

Solemnity of Pentecost 2020

[Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104; 1Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23]

By now we have all become familiar with preventative measures that guard against the spread of the coronavirus. Together with hand hygiene and not touching the face, two in particular have been receiving special attention of late: physical distancing and the wearing of a mask. In situations where a physical distance of two meters between persons cannot be maintained, a mask should be worn. There is one reason for this: breath. Breath has become very dangerous, because of what it might carry, namely, droplets that contain the dreaded virus.

In our celebration of Pentecost today, our attention is directed to breath, but in this case one that is not life-threatening but life-giving, precisely because of what it carries. I speak of the breath of Jesus, otherwise known as the Holy Spirit. The Gospel passage from St. John tells us that Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” As the Holy Spirit of Jesus, this breath carries his Word, which alone can give life. In our current pandemic context, the last thing we want is anyone breathing on us. Yet, the breath of Jesus is, in fact, the first thing we want; it is that which we need more – far more- than anything else. Why this is so becomes clear when we ponder what Scripture tells us about the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon the first followers of Jesus.

When Jesus breathed on his disciples, the Word of God carried by the Holy Spirit was the pronouncement of forgiveness through the ministry of the Church: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Here we have the institution by the Lord himself of the Sacrament of Penance, or Reconciliation. Jesus gave his life and rose again to forgive our sins, and communicates his power to pardon through the Church’s sacramental ministry.

For more than two months we have been held captive by COVID-19. Well, the fact of the matter is that we are far more constrained by sin than by any virus. Sin is the distancing of the soul from God, who alone is the author and giver of authentic freedom. It thus locks us in on ourselves and away from others. So, what truly holds us bound is unrepented guilt. Freedom is restored whenever we acknowledge our sin and turn back to God for His merciful forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is breathed forth by Jesus so that our state of sin might be gently confronted and we liberated by the power of his mercy.

Turning to the passage from *Acts*, we see that the Holy Spirit entrusts to the Church’s ministry not only the Lord’s power to forgive sins but also the boldness to announce this astounding gift to the world. We know that prior to the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles were fearful and lacking in understanding. Having received the Spirit, nothing could hold them back, and their proclamation was infused with comprehension and propelled by audacity. What they announced were “God’s deeds of power,” at the centre of which is the forgiveness of sins emanating from the Cross of Jesus Christ and communicated through the Church.

Now, there is something peculiar about the way the Gospel was first proclaimed at Pentecost, and which I would like to underscore here because of its immediate importance in our

own day. The apostles were given the capacity to speak in many languages, yet through that linguistic diversity communicated one and the same message, understandable to everyone. In the background is the ancient story of Babel from the book of *Genesis* (11:1-9). The building of the ancient tower was undertaken as an act of prideful self-assertion over against God. In response, God confounded what was then one universal language by rendering it multiple such that the people could no longer understand one another and thus became separated from each other. So, the fashioning by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost of one understandable message communicated in a diversity of languages demonstrates the power of the breath of Jesus to overcome the sin of division and fashion among people the unity for which he gave his life.

This is immediately relevant to our situation, because the temptation to build a tower of Babel lurking within each of us is today strongly encouraged by the exaltation of personal autonomy. The one language of self-promotion predominates, and in consequence there is no shortage of babble coursing through the many modern means of communication. Diversity of views and opinions abound, even in the Church, and this leads to a fracturing of both mind and heart that in turn issues in societal division. In our response to the pandemic, we have experienced a taste of human unity and solidarity, and have rejoiced in that. However, it has been but partial and tenuous. The unity God wills for His people is universal and enduring. In our hearts we yearn for this, but we cannot bring this about ourselves; it is the gift of the breath of Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit to descend mightily upon us so that our divisions be overcome and we be truly one human family, united by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Now, as we ponder all that the sacred texts are telling us about the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, there emerges an invitation to each of us to cultivate a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. We are accustomed to speaking of the need for a relationship with Jesus and, through him with the Father, but a direct relationship with the Holy Spirit does not often come to our minds. It is helpful on this point to recall, first, that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine Person within the mystery of the Holy Trinity, so to have a personal relationship with the Spirit is entirely appropriate; and second, that it is necessary, because, as St. Paul teaches, it is only by the working of the Holy Spirit that we can know Jesus as Lord and surrender our lives to him. So, let's collectively and joyfully accept the invitation. Let's pray to the Holy Spirit on this feast of Pentecost that he enable us to grow in our love for him and surrender more fully to his agency in our lives. If our hearts are open to his prompting, the Holy Spirit will act to: free us from the burden of guilt; to give us boldness to proclaim the Gospel; to help us follow readily the encouragement given by St. Paul to place our God-given gifts at the service of the Church's unity and mission; and to transform our anxiety into Christ's gift of peace.

The same Holy Spirit that descended upon the Church at Pentecost descends in this mass upon the bread and wine, so that they become the Body and Blood of Christ. By the grace of this sacrament, may the breath of Jesus extend from this altar to wherever we are and bestow upon us his gifts of forgiveness, unity and peace. His breath is not to be avoided in fear but welcomed in hope.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph's Basilica (livestreamed)
May 31, 2020