

Pentecost (A)
(Acts 2:1-11 / John 20:1-23)
08.06.2014

The Scripture passages we hear on the morning of today's feast speak to us of two particular graces that stem from the Pentecost event: **mutual understanding and forgiveness.**

I am sure that many of us long for these two blessings of Pentecost in our lives.

Our hope will not be disappointed, because, as St Paul assures us, *God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.*

The challenge presented to us today is a challenge to open our hearts more and more to receive the graces of mutual understanding and forgiveness, so that we may display these attitudes in the way we live our lives.

In regard to mutual understanding, today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles places great emphasis upon the fact that when the day of Pentecost came round *all the diverse peoples gathered in Jerusalem were led to understand the disciples each one in their own language.*

We can also take it that all those who heard the disciples preach the gospel of reconciliation, and opened their hearts to its message, will have been led into an experience of mutual comprehension. For, those who truly welcome the gospel of Christ come to recognise themselves to be brothers and sisters in the Lord. They come to understand one another as brothers and sisters do. They come to see themselves as members of the one Family of God, called to live not only in mutual tolerance, but, more than that, in a positive appreciation of each other.

Today's gospel passage makes the point that the Spirit was given *for the forgiveness of sins.*

The gift of the Spirit is given not only to lead us to experience forgiveness for ourselves, but also so that we may share this gift from God with others.

Forgiveness is *for giving!*

Our reception of forgiveness engages us to forgive.

The prayer the Saviour taught us has us pray: *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

I wonder where we stand in regard to what our Scripture texts remind us of this morning.

I believe that we must ask ourselves how we are situated when it comes to mutual understanding and forgiveness.

I see today's feast as an invitation addressed to us to strive to make progress on both these scores.

I see our celebration today as carrying within it an invitation for us to implore the Spirit of God to lead us into mutual understanding and to the point where we hold in our hearts a readiness to reflect God's gracious pardon to those who have offended us.

The gospel insists again and again that we are called to forgive each other in the same way that we have been forgiven.

The reality is that we have all experienced hurt in our lives.

Others have offended us – just as we will have offended others.

Many of us may still be smarting interiorly from wounds received.

Who among us has not known different sorts of unfair treatment?

Most of us will have experienced disappointment, betrayal, deception, other people's ingratitude, lack of appreciation, inconsideration.

I am sure that there are still in many of our lives unresolved issues that leave us feeling conflicted within ourselves and with others.

While the wounds we have received clearly need to be pacified, they will often need to be purified first.

It is hard to avoid that sinful reactions will have infiltrated our wounded hearts.

Bitterness, anger, resentments of all sorts can readily take root within us.

Our wounded pride can quickly become infected and fester.

We need to face up to all the ills that poison and destroy our lives.

We need to acknowledge that wounds inflicted upon us can detract from our peace and rob us of our well-being.

This can be made all the harder because of the difficulties we experience around communication.

Let's face it, we are likely to experience communication problems with those with whom we are in conflictual relationships.

Worse still, it can happen that there are those in whose regard we have become totally estranged.

Because we may have come to feel completely indifferent in regard to these people we are likely to have cut off all communication with them.

We note in the Acts of the Apostles that the sign that the Spirit had come upon the disciples at Pentecost was precisely the fact that they were able to communicate with all around them.

Filled with the Spirit, the disciples began to announce the gospel message of pardon to all and sundry – including those they would have previously held at bay.

The disciples were able to proclaim the gospel message to *all those gathered in Jerusalem* – people from a wide diversity of backgrounds (*Parthians, Medes and Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts Lybia round Cyrene; as well as visitors from Rome – Jews and prosylites alike – Cretans and Arabs*) – and all these diverse peoples could understand.

We see in the story told how communication opened up between all God's People.

The original Pentecost event was only the beginning of a story which progressed further as time went on..

The Church which emerged from this initial event has developed into an ever widening circle of believers.

A sign which shows us God's Spirit to be at work in the hearts of believers is their readiness and their capability to communicate with each other in a way that builds up communion and, when needed, restores it where it is broken.

What we read in the Acts of the Apostles about the communication that opened up between all the people gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost shows us that no place was given to ethnic exclusion in the newly formed, Spirit-filled, community of believers.

All were led into an experience of universal brotherhood and sisterhood.

All those upon whom the Spirit fell came to have hearts wide open to others by the gift of God's grace.

Because they had opened themselves to God, they came to see the Lord's presence in each other and in every person encountered in all the world!

This is always the sign of Spirit-filled persons: they have a heart for everyone; they will exclude none!

They are never be content to be closed in upon themselves alone; they always strive to be open to all!

The Pentecost experience, already on the first day of the Spirit's manifestation in Jerusalem, and more and more as the story of the Church extended in the outreach recorded for us in the Book of Acts, shows us that the Spirit propels those who experience its outpouring to cross frontiers and demount barriers along the way.

Authentic Christianity without ever losing what is distinctive to itself, will always tend to reach out to the wider world and become universal.

It will never content itself to be a sectarian religion.

Authentic Christianity simply cannot be confined to a particular culture alone. It transcends all cultures and ethnicities; it tends to become universal.

If we are not grasping this, to the extent of being carried along by this wave of life and energy, then we simply are not getting the full message of Christ and His gospel.

Christ came into the world for all!

In Christ there is no longer male or female, free-born or slave, Jew of Gentile: all are one in Christ!

We must ask ourselves honestly if this is how we see things and whether or not we present our Christian faith to the world as a truly universal religion.

Authentic Christianity promotes unity without uniformity.

It holds Jesus to be *the Way* and *the Light*, certainly, but, at the same time, it sees Christ's way to open up many different paths and His light to be refracted in myriad ways.

Christ becomes incarnate still in so many differing personalities and across such diverse cultures which together make up the One Body of Christ.

Just think of how Jesus incarnates Himself in new and surprising ways in each one of us already! Each one of us here in this church is quite unique; there are not two of us who are totally alike.

We can marvel at how Christ makes Himself manifest in all our brothers and sisters over and beyond those of our own type, race and nation.

Authentic Christianity will never make efforts to deny, destroy or obliterate difference, therefore.

Authentic Christianity will always rejoice in the variety of the Spirit's gifts seen to be at work in

every person.

It will see itself as blessed by the rich diversity which believers in Christ are called to live together with each other, in harmony, and with all other people in concord and peace.

Paul writes: *Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

I wonder if we really believe those words.

We pay lip-service to them, certainly, but do we live by them?

If we genuinely believe that *where the Spirit is, there is freedom*, if we truly live by those words, then we will not be seeking to control and manipulate others, even for what we esteem to be *for their own good*, because we will know that this is not how God works!

Of course, we know and we have heard how those who call themselves Christian (and who actually believe themselves to be Christians) have spoken and can still speak and act tyrannically at times.

Some examples of this spring to mind.

I am thinking not only of examples from the distant past, but also of the sort of firmly held convictions we have heard voiced over the airwaves in recent times, coming from different quarters, in our own little land.

The sort of things we have heard said by many people who are convinced of their beliefs, has actually betrayed a grave deficiency in their Christianity.

It is hard, indeed just not possible, to recognise an echo of Christ's words in some of the words spoken by those who have made such disparaging comments about others.

It is clear that as Christians we have a real need to ask for forgiveness because of some of our sectarian attitudes.

We need to begin by asking forgiveness for ourselves if we are to proclaim the gospel message to others in a way that is credible to them.

If we are to proclaim the message of forgiveness convincingly, we must first recognise our own need for this God-given grace and we must go on to have the humility to implore it from those we have offended, while being ready to offer it to those who have offended us.

Today's gospel passage is clear in respect to all of this.

The Risen Christ came and stood in their midst and breathed the Spirit upon His disciples as He had promised

This life-giving, truth-revealing, sin-convicting, comfort-giving Spirit is the Spirit of forgiveness.

Just as we receive God's forgiveness for our sins, so we are exhorted and enabled to forgive those who sin against us.

If we refuse to forgive others, we will miss out on the blessed freedom God offers to us.

When we look at our lives fairly and squarely, we see that our refusals to forgive others lead us to miss out on the blessed freedom God offers through forgiveness – by which I mean, through our

having forgiven.

By our refusals to forgive we bind ourselves; we deprive ourselves of freedom.

Our resentments cripple and destroy us; they paralyse us and hinder us from advancing in the way of life in which we are called to progress with hearts and minds that are free.

God wants us to experience the emotional healing that comes from working through our anger and hurt (often rooted in legitimate disappointments and deceptions) to the point of releasing it to God.

Where we go wrong is to hold on to, to cling to, the pain others (especially significant others) have caused us.

The gift of the Spirit – the gift of forgiveness the Risen Christ has confided to us – has been given to us so that we may relay it to others in our turn.

More often than not the giving/forgiving of which I speak is not a gift we will express to another by walking up to them and saying *I forgive you*.

I would go as far as to say that usually forgiveness is a gift we are called to make in and from the secret of our hearts.

The person on the receiving end of our forgiveness may never even know that we had to offer this gift to them; they may never know the extent to which they have wounded us, broken our heart and grieved us, but we will know it.

And we will come to see that in forgiving our offender we have found the way to healing, peace and release that has evaded us for as long as we held ourselves bound by binding this other by our resentments.

Forgiveness is the way we need to follow if we are to know the grace of life renewed.
It is the path we need to take if we are to attain the freedom to live again.

I think it fair to say that the call of Pentecost which comes to us through the gospel passage addressed to us today is a call to dare to forgive, believing that the gratuitous love we show by cancelling our offender's debt to us actually lead us to receive a fresh start in life, over and beyond all your imagining, over and beyond all we thought possible, over and beyond all our hopes and expectations.

The bottom line of the gospel is **forgive!**
Show love in this way!

It is to the extent that we do so, that we resemble the Risen Christ and, like Him, become truly free persons: people who are totally alive, because people who are completely in love.

Amen!