

## THE DAY OF PENTECOST (Acts 2. 1-21)

Today is Pentecost. We had several special days during this month. May 3<sup>rd</sup> was St Philip's Patronal Festival – May 17<sup>th</sup> was the Church Day of the CSI Malayalam Congregation – and today we celebrate the Pentecost - the birthday of the Universal Church – of the 'one' Church that we have been referring to quite often during this month.

The word Pentecost is Greek. And it means 'fiftieth'. Originally there was a Jewish festival on that day (still Jews continue to celebrate that major festival 'Shavuot'). It has roots in Leviticus (23.16). Jews used to count seven Sabbaths starting from the Feast of Passover – and on the fiftieth day they presented an offering of new grain to God in gratitude - for the completion of harvest. Several other biblical meanings were also added later. So the birth of Church on this particular day was not by accident – it was God's plan.

For the disciples, after fifty days of uncertainty - this day of Pentecost arrived. Today, we too as individuals and as a church need that Pentecostal experience. Because, if we look into the life of the disciples, the resurrection of Jesus alone could not fix their problems. It is true that they were over-joyed seeing the risen Christ – they heard Jesus speaking – even shared a meal with him - but none of these could eliminate their doubts and fears. They were still meeting behind closed doors – they were uncertain about their future – and did not proclaim the risen Lord (Jn 20.26).

But on the Day of Pentecost – as Jesus promised them that they would receive 'power from high' (Lk 24.49) the Holy Spirit descended on them. As we heard from the reading, first there was 'a sound like the rush of a violent wind' – and then there were 'tongues as of fire' resting on each of them – and each of them was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Fire is a symbol of God's presence. We find this in the story of Moses (burning bush) – and in exodus we see a pillar of fire travelling with the Israel through the wilderness. Fire can also be a vehicle of punishment and destruction according to the Bible. (Punishment Matt 25.41, Rev 21.8; Day of the Lord 2 Peter 3. 10-12). But at Pentecost, we find it as a positive symbol - individual pillars of fire falling on each person.

Along with that, we find the Holy Spirit descending like a violent wind. In the Bible we also have records of Holy Spirit descending as a gentle breath (John 20.22) – and in the symbol of peace 'like a dove' (Matt 3.16). (So, these are also valid expressions.) And Jesus reminds Nicodemus that 'the wind blows where it pleases' (John 3.8). It has lots of meaning today in relation to people of God in this world of many faiths.

Anyway, this Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit changed the life of the disciples. This was to be expected because God is breathing on them - the same breath that God breathed at the beginning of the creation to turn the dust of the ground to a living being. So when the Holy Spirit descends on these disciples they turn into 'new' beings - a church which was dead at that time becomes living. Now, the disciples come out – they are no longer hiding anymore - they are fearless – they are not worried about their lives – they are not afraid of dying - they are now showing themselves before those who came to arrest them. Till then they were waiting for God's Kingdom to come to them (Act 1.6) – but now, filled with passion they travel to unknown lands. These people who had almost never spoken in public are preaching to every nation. Because they are rejuvenated by the Holy Spirit – transformed by a joy that gave them a new birth. The Holy Spirit did this.

And this is the joy, peace, and harmony that the Spirit wishes to bring to us today: in our individual lives – and in the life of the church.

This peace that the Spirit offers is not an outward peace – but an inward peace - a peace that is within. This peace is offered to us ‘not’ by freeing us from our problems. But ‘in’ problems, filled with this peace, our hearts will be like a deep sea, which would remain peaceful, while its surface is swept by waves. If we look into the lives of the apostles we find that this is true in their lives as well. The Holy Spirit did not make things easier for them – did not take away their difficulties, their opponents, temptations, tribulations and persecutions. Rather the Spirit brought into their lives a harmony that had been lacking: Spirit’s own harmony, because the Holy Spirit is harmony.

Often we choose to remain on surface floating on the waves! ...thinking that everything will improve once this or that problem is over. We look for a quick fix, popping one pill after another to keep going, to feel alive. But when one problem goes, another comes – and again we become anxious and fall ill. So, staying on the surface – and resolving momentary problems will not bring peace. But what can make a difference in our lives is the peace of Jesus, the harmony of the Spirit. This Spirit makes Jesus live within us; Spirit raises us up from within. The Spirit becomes our peace in the midst of restlessness, confidence in the midst of discouragement, joy in sadness, youth in aging, and courage in the hour of trial. When the currents of life tend to sweep us away, the Spirit lowers the anchor of hope. To quote Pope Francis, ‘without the Spirit, Jesus remains a personage from the past; with the Spirit, he is a person alive in our own time. Without the Spirit, Scripture is a dead letter; with the Spirit it is a word of life. A Christianity without the Spirit is joyless moralism; with the Spirit, it is life.’

To conclude, the Spirit is not only the specialist in creating harmony – but the specialist in creating diversity as well. In the beginning of the creation we find the Spirit (wind of God) changing chaos into cosmos – creating diversity, enrichment, and individuality. So, Spirit is the creator of this diversity and, at the same time, the one who brings harmony - and gives unity to diversity. Only the Spirit can do these two things.

On the Day of Pentecost we find people from sixteen geographical regions coming together. They all ‘began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability’ - but the Spirit also gave them the ability to hear them speaking their own language. This miracle of tongues on Pentecost thus reverses the confusion of tongues wrought by God at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11.1-9). And today’s reading from St Paul (I Cor 12:4-13) refers to the ‘varieties’ of gifts given to the Church as coming from the same Spirit who activates all of them for the common good. St Paul repeats that single word ‘variety’: varieties of gifts, varieties of services, varieties of activities’. We differ in the variety of our qualities and gifts. It is the Holy Spirit that distributes them creatively, so that we are not all identical.

If ‘we’ try to create diversity we may end up in bringing division. If ‘we’ want to build unity in accordance with our human plans, we may end up in creating uniformity. But when the Spirit does it – it brings unity and diversity together. So, the Spirit is the first and last need of the Church. Without the Spirit, the Church becomes an organization, her mission becomes propaganda, her communion a routine. So, let us earnestly seek the presence of the Spirit in our individual lives – and in our churches; and dream together God’s dream and vision for us and for our churches. Come! O Holy Spirit, Come!