**PENTECOST SUNDAY**

**5th June 2022**

**First Reading Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11 (All years)**

In the ancient world, life was governed by seasons and marked by the crop that was due for harvesting. After the settlement in Canaan, Pentecost was the day on which the corn harvest was completed (Deuteronomy 16;9) about fifty days after the Passover. Passover had celebrated the Exodus, so Pentecost celebrated the next event in Israel’s history which was the giving of the Law (Torah) to Moses on Mount Sinai. (Exodus 19;16-19)

As described in Exodus, the presence of God was marked by cloud and earthquake, thunder and lightning, wind and a pillar of fire, and historically may have been volcanic activity. It happened to become the day also on which Christians celebrated the arrival of the Holy Spirit, marked by some of the same signs. The story that we read in Acts gives us Luke’s recollection of what happened.

Later Jewish commentary on the Sinai story said that the fire settled on the heads of seventy men, symbolic of the seventy known nations of the world, and giving them each a language. The point being made here is that the Law (Torah) was universal, and not meant for Jews alone.

Luke, too, has the mighty wind and tongues of fire coming upon the group of disciples giving them the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. The disciples are so overwhelmed by the Spirit that their joy is universally recognised despite the barriers of language. By the date of Acts, of course the Church spoke many languages and many dialects, and Luke imagines this feature as beginning with the Apostles.

This universal character of the event is fundamental to the understanding of the Church. It is seen as the reversal of the dispersion of the tribes after the building of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11;1-9) symbolised by the people that Luke records as being present. Roughly they are the countries bordering Israel which had Jewish settlers, and by the time of writing, Christian Churches.

**Alternative Second Reading (Year C)**

**Paul’s Letter to the Romans 8:8-17**

Pentecost Sunday is the time associated with the Holy Spirit. The Greek for Spirit is Pneuma which also means Breath and therefore Life, Wind and therefore Power. By the nature of things it is invisible, though the effects of its presence are often visible.

Much of Jesus’ teaching brings face to face the opposing spiritual and material aspects of our lives. e. g. Dives and Lazarus, the Beatitudes, Jesus’ exchange with Pilate over the Kingdom being not of this world etc.

This is reflected in the language Paul uses in the reading. Our relations with each other and with God are spiritual and invisible. It is important to keep them in good order. These relationships are far more important than any property we may own. Wealth, comfort, indulgence, are visible aspects of a life ruled by materialistic issues and Jesus warned his disciples not to become too attached to materialism at the expense of the spiritual life.

The Greeks had two words, soma and sarx, either of which may be translated in English as ‘body’ Soma is a neutral word, with no overtones and means very much the same that we mean by ‘body’ In this reading, Paul uses soma in the phrases ‘Though your body may be dead …..’ and ‘…… life to your own mortal bodies ……’

Sarx however, is anything but neutral. It refers to the body in its most despised state. Mortal, weak, corrupt. To the Greeks it was something to be jettisoned and from which the Pneuma could be liberated. Hebrew thinking, by contrast, was that a human being was an indivisible unity. Created good, with acquired weaknesses, he was nevertheless capable of redemption.

Paul uses sarx in the phrases ‘unspiritual lives/things’ and ‘misdeeds of the body’ It might help us if we translated soma as ‘body’ and sarx as ‘flesh’ The passage 8:1-17 centres on the contrast between 'flesh' and 'Spirit,' between two ways of living. Life pursued according to the flesh is life influenced by rebellion, life without Christ, and, therefore, doomed to frustration and death. Life in the Spirit, on the other hand, is life in Christ, a life set free from indulgent weakness and sin.

'Flesh' means not exclusively, or even primarily, our physical bodies but rather an orientation to our world which is dominated by rebellion and sin. What Paul means by 'flesh' and 'spirit' is splendidly spelt out in Galatians 5:19-23 which reflects on two diametrically opposed life-styles dominated, respectively, by 'works of the flesh' and 'fruit of the Spirit.'

**Alternative Gospel (Year C) John 14:15-16 & 23-26**

We see here the same kind of spiral thought that characterizes the farewell discourse throughout and which we noticed in last Sunday's gospel. The last sentence in this week’s reading returns to the theme of the first one having reflected on the work of the Holy Spirit which is the reason for using this section on this day.

In John 14:1-11 Jesus had described his own closeness to God. In vv. 12-13 he goes on to indicate how others are brought into a similar closeness. From v. 14, he directly addresses the Twelve to whom he promises the coming of the Spirit. Here (v. 16), for the first time in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is called 'Paraclete'. The Greek word is often left untranslated because of the range of possibilities. Its primary meaning is one who stands alongside a client as in a court of law as an advocate or witness. But it may equally be translated Strengthener. (The old word ‘comforter’ meant strengthener rather than consoler) Jesus had been a paraclete to his disciples, helping them as their teacher, assisting them in their faith. Now, risen and before the Father, he will be serving them in different role as an advocate which still uses the same word.

The farewell discourse is dominated by the thought of his forthcoming departure. He is concerned to assure his disciples that he will not leave them as orphans. Despite his going away, he and they will not be divided or alone; they will be drawn into the love of the Father and Son. To love Jesus is to 'keep his word', that is, to respond in all their life to the challenge of Jesus. If this be the case, then 'my Father will love them and we will come to them and will make our home with them'. This is a personal coming of the Father in the Son. Besides, the word of Jesus - his revelation - also abides with them.

There is another sense in which they will not be alone: the Holy Spirit will take Jesus' place and carry on his work (vv. 22-26). The former togetherness is over (v. 25). Instead there is a new normal, another form of togetherness: the Holy Spirit will bring to mind - and at a deeper level of understanding -what Jesus had said (v. 26), and will bring them into 'peace' (shalom or wholeness). Loving Jesus means listening to his word and putting it into action. To obey is to love. Jesus 'comes' to all who respond in this way to his word. He comes through the Spirit.

Despite a widespread assumption that the Christian life consists in ethical behaviour, or obedience to a list of rules, John writes about it as an unconditional love between the Christian and the three Persons of the Trinity. The Spirit conveys the presence of the Son, who in turn reveals the Father.

But as this intense personal relationship cannot be codified in rules, then neither is it reduced to mere sentiment. It is concretely and soberly manifested in a life of obedience to Christ's commandments not for their own sake but as a natural consequence of our union with him.

The departure of Jesus does not mean that he is now absent. It means his ever-renewed presence is no longer just local. Through the coming of the Spirit he is henceforth present throughout the world. That is the Easter message of this gospel reading.