

Let us pray: Spirit of God, your rushing wind and flashing fire renew and restore us. Fill us with your breath, that we can move on to proclaim the good news of eternal life in love, joy and strength in your wisdom, that all will understand and believe. Amen.

As we celebrate the high feast of Pentecost today, we can probably gather from our Readings today (especially the First Reading and Gospel Reading) that the coming of Holy Spirit had been deeply meaningful to the disciples and the early church (both in their individual and corporate levels). The question though, is how do we take of Pentecost? For example, church attendance on Day of Pentecost has a long way to catch up with church attendance for Christmas and Easter. How much do we count on coming of the Holy Spirit to us on individual and corporate levels?

Perhaps it is timely for us to take a closer look at how the disciples perceived, appreciated and responded to the Spirit's coming to them. First of all, we saw from our First Reading today that the disciples gathered prayerfully on the Day of Pentecost. This is a result of their taking seriously of how Jesus told them to devote themselves to prayer together, so that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and then be Jesus' witness to the ends of the earth.

With such good preparation of intentional and prayerful waiting, they could embrace the Holy Spirit's coming (as wind and fire, enabling them to speak in tongues etc.) much better than their audience: i.e. devout Jews from many nations from Mesopotamia to Turkey to North Africa as well as Jews and proselytes from as far as Rome. No, the crowd couldn't figure out what the matter was, with some amazed and perplexed, while others sneered to say that the disciples were drunk.

Yet, it is probably not just their 'prayerful waiting' according to Jesus' instructions prepared them well to inherit the outpour of the Spirit (like Peter's spontaneous sermon by explaining that it's the coming of the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of the prophecy of the prophet Joel). Their post-Easter prayer-time together also helped them to recall and gained deeper appreciation of Jesus' words to them before his undergoing of crucifixion, as we heard today from our Gospel Reading.

Let's recap. There, Jesus said: 'Now I am going to him who sent me . . . sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: 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. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong . . . about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned . . . when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth . . . he will take what is mine and declared it to you.'

Such promise by Jesus on the coming of the Holy Spirit didn't sink in when the disciples first heard it. They were then sad, or even depressed about Jesus' imminent departure from them. They were also probably scared at how Jesus foretold his suffering and death. We all know how fear and despair can cripple people, dragging their minds from proper analytical and rational operation, just like how it often takes time for patients with terminal illness to go through stages of denial and depression etc., before they finally accept and embrace their illness.

However, after Jesus' resurrection and post-Easter teachings for the disciples, they were eager to re-embrace Jesus' words and prepare themselves for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It's the same whether for the disciples then or for us – that when the Spirit comes, he will reveal that God convicts and judges against the world, that the world had been wrong in not posing faith upon Christ but chose to sin (i.e. stay away from God), hence got Jesus condemned to death on the cross, but then paradoxically got Satan condemned and hence Jesus returned and the Spirit would breath upon the disciples to give birth to, and sustenance of, the church.

This is an invaluable truth, both for the disciples and for us. The Book of Acts and in fact the entire New Testament are filled with such exciting realities continuing throughout the next 2,000 years to our time: whenever Jesus' followers prayerfully wait for, and be open to, the outpour of the Holy Spirit, exciting births and re-births, not unlike wind and fire and speaking of tongues and in fact the growing of the 12 and 120 into 3,000 on the first Day of Christian Pentecost. As I say this, I would not be surprised to find that, like some of the people in the crowd on that first Day of Christian Pentecost, some of us here think that I must be drunk when I say that the coming of the Holy Spirit to us can be equally amazing and perplexing.

I would not be surprised because a lot of times many of us find our spiritual life not strong enough to shape our daily lives so as to live out what we know God expects of us. It is inevitable that such daily experience sometimes speak louder to us than what faith tells us about the work of the Holy Spirit upon us. And so over time we start the habit of not taking Pentecost seriously, leading to what I alluded to earlier here about the hard fact that church attendance on day of Pentecost has a long way to catch up with church attendance for Christmas and Easter.

We need to recognize though, that such our frailties do not arise from the Holy Spirit being weak or unwilling to fill us. It is rather our unpreparedness to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Needless to say, we neither did the prayerful waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit, nor have prayer-time together for such purpose, as we heard from our First Reading today how the disciples did so.

In practical terms, let us hear how C. S. Lewis explained our problem in that regard. In his book *Mere Christianity*, he wrote as follows (with my slight modification for clarity sake, using the words 'God' and 'Holy Spirit' to substitute for his simply using the word 'He'):

*“The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. . . We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting the Holy Spirit work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through. God never talked vague, idealist gas. When God said, ‘Be perfect’, God meant it. God meant that we must go in for the full treatment by the Holy Spirit. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder... It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”*

That is how the Holy Spirit can work on us to transform us into new lives as willed by God when we are open to the work of the Spirit, just like the disciples indicated their willingness by praying together and waiting prayerfully. That is how C. S. Lewis called our new lives as *'birds flying after being hatched from an egg'* and how he called our old lives without the breath of the Spirit enlivening it *'an ordinary, decent egg'* and that *'it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg'*. Sure enough, it boggles our mind to envisage the coming of the Holy Spirit to us in our contemporary context as wind and fire and speaking of tongue, yet as we think about it, whatever the Spirit is going to work on us to make us perfect to fit the expectation of God upon us, it can be equally daunting for us to be hatched from an egg into a flying bird.

If we desire to have another example in practical terms on the work of the Holy Spirit upon us, we can take a look at our Second Reading today. There, St. Paul wrote to the believers in the early Roman church in the following words:

*"We know that the whole creation has been groaning . . . and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption . . . For in hope we were saved . . . we wait for it in patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but (the) Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words . . . because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."*

Perhaps I can throw in a story happening in our midst along that line. We all desire wholeness but illness and imperfection is part of human reality. And we encounter that a lot, especially in our *Roads and Lanes (Mental Health) Ministry*. If we talk about ourselves and the whole creation groaning, or about the Spirit helping us in our weakness, especially by interceding for us with sighs too deep for words, it is in that ministry that we experience tons of such realities. For as we can imagine, human knowledge and understanding of our brain is still at a rudimentary stage, albeit with much progress over the years. However, it is often when we groan helplessly and simply opened ourselves to the work of the Spirit, we see and taste awesome fruit of progress arising from the intercession for us by the Holy Spirit. Many of us know that when Bishop Melissa visits us two weeks down the road, there would be some musical presentation by our new or recent confirmation candidates. Amongst them, there would be a very moving one from a young adult in our midst, growing from her years of hospitalization to gradual regaining of wellness, to the point of her learning music from scratch with the hope and goal of bringing comfort and wellness to patients as a music therapist down the road. She picked the hymn *Love Divine, All Love Excelling*, in which there is a line going as *'Finish, then, thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be; let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee'*. How appropriate it is, having seen her journey on healing for five years as she comes to this stage. As I told her that no matter how her guitar music may sound like on the day, the Holy Spirit will turn it into music from angels' golden harp in the ears of God. I really mean it, as it is just another example of the Spirit of God renewing and restoring us with rushing wind and flashing fire, filling us with breath of the Spirit, that we can move on to proclaim the good news of eternal life in love, joy and strength, that people seeing and hearing will understand and believe, to the glory of God. Amen