

Homily for Pentecost

Birthdays deserve to be celebrated. They are occasions when we can be thankful for the gift of life, and for the love we have received. So it is with Pentecost. Today is the birthday of the church, a time for us to celebrate who we are and to rediscover what it means to be the people of God. Down through the centuries the Holy Spirit has guided the church, despite the weaknesses of its members, both clerical and lay. We have the witness of many generous and heroic people who have been 'led by the Spirit' and whose lives have given eloquent testimony to the power of God at work in them. Rather than try to describe what the Holy Spirit looks like, the Bible says great things about what the Spirit does, how it impacts on life. Paul uses an image drawn from nature, speaking about the fruits of the Spirit. He is talking about the visible flowering of the Spirit in a person's life. We may not be able to see the Holy Spirit, but we can see the Spirit's impact on our outlook and behaviour, just as we cannot see the wind but can see its impact on the world about us. Wherever we find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control, the Spirit is there at work, made visible in and through these qualities and virtues. *At the entrance to a Hindu temple there was a beggar always stretching out his hand, asking and pleading for alms. One day he stretched out both of his hands. A passerby asked him: "All these days, you were stretching out only one hand—why are you today stretching out two hands?" To which the beggar replied: "Hari Om! Praise God! Business was so good that I opened another branch!"*

Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, full of the life of God. That divine life and love was poured out at Pentecost, initially on the first disciples but through them on all who are open to receive this powerful and wonderful gift. The Spirit is constantly at work in our lives, making us more like Jesus. The ordinary, day to day expressions of goodness and kindness, of faithfulness and self-control, of patience and gentleness, are all manifestations of the Spirit that has been given to us by God. We can recognize the Spirit's presence in the common happenings of everyday life. The spiritual is not something other-worldly; it is humanity at its best. It is by exercising these gifts that we let the Spirit guide us. When a person is loyal to a demanding partner, when one is cheerful and courageous, when we console the bereaved, link the old or encourage the young, we are doing the work of the Holy Spirit. When we curb our evil instincts, we honour him. When we respond to our best impulses, we honour him more. The Holy Spirit is like the rising sap that fills the tree with life. It is through and with our better instincts that the Spirit works, and brings our lives to fulfilment through the loving service of others. *Some years ago there lived a man in Ireland who had just returned from England where he visited his brother. The Social Services in England had contacted him because his brother was old and badly undernourished. He had his own house but it was clearly very neglected and dirty. After visiting his brother who was then in hospital he returned to the house to try and clean up the place. Imagine his great surprise when he found almost a quarter of a million pounds sterling hidden in a suitcase in an old cupboard. His brother had been a lawyer, and obviously a successful one but since the death of his wife had neglected himself badly. If this brother had made use of the money in the suitcase he could have had a very comfortable lifestyle. But he didn't do so and suffered the consequences.*

It would appear that many Christians are like this. They don't call upon the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They have a great treasure at their disposal. They can call upon the Spirit at any moment for help. But unless they do they may be undernourished, depriving themselves of the power of the Spirit in their lives. Just like the lawyer who deprived himself of food and other comforts. Let us pray with Cardinal Newman: Come Holy Spirit, Make our ears to hear, Make our eyes to see, Make our mouths to speak, Make our hearts to seek, Make our hands to reach out And touch the world with your love. AMEN."