For the Anglophiles amongst us Pentecost is also called Whitsunday. The Whit in Whitsunday has to do with an old English word that is related to wisdom. Therefore, Whitsunday is about receiving the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. (If nothing else that will help you understand the time of year when it is mentioned in a British mystery book or TV show.)

My experience in the church is that when we get to Pentecost we get caught up in several aspects of the story. One aspect is the disciples speaking in languages they did not previously know. Some people think that this is the first instance in the New Testament of glossolalia, that is speaking on the language of angels or more commonly speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues is when someone speaks in a language that sounds like gibberish to human ears, but some believe it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But the Book of Acts is very clear that the people gathered there, “heard [the disciples] speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.’”<sup>1</sup> This was not glossolalia but rather a sort of reversal of the mixing up of languages that happened at the Tower of Babel.<sup>2</sup> The Holy Spirit is so powerful that it automatically makes these uneducated disciples able to speak in languages they have never learned. Everyone hears the Good News of Jesus Christ without need for a translator.

Another aspect of the Pentecost is the fire that comes to alight on the heads of the disciples is symbolic of the Holy Spirit coming to rest upon them. You can see symbols of that in our altar frontal. In paintings such as the one by El Greco the tongues of fire look like actual flames above their heads [see image below]. The flame is enlightening each of the disciples and giving them, as we would say, the fire in their heart for the work that they have been given to do in evangelizing the world. In the vestments of the church these tongues are symbolized by the bishop's miter.

One other symbol that is often associated with Pentecost is the dove. You can see one at the top of the full El Greco painting. When in the scriptures was the Holy Spirit described as a dove coming down from heaven? Yes, at Jesus' baptism. Mark writes, “And just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:6a-11 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 11:1-9

saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him.”<sup>3</sup> God’s Spirit or the Holy Spirit shows up at other times in scripture. Quite notably we read in Genesis, “And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”<sup>4</sup> A better translation of that passage might be that the Spirit hovered or even fluttered over the water.

Pentecost is a mysterious manifestation of the Holy Spirit. That is why it seems to need so many metaphors and visualizations to help us understand it. Whether flame, dove, mighty wind, or the disciples speaking foreign languages the writer of the Book of Acts is trying to help us understand the transformative power of what happened on that day.

Like other feasts of the Church Pentecost is not just about remembering what happened a long time ago and far away. We are also called to accept the power of the Holy spirit into our own lives. The power that made it possible for the disciples to become apostles. That is to move from being students of Jesus to the ones that Jesus sends out into the world. That power is ours to claim. Indeed, whether or not you realize it, you claimed it when you were baptized in the name of the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What’s more you were sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism with Holy Oil. Some Christian traditions think that we have to have a Holy Spirit moment, a conversion experience, to receive the Holy Spirit. We believe that Holy Spirit moment happens at baptism when we experience the water and the anointing oil, and God saying, “You are my beloved and with you I am well pleased.”

Conversion is exciting when it is like a thunder bolt or mighty wind that strikes us and sweeps us up in the ecstasy of the Spirit. But it can just as easily come with the calm and assuring words of baptism and confirmation. It can also come gradually as we experience the Spirit moving calmly and mysteriously in our lives over the course of days, months or years. Remember that Elijah looked for God but did not find God in the wind, earthquake or fire, but in a “still small voice.”

This Pentecost we may look for the whirlwind, flames, and mysterious language but we must not discount the still small voice that is calling us to service just as flames and wind called the disciples to serve God. Ours is not a passive remembrance of something that happened nearly two thousand years ago, but a reminder of our part in going forth to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in the way that we live our lives and share the talents and privileges that God has so generously bestowed upon us.

Accept the challenge as the disciples did to go forth into the world proclaiming the power of the spirit. It is our duty and it can be our joy to do so. A joy that like God’s peace which passes all understanding will lead us to abundant life in this world and the world which is to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:11 NRSVUE

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:2 KJV



Pentecostés (El Greco, 1597)