

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

Genesis 11. 1-9

Acts 2. 1-21

John 14. 8-17

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Have you ever thought about it? The Church Calendar follows the contours of our Lord's life. Almost all of our major feast days revolve around events that marked his time on earth: Jesus's Birth; his life and ministry; his Crucifixion; his Resurrection; and his Ascension. One could even say that the structure of our liturgical year is the structure of Christ's life with us. And the coming of the Holy Spirit, which happened at that first Pentecost and which we remember today, draws to a resting point what we began six months ago on the first Sunday of Advent. It was then that the Church started to prepare for the birth of the incarnate Word, the presence on earth of the body of our Lord. And ten days after that same body ascended into heaven, St Luke tells us in the book of Acts about the sequence of events in which Jesus kept his promise to send the 'Comforter' or the 'Spirit of truth' to those disciples gathered in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem in which those disciples were waiting and praying would have been packed on those particular days. The Jewish festival known as 'Shavuot' (or the Feast of Weeks) was being celebrated; it was the holiday<sup>1</sup> on which God commanded his people to bring their first harvests to the Temple, fifty days after Passover. So there they all were: 120 disciples in a large room, watching, waiting and praying in a crowded city. It is ten days now that they have been doing this, waiting for what had been promised. And then, from heaven, there came a sound like the rush of a violent

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<sup>1</sup> Described in Lev 23. 15-22. See also Ex 34. 22. Shavuot also marks the anniversary of the day when God gave the Torah to the nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai (although the link between Shavuot and the giving of the Torah is not explicit in the Scriptures).

wind. It filled the whole house where they were sitting; and divided tongues, as of fire, rested on each one of them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit; and they became the first Pentecostals.

But these Pentecostals were speaking in languages that others could understand. They were not speaking their own native languages,<sup>2</sup> but the tongues of the Parthians, Medes, Elamites and everyone else in the then-known world. Imagine what a ruckus they made! 120 men and women, all speaking at once, all in different languages, speaking about the good news of God in Christ and the life-changing power of God's grace. It was a message that brought forth such joy in them that they seemed to be inebriated; casual onlookers thought that they were drunk as they celebrated the fulfilment of the prophecy, that God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh.

So much had changed for them, and in such a relatively short period of time. It wasn't so long ago that the disciples had fled in fear and silence; that Peter had spoken words of denial and betrayal; denying that he was a disciple, denying any knowledge of our Lord at all. But now we see this same Peter courageously facing an unruly mob with new words given to him by the Spirit. His sins had been forgiven; the promise had been fulfilled; and now he was ready to go even to the ends of the earth to testify to that very thing he had so recently denied. All of the disciples who were present that day proclaimed the Lordship of Jesus with confidence and joy, in the vernacular language of every then-known nation on earth.

For those who weren't paying attention, perhaps the scene in Jerusalem that day seemed at first like a replay of the scene at the Tower of Babel, where God had thrown the people into confusion. Just like the disciples at Pentecost, the people at Babel had been speaking many languages; however, unlike the disciples at Pentecost, the people at Babel could not understand each other. At Babel, each person was

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<sup>2</sup> The text says that they were all Galileans.

speaking his own language, a unique language that no doubt sounded perfectly reasonable to the speaker, but which no one else knew. At Babel, people were turned into single individuals and operators. They were unable to relate to anyone else. They were unable to communicate with others. There was no community. Total confusion followed; relationships were fractured; and co-operation ceased. The people of Babel were scattered to the four winds in mutual incomprehension.

At Pentecost, however, all the different languages were being not only spoken, but also understood. Ultimately, as the end of chapter two of Acts tells us, relationships were built-up; co-operation was established and expanded. The apostles kept everything in common and distributed to each member as their needs dictated. In spite of the considerable diversity of that crowd in Jerusalem, a new kind of community came into being, one centred on the Lordship of Christ; one centred on prayer and the Eucharist; one centred on works of mercy.

But not only that. What happened with the outpouring of the Spirit wasn't just a new means of social organisation, or a different way of distributing goods. It was something that has profound implications for our understanding of the on-going relationship between God and humanity. As these apostles worshipped and prayed together, as they read the scriptures, and as they cared for one another, we see that the seeming 'ruckus' and 'disorder' of these individual lives have been transformed. And we begin to be able to see something we hadn't been able to see before; we begin to be able to see *someone*, someone whom we thought had gone.

The physical body of our Lord had been present in Galilee, thirty years earlier. It was first present to Mary and Joseph; and then it was present to the disciples. But then, following the resurrection, and after the Ascension, only ten days before, it was present no longer.

And yet, during the days that followed Pentecost, the body of Jesus was made miraculously present again. This time, it was made present in the transformation of those stray individuals: those Parthians, Medes and Elamites; those people from Mesopotamia; and all the others from the farthest corners of the then-known world. The body of Christ was wonderfully made present again as these people were *transformed* into an *ecclesiastical community*.

By the sending of the Spirit, the body of our Lord that had first been born on Christmas Day was now being re-born, among this motley collection of Jews and Gentiles. They became (as we have become) the living and visible body of Christ. The body of Jesus that had disappeared from view in his first-century distinctiveness was brought into view again in the dynamic mosaic of communities of the faithful all over the world, throughout time, from then until now.

The Holy Spirit accomplished what the people, by themselves, could not have done. Without the Spirit, Jerusalem was Babel: everyone speaking their own language and no one understanding. With the sending of the Spirit, however, something wholly new came into being: this living body of our Lord, this new community which would, and in short order, get a name.

In the book of Acts, we read that when the apostles dispersed from Jerusalem, some of them went to Antioch, and it was in Antioch that they were first called ‘Christians’. It was there that that diverse band of people was recognised as something new, something brought into being by the same Spirit that had moved over the face of the waters at the time of creation; by the same Spirit that had raised up the dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision. The Holy Spirit that brings forth life went to work on that eclectic group of Jesus’s followers, gathered up from hither and yon, casting out their fear and silence, and transforming them (as he transforms us) into the very body of Christ.

Yes, it is true that the Church Year follows the contours of our Lord's life. And what we begin this Sunday is the period of six months that revolves around the work that Jesus is doing now, right now, on this island of Guernsey and all over the world, as the living and visible body of Christ witnesses to the same good news that so filled the hearts of the apostles.

As we gather in a moment to receive the Sacrament, may we (as St Augustine taught) *receive what we are, and become what we receive*: the Body of Christ.

Amen.