



## St Mary's Concord

### A Reflection for Pentecost Sunday

*Pentecost Sunday concludes the Easter season. The readings for Pentecost (Year A): Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 3-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23.*

*During the Easter season the first reading each Sunday has been from The Acts of the Apostles. Luke's account of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost has dominated our understanding of the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, John's Gospel offers another insight when it presents the gift of the Holy Spirit as a part of the Easter event.*

*To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic only ten people are currently allowed in a church. Sunday Masses have not resumed at St Mary's Concord.*

When did the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? John and Luke present different answers. In John's Gospel it happened when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples on the evening of the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection. For Luke, as we read in *The Acts of the Apostles*, the coming of the Spirit happened at Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection.

The timelines are so different that in the past many people felt compelled to find an explanation. Did the Spirit come twice? Of course, we now better understand that the books of the New Testament were written for the early Christian communities. Their focus was not so much on "what happened?" but rather on "what does it mean for us?"

The evangelists were not attempting to write a biography of Jesus. Their key question was: "Who is Jesus for us?" For them, as it is for us, the question was not about a past event but about a present reality.

An historian may ask, "Who was Jesus?" but our question is "Who is Jesus?" For both John and Luke, the answer is that Jesus is the Risen Lord who continues to be present among us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The coming of the Holy Spirit therefore is part of the Easter event.

John's account of the Easter event unfolds on the first day of the week, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Early in the morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it was empty. She immediately ran to tell the disciples. Peter and another disciple, the one Jesus loved, ran to the tomb but did not encounter Jesus.

After they had left, Mary Magdalene remained weeping outside the tomb and Jesus appeared to her. He sends her to tell the disciples that she has seen the Lord and that he is ascending to the Father. Mary becomes the first witness of the resurrection.

In John's Gospel we move to the evening of that same first day of the week. The disciples were gathered when Jesus appeared among them. No indication is given about who was present. The essential message was that to be a disciple is to have encountered the Risen Lord.

Jesus then breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit." We can sometimes be distracted by the words that follow: "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). Our ears have been conditioned to hear those words as a reference to the Sacrament of Penance but that is not how John's community would have heard them.

In the opening scene of John's Gospel (Jn 1:29-34) John the Baptist declared that Jesus is the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world. It is not about the forgiveness of personal sins. The "sin of the world" was a state of alienation or separation from God.



The forgiveness of sins is something God does and so this is about what God is doing through the disciples. It is about the new creation that was echoed in the words of the response to the Psalm (Ps 104:30): “Lord send out your Spirit and renew the face of earth”. The Spirit is given to the disciples by the Risen Lord so that they can share in his mission to renew the face of the world.

Luke presents the same message but uses different symbolic language. The Jewish feast of Weeks was also known by its Greek name, Pentecost, because it was celebrated fifty days after the Passover. The feast of Weeks recalled how Moses encountered God on Mt Sinai and received the Torah (Law). The Law sealed the covenant, the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

Philo, a first century Jewish writer, records that God’s word coming down from Mt Sinai was often described by the rabbis as “tongues” appearing on the people. Fire was also a common symbol for the presence of God and so Luke uses the symbol of “tongues of fire” for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Luke places his account in the context of the feast of Pentecost to show that through the gift of the Spirit the disciples entered a new covenant, a new relationship with God.

Neither Luke nor John recorded the names of those who were present. The gift of the Holy Spirit is about a present reality not a past event. For both Luke and John, the gift of the Spirit is about being called to share in the mission of Jesus.

*Paul Crowley*  
*31 May 2020*