

Pentecost Sunday
June 12, 2011

Brothers and sisters, friends and parishioners. Today's Feast of Pentecost brings the Easter season to a close. If we focus on today's Gospel, Pentecost means peace: "Peace be with you." Or Pentecost means pardon: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." But today I want to picture Pentecost not as peace, not as pardon, but as power. Power is the ability to do something, to act, to accomplish. There is physical power. There is political power. There is economic power. There is social power. There is the power of technology. It excites me. It baffles me. It dismays me. But, more importantly, it reminds me that there is another kind of power. A power more critical for human existence than politics and economics, society and the computer. I mean... power in the Spirit.

The New Testament thrills to it. Listen to an angel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the Most High will overshadow you." What did the risen Jesus promise his apostles just prior to his ascension? "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." How did St. Paul preach to the people of Corinth? "I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling. And my speech and my message were not in words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit of power, that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but in the power of God." How did Paul win conversion to Christ from the Gentiles? In his own words, "by the power of the Spirit." What was Paul's prayer for the Christians of Rome? "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

In all these instances the Greek word we translate as "power" is the same: the word we carry into English when we say "dynamic," "dynamism," "dynamo", "dynamite." The Holy Spirit is dynamite. Once again, thumb through your New Testament. What was the dynamo that drove Jesus across the Holy Land? Listen as he describes his mission: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."

This Pentecost, Peter proclaimed, fulfilled the dynamic prophecy of Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants... I will pour out my Spirit.... And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath....”

So then, two powers: power in the world and power in the Spirit. God created the world “and behold, it was very good.” Politics and economics, society and the computer are not God’s enemies. Despite all the sin that can bedevil them, they are born out of the intelligence and freedom God gave us when he created us. In this perspective our Christian task is not to sever the two powers but to link them together, unite them in a splendid harmony.

This calls for a profoundly Catholic imagination. This is the thrilling vocation which Vatican II sketched in its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity: “The redemptive work of Christ has for essential purpose the salvation of woman and man. And still it involves as well the renewal of the whole world order. Consequently, the Church’s mission is not only to bring to men and women the message of Christ and his grace, but also to penetrate and perfect the world with the spirit of the gospel. In carrying out this mission of the Church, the laity therefore exercise their apostolate in the world as well as in the Church.”

The point is, a “Sunday Christian” is a contradiction. This liturgy is not an escape from a godless world. The liturgy, especially this liturgy of Pentecost, sends us back to the world and its powers: back to society and the computer, to politics and the arts and economics. To grace them “with the spirit of the gospel.” Whatever power you possess – and there is no one among you without power, without the ability to do something, to act, to accomplish – shape that power into a servant. Let’s make sure that our power *in* the world is a power *for* the world. Make sure that we are women and men for others.

The examples are legion. The needs endless. Let’s realize how powerful we are. Let’s rediscover where and how we can make things happen – from a smile on a careworn face, through legislation for the afflicted, to peace in some corner of our world. Link our power in the world to the Power within us. The Spirit of light and of life and of love. In a word, shake that Spirit loose!