

Pentecost (A)
(Acts 2:1-11 / John 20: 19-33)
31.05.2020

The Solemnity of *Pentecost* is sometimes referred to as *the feast of the birthday of the Church*. Let me dare to suggest that what we celebrate today is even more than that. With Pentecost what we celebrate is nothing less than humanity's recreation. What makes me say this is the gesture Jesus posed when He visited the disciples in the Upper Room. We are told that *when He stood in their midst He breathed on them and said to them: Receive the Holy Spirit*. This was a prophetic gesture: one that spoke! It would have made the disciples think of the act of creation of the first human being, recorded for us in chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis. We read in Genesis 2:7: *The time came when the Lord God formed a man's body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life. And man became a living person*. When Jewish readers of today's Gospel text read of the Pentecost event they too would have thought of this creation moment in Genesis when God took the clay and formed a human person, breathing on the human form He had fashioned from the dust of the earth, blowing His own breath into the nostrils of the first human. We will recall what the Creator said of the first persons He brought into being. He declared that humans were *made in His own image and likeness*. That remains true of all of us. We are all of us made in God's own image and likeness. We emanate from Him. The implication of this is that we are called to imitate Him by our whole way of being. In the light of today's Gospel passage, I would say that we are called to do this not least by our willingness and readiness to forgive.

Of course, even before the creation of the first human person in the Genesis story we are told that *the Spirit* (that is the breath of God) *breathed over the watery chaos* to bring forth from it the created order we call the world. The Jewish disciples and John's Jewish readers would have been reminded of this insight from the Genesis story as well. In light of this they would have recognised how the Spirit orders all things by setting and articulating in harmony the great variety and differences visible all around us.

We note that in the Upper Room Christ spoke these words as He breathed on the disciples: *Peace... As the Father sent me so am I sending you*. What Jesus declared there amounted to Him saying that it was now up to the disciples to pursue His mission on earth. Jesus sent the disciples out into the world to transform it. His followers were to live according to Christ's way, which we know from the Gospels to be a way radically different to that of this world. The Beatitudes speak of the stark contrast between Christ's way and that of the world. What Christ had to say in the Upper Room made the point that at the very heart of what He proposed to the disciples of yesteryear was the call to live the grace of forgiveness. Jesus still proposes that way to us today. Just as he invited the disciples in the Upper Room to be instruments of His reconciling grace and heralds of His peace in this world, so He invites us to be the same. The Christian way is meant to be a way of pardon which leaves no place for violence; no room for hatred, retaliation, revenge, no space for animosity of any sort. St Augustine reminds us that as Christians, as Church, we are called to live in this world as *humanity reconciled*. For this to happen we have to allow ourselves to be animated with the divine breath which was first breathed upon the chaos of the earth to bring order and harmony into all things. In the creation story we see how a healthy distinction was made between all the elements of the universe – a distinction which made clear the riches of each one the elements, an enrichment made all the more visible by the contrast and the differences which existed between them. The ordered universe is enhanced by everything being held together in a way that is life-giving. The world around us is truly teeming with every living thing... and it is all good! God could rejoice in His work and He still does so: *Behold what I have made is*

good! And when it comes to humans He said and still says: *Behold what I have made is very good!*

If in John's Gospel the Pentecost event is already hinted at (and indeed is present) in the second post-resurrection appearance in the upper Room, it was already prefigured, even before that, in Jesus' giving up His Spirit (His breath) upon the cross. It seems to me quite legitimate to read the line of the Passion Narrative *Jesus gave up His Spirit* in terms of Christ releasing His last breath into what had become the renewed violent chaos of this world wounded by the sin of our first parents and that of subsequent generations. We can take what Jesus declared at that moment, *It is accomplished*, to be a reference to God's creative/re-creative work. Jesus' words on Calvary can be seen as being crowned, as it were, with this statement found in John's later written work, the Book of the Apocalypse: *Behold I have come to make all things new*.

Today's Gospel text makes it very clear that the Spirit was given to the disciples for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus said to the disciples: *Receive the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins*. That little phrase reminds us of the most important element of the creation story, already touched on: namely, that humans were *created in the image and likeness of God*. It brings home to us that what Pentecost does is to make us one with God. The words Jesus spoke to His disciples are quite extraordinary in this respect. Jesus said: *Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven*. Bearing in mind the truth of the Pharisees observation in Matthew 13:35 that *only God can forgive sins*, what we hear Jesus say to the disciples in the Upper Room – and by extension to all of us – amounts to this: You have been given a share in My divine life. The breath of the Spirit empowers us to do what God alone can do: to forgive sins! That is the whole point of receiving the Holy Spirit for John. This is the core revelation of the Gospel: God's pardoning grace, which we are invited to allow to flow through us and to reach into others by our intermediary. This grace makes us nothing less than participants in the Lord's own creative, life-giving work. Every pardon we offer, like every pardon we receive, is a grace of new life extended through us, when we offer it, or, which is extended to us, when we receive it. With the breath of Jesus – the Holy Spirit – it is God's own life that is shared with us. We are brought into Christ Himself, made one with Him, and, as a result, we are led to pursue Jesus' ministry on earth: *As the Father sent me, so am I sending you*. Thinking of how we are all sent to share with others the Spirit's special gift of forgiveness, I find myself recalling words from the Rule of St Columba written to monks called to live the white martyrdom of missionary journeys abroad. Columba addressed them saying: Remember as you go, *'Forgiveness from the heart for every one!'* Although written originally for monks this exhortation is equally applicable to every Christian. We are all called to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness. Forgiveness was central to the message that those who received the Spirit on the first Pentecost day were given to proclaim; it remains central to the Christian proclamation in our own day and age. It has been said that forgiveness really is Christianity's unique contribution to religious thought. Jesus of Nazareth brought this theme to the forefront of His teaching. When He sent the Spirit upon the disciples in John's Gospel it was to this end: that sins may be forgiven. Our mission today is meant to be a continuation of that of Jesus in this regard. Everything else associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit – the spectacular charisms, speaking in tongues, operating healing miracles, prophesying etc. – all pale into insignificance beside the power to forgive. Through forgiveness the relationship between humanity and God (the relationship that was severed by the sin of our first parents) is healed; we are restored; and all people can be renewed by the grace of pardon. Forgiveness makes all things new!