

Pentecost : May 31, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

Pentecost in the Time of COVID-19

We sense that COVID-19 has brought a profound change to our world. What that will mean? What will it be like to live in that world? We don't know. We only know that we face a changed reality. And that's scary. That fear, those questions are ones the disciples gathered in that upper room could relate to. This Pentecost as never before in our lives, we can understand them. Yes, the past held suffering and pain, but there were rich memories also of the joys and blessings of Jesus' physical presence. What could make up for that loss? Nothing was ever going to be the same. What could, what would, such a future be like?

In the first chapter of Acts, Luke made a point of telling us that the mother of Jesus was among those gathered. Mary was the one *par excellence* who knew the risk of asking, "How can this be? It doesn't make any sense." It was fitting she be present as the disciples struggled with their own future. Like her, despite fear, despite not knowing, despite common sense, they remained open to a future they could not possibly imagine. And the answer was the wind and fire of Pentecost, of the Spirit.

First, however, there was the waiting, waiting in cautious trust and longing hope (and with no liturgical calendar to assure them it would only be ten days). All they had was faith, the prospect of understanding the genuine fidelity and love of God, the hope that the revelation they had perceived in Jesus' words and life was in fact real. That would become the fuel for the fire that would burn within them for the rest of their lives, the breath of the future that would sweep them forward. In welcoming that revelation at a new level, they would accept that their lives, that all of human history, had in fact been changed.

Nothing would ever be quite the same again.

In celebrating this feast, we are invited to do likewise. It is climax to the journey we began on the first Sunday of Advent. We are invited to let the life events of Jesus, the revelation of God's love and vision incarnated in him, whatever new understanding and response to those events that have been part of this year's journey—to let these fuel this next step, as we move into a new future—one not changed as dramatically as at that first Pentecost, but one definitely holding new perceptions, new challenges.

Looking with new eyes as those first disciples did, perhaps we can find that these days of the pandemic hold their own reassurance of the Easter victory at the heart

of Christian celebration. As I have seen TV's visual records of the many gestures of connection and support, large and small, I have been reminded of a study that was done by a group of ethicists a few decades ago. They looked at human behavior across the globe. Sadly, they concluded that humanity was capable of just as horrendous evil as ever. But they also insisted that there was a greater moral depth and maturity at this point in history. Yes, it is possible to look back and find individual persons or cultures who lived and advocated such virtues as human rights, the abolition of slavery or torture or warfare, respect of those who were different but, the researchers maintained, never has there been the widespread consensus that today involves so many people who have come to take such positions for granted.

That view may find support in so many people's response to COVID-19. The creativity and generosity in finding ways to connect, to support, to show appreciation—these have been both heart-warming and astonishing. Certainly we have known people's capacity to pull together in times of crisis but perhaps never on this scale. Yes, as people have shared stories of the 1918 epidemic there are poignant examples of caring there as well, but apparently not to the extent we are seeing. Certainly the Black Plague must have had its stories of compassion and service as well, but this does not seem to have characterized a large segment of the population. Nothing in art or literature, for example, points to an outpouring of gratitude to the "essential workers" of that time—those who gathered the corpses and transported them to burial!

In the contemporary examples which have touched us, is it possible we are seeing a sacrament of the gradual, slow transformation which is the reality of Christ's "redemption"? Can we taste something of those first disciples' exhilaration—one which can nourish our fortitude. That is a nourishment we definitely need because for us, as for that first upper room of disciples, Pentecost is more than reassurance and rejoicing. In the midst of so much good revealed among us, there are vivid reminders of the evil that remains: racial hatred culminating in murder, the escalation of overwhelming destitution and neglect, the callous indifference to simple precautions.

Fire and wind are given to us—as they were to those first recipients—to be brought to bear on that world. The ongoing work of redeeming the world is entrusted to us—as it was to them. And perhaps the outpouring of solidarity which has so moved us is sacrament as well of the ground and heart of that work. The disciples in the upper room waited together. Together the Spirit acted upon them. Together they burst out of that room and the first sign of their transformation was an ability

to speak to others, to draw them together, to overcome all the barriers which would have seemed to prevent their connecting.

That was the answer to the disciples' questions about the future. That was to be the ground and heart of why nothing would ever be the same again. In the light of the Spirit's fire, in response to that wind blowing away the last of their faulty preconceptions, they could recognize and own the gift they had already been given. Almost the first act of Jesus' ministry had been to call them together, to override their divisions, to invite them again and again to a table fellowship which would culminate in that final supper. That was the great work of salvation. It was in continuing that mission that they were called to change history.

Is it, then, mere coincidence that in 2018, the eve so to speak of this pandemic, Francis issued the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, centered on the "universal call to holiness." That phrase was a key statement of Vatican II (called by some of its episcopal participants a Second Pentecost). It was meant as a rallying call to move beyond a hierarchical model and re-envision Church as first and foremost community, the People of God. To many, it remains the one unfulfilled prophetic stance of the Council.

In this document, Francis call us by the New Testament term by which those early disciples would have recognized themselves: "saints." They would have recognized as well in his call to mission their own Pentecost experience.

Each saint is a mission, planned by the Lord to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the gospel. . . . Every saint is a message which the Holy Spirit takes from the riches of Jesus Christ and give to his people. . . . You need to see the totality of your life as a mission.

So, yes, the next months—perhaps years—will find us again and again in that Upper Room: uncertain, weak, questioning. But today is Pentecost and it is to that message, that reality that we will also return again and again: certain, strong, trusting. Nothing will be the same again—and it our mission to make sure that it isn't. Because what does not change is the Love of our God, poured forth as flame and refreshing breeze—as unpredictable Spirit, breath of the future and of all impossibilities. *Gaudete et Exsultate*: "rejoice better yet leap for joy." Who cares if those not with us in that Upper Room think we are drunk or crazy? It's Pentecost. Nothing need ever be the same again.

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