

May 24 (Pentecost)

Acts 2:1-21

Rom. 8:22-27

Jn. 15:26-27

Let us pray:

Living God, you have created all that is, groaning inwardly and yet with hope of salvation. Pour out your Spirit upon the whole creation. Come in rushing wind and flashing fire to turn the sin and sorrow within us into faith, power, and delight, according to your will. Amen.

Today we celebrate Pentecost, after seven weeks following Easter. Some of us may find our eyes brightened up by the liturgical color of red, especially we have got used to, after seven weeks, the liturgical color of white for Easter-tide symbolising the Easter joy, hope and new life. That would be nothing comparable to what shocked the disciples on the day of Pentecost though – the loud sound like the rush of a violent wind from heaven, filling the entire house where they were sitting; and then the divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. And what's more shocking is that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and was enabled to speak in other languages. This is reflected in how devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem heard in bewilderment: they heard them speaking in the native language of each, speaking their respective nation's language and dialect, though probably with Galilean accent. Such phenomenon must have left a significant impression upon the disciples on what happened to them. Yet what could be even more shocking was that they could have remembered that this in fact was the materialization of what Jesus had told them and prayed for them before he underwent his passion, crucifixion and resurrection. Even some of us may remember how Jesus said to them after their hearts were filled with sadness upon Jesus indicated that he would have to leave them soon. There Jesus said to them (Jn. 16:7): 'it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you . . . when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . .' And then Jesus prayed for them saying: 'Father . . . now I am coming to you . . . I ask you to protect them from the evil one . . . sanctify them in the truth . . .' In other words, this prayer of Jesus for them to be protected and to be sanctified by the truth (to be revealed to them by the Spirit) is materialized with the out-pour of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Not only that. The disciples could probably remember how when Jesus appeared to them in the evening of Easter Day through the closely locked door to greet them with peace, and to breathe on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they're forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' So this commissioning of Jesus to send the disciples out to be the church in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, got mushroomed into earth-shocking out-pour of the Spirit, with the amazing effect of the Spirit's infusion as in the disciples' speaking in tongues. The disciples must be deeply impressed.

That's right. First-hand experience is best to help contemplation, reflection and grasping of holy mystery such as the down-pour of the Holy Spirit. First-hand experience is also an indispensable teaching tool by which the Spirit empowered the disciples to carry out Jesus' commissioning for them. And so, as we heard from our First Reading today, Peter immediately got empowered by the Holy Spirit to correct the crowd's misinterpretation on the downpour of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples as the disciples' being filled with new wine. No, Peter explained that it's only nine o'clock in the morning and so was too early for them to get drunk. Instead, Peter pointed the crowd's attention to writings by the prophet Joel, about this effusion of God's Spirit on people irrespective of gender or age. So, we heard Peter said, 'Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will 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. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit . . ."'

Now that we have seen how Peter's first-hand experience of the effusion of the Holy Spirit empowered Peter to do his first preaching in front of about 3,000 people, we can see what a big contrast it is to the pre-Pentecost posture of the disciples, even after Jesus' ascension. There, they returned to Jerusalem from mount Olivet, went to the room upstairs where they were staying, constantly devoting themselves to prayer. For what they did was exactly following Jesus' instructions to before Ascension. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come upon them, and they were to wait in Jerusalem for this promise to materialize.

Well, both posture of 'praying to wait for the Spirit's downpour' and of 'talking to the people to share the good news' are equally important. Yet it is still a big contrast, and Peter would not be able to do the latter without empowerment of the Holy Spirit on that Day of Pentecost. And Peter did the appropriate thing at the right time, demonstrating to the crowd then, but also to us, that the outpour of the Holy Spirit according to Prophet Joel's prophecy was that on the day of the Lord, people (whether the crowd then, or

us in our contemporary world) would call out to the Lord for salvation. So, Peter's sermon on God's salvation for all through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is the most appropriate response to our human inner yearning for hope for salvation. No wonder 3,000 people decided on the spot to turn around (repented) and got baptized after listening to that sermon of Peter.

In fact, that's also what St. Paul alluded to in our Second Reading today: 'We know that the entire creation has been groaning . . . we ourselves . . . groan inwardly while we wait . . . for in hope we were saved . . . the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.'

Yes, as children of God, our yearning for God (and what God gives us), whenever it comes, is still often hard for us to articulate or express it – and so the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs 'too deep for words'. So, whilst we are 2,000 years after the disciples' time, we can relate to their first-hand experience of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, though in very different manners. Irrespective of frequency (or infrequency for that matter) of its occurrence, we do experience inner yearning for intimacy with God from time to time. Often we respond to that inner yearning by praying to God, and that's what St. Paul talks here (viz., the Spirit stands by to assist us in our weakness, in the imagery of a heavenly court, in which the 'inexpressible yearnings' of both creation and community are taken up and presented on their behalf to God). Wouldn't it be comforting for us to know that even when we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes for us as desired by God, who searches our hearts to look for hearts seeking to bind with God's heart?

Some of you (who are members of our prayer group praying monthly for our parish ministry) are familiar with this reality, as our prayer items are all listed under the heading 'Binding our hearts with God's heart', as we remember our parish ministries and those whom we minister. There, the Holy Spirit helps to tie a thread between our hearts and God's heart when we seek to bind our hearts with God's heart, for matters big and small. The Holy Spirit is also the one who defends us and protects us, as Jesus said to his disciples: 'if I do not go away, the Advocate not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.' Besides being our 'advocate', the Holy Spirit is also the one who guides us to the truth, as we heard Jesus said, 'when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.' Have we ever experienced the outpour of the Holy Spirit upon us in those regards?

20 years ago we at St. Chad's celebrated Pentecost during Sunday Eucharist with exchange of peace being shared in as many as six to seven different languages (including both eastern and western ones) to symbolize 'speaking in tongues'. Since then, we now have three Services each Sunday celebrating Eucharist in three languages. Yet, it's time for us to move beyond these wonderful symbolic ways (such as our using different languages) of living out the Spirit in our midst. We need to move on in readiness for the downpour of the Spirit upon us as our intercessor, our advocate and as truth and guidance to us into truth.

Whilst it is God's decision on timing and manifestation for outpour of the Spirit, we can be sure that God is always looking for hearts (like those of the disciples who had been praying and waiting in Jerusalem in accordance with Jesus' instructions) yearning for it. Are we ready for God to make the gift of the Spirit bestowed upon us at our Baptism (and in some cases Confirmation) full-blown this Pentecost? Are we ready for God's fire and wind for us and our moving beyond superficial cognitive understanding the Pentecost to whole-heartedly experiencing God's outpour of the Spirit upon us in sundry manifestations?

The Spirit has already been poured upon us to guide us into all sorts of unique parish ministries over the years: from that of caring for our neighbors through teaching ESL classes and other help to remove language-barrier, through children and youth ministries to break-down cultural shocks and generational stresses, through mental-health ministries to bring compassion and healing, and through many other means and channels to bring God's love and peace to all around us. The Spirit gives us gifts to empower us into ministry. The Spirit also equips us, through wind and fire as well as God's small voices to us to bear fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Just wish to end my sermon here with one little story. Weeks ago, a woman coming to our Wednesday exercise class decided to bring in her few friends to our Thursday ESL Bible Class. Yet it was raining cats and dogs that next day, and so only one friend showed up. She was a nanny and brought along a 4-years old girl under her care. As no other friend was there, we changed teaching to chit-chatting, and with the little girl's presence, we learnt to sing the children hymn 'Jesus loves me' by the end of the session. Since then, every time this group of friends gathered for ESL Bible Class, learning to sing a hymn became a routine, and they learnt about Christian faith through hymn-singing. Who would have

thought of such learning channel if not for the Spirit's work amongst us? Have a blessed Pentecost! Amen.