

PENTECOST SUNDAY; YEAR A 2020

The promise of Jesus is fulfilled, and on the day of Pentecost the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were aware that the gift of the Spirit was to be given to them as Jesus had told them to return to Jerusalem and wait. In several of the discourses with His disciples Jesus prepared them for this moment and when we read these accounts, particularly when we consult various translations, we are introduced to a number of describing the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

We are familiar with the designation Holy Spirit. It is found on our lips many times during the liturgy, especially when we use the three fold invocation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But we also come across descriptions such as the Advocate, Counsellor, Paraclete and Comforter. These designations of the Spirit are descriptive of the role and work of the Holy Spirit and help us to understand this wonderful gift imparted to all of God's people in and through our lives as Christ's disciples and members of his body the Church.

But I can't help but wonder whether we are inclined to ere on the side of a certain passive understanding of these titles. When we employ these descriptions in our modern ways of conversing we are aware for example that an Advocate will usually speak on our behalf, and a counsellor will help us to discover what is true mostly about ourselves and the Greek word Paraclete literally means one who is called to your side. And then we come to the word Comforter. What a wonderfully cosy word! We often use this word in discourse to mean sooth and reassure. I believe that in American slang a comforter is another way of saying Duvet; a comfy wrapping that you can pull over your head and hide from the demands of the world. To comfort is also to pacify. This is where there is urgent need not only to get back to the correct foundation of the word "Comfort" but also to move away from thinking that an attribute of the Holy Spirit is to make us feel cosy.

Many years ago i had an opportunity to go to France and see the Bayeux Tapestry; a truly amazing piece of work that tells the story of the invasion of England by William the Conqueror. In one of the panels the observer is introduced to a depiction of Bishop Odo; Odo being the Bishop of Bayeux and the half brother of William. In the scene the Bishop is seen rounding on a

group of reluctant soldiers with what seems like the flat end of a sword, or a stick, maybe even a club, for Bishops could not kill in a fight due to their office but they were allowed to bash a person senseless. Underneath this scene is written the caption, "Bishop Odo comforts his troops."

This is hardly how we would imagine giving someone comfort. But this is where we must get back to its original meaning. From the Latin "com" relating to expressing a force, and "fortis", meaning strong, to give strength particularly when someone is weak and vulnerable. Now it can be understood that to give comfort to be a comforter is not necessarily a passive act, it is very active and determined. To comfort is to rouse to action and to make ready for the challenges ahead with conviction and with the confidence that someone is behind you.

Jesus prays to the Father to send the Comforter and now we are aware what that actually means. Look again at the Gospel of John when Jesus breathes on the disciples and says "receive the holy spirit." The reader is aware that these disciples are in a locked room because of fear. They are burying their heads from the big nasty world. But the first task of the giving of the Comforter is the command to go. "As the Father sent me so am i sending you." This is the same image as Bishop Odo. The active giving of strength, divine strength to those who are weak and vulnerable that they may leave the safety of that upper room and proclaim the kingdom in strength.

The Comforter is the source of divine power in our lives invading us, animating us, convicting us of acting rightly and meaningfully. Look again at the manifestation of the spirit. It comes as a powerful wind and tongues of fire. These are not passive forces. Wind can bring great destruction but when harnessed properly and with the right motive it is a source of sustaining life giving power. Fire consumes and destroys everything in its path but when guided and channelled gives warmth and light. Receiving the gift of God's comfort correctly perceived motivates us to work together in fellowship, enflames our minds towards actively pursuing and making real all that Jesus taught, and above all to be open, obedient and responsive to promptings of the Spirit.

The psalmist writes, "You take back your spirit they die, returning to the dust from which they come. You send forth your spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth." The earth cannot be renewed when we are passive, hiding behind closed doors and fearful. But vivified by the Holy Spirit we leave that closed sterile setting and go to the ends of the earth, strong, supported and enlivened, for Christ is with us to the very end.

AMEN