

PENTECOST (Year C): The Birthday of the Church.

First Reading: Acts 2:1-12: The coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles;
Second Reading: Romans 8:8-17: the effects of the Spirit we have received;
Gospel: John 14:15-16+23-26: Jesus promises the “Advocate” will come.

(Please note: the optional 2nd reading & gospel for Year C are used here.)

I am typing this on Monday morning - sad, isn't it? - and the “news” (if you can call the BBC's morning TV material that) is full of the experiences of Liverpool football fans at their European Champions' league final in Paris on Saturday May 28th. Two things strike me. First, whom should we believe to have been to blame for the chaos at the French national stadium that night? Even the French authorities accept that there may have been faults in the organization for the occasion. Second, people often say “Football is my religion”, and I wonder if they are deluding themselves, or could it be true?

I mention this because of the role of emotion in our experience. Since the 1890's (when Association Football became nationally organized), many lives have revolved round people's support for a football club. It runs through families and places of study & work, affecting every mood – even sometimes overtaking marriage & family life. That is why some call football their “religion”. Admittedly, they have the element of ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ in their team (including knowing the names of past players); they have the ‘worship’ aspect – wearing the club's strip or colours; going to the matches (or at least following the results!); but that's where it stops. The third element in religion is behaviour – how our belief affects what we think, do and say. No matter how emotional football supporters get, I don't think supporting one team or another makes much difference to their behaviour. That's the big point I wish to mention.

If you read the Acts 2 story of what happened on Pentecost Day, you'll see straightaway that it was about behaviour. The apostles already knew Jesus' life, teachings, death & resurrection; they also believed in him. However, this knowledge & faith was bottled-up inside their minds; what was missing was the ability and urge to share it with anyone else. The writer (St Luke) is rather vague about what happened, but he is very clear about its effects. They heard what “sounded like” a powerful wind from heaven; something appeared to them that “seemed like” tongues of fire that rested on their heads. This was the Holy Spirit “filling” them: afterwards, they went outside, with “the gift of speech” and were understood by people of foreign languages.

There is no rational explanation for this. All I can say is that there was some intervention from God – the coming of the Holy Spirit – that ‘kick-started’ a movement that grew into the Church as we have come to know it. The apostles were changed – formerly frightened, they were now emboldened. They could preach to others what they already knew and believed themselves: that Jesus, executed publicly some weeks before, was now alive with God, and was God’s chosen instrument for a new relationship between God and the human race. Initially, this was within the Jewish system; but, as we’ve seen in recent weeks, within a generation, the new “Church” would move away from Judaism.

If you read the optional 2nd reading & gospel for Year C, you’ll see how the Pentecost story is meant to affect us. In Romans 8:8-17, St Paul contrasts the “unspiritual” life with the “spiritual” one. When he writes, “The Spirit of God has made his home in you”, I think he means the difference the Spirit makes to us. In a practical way, whatever the outward system of religion we belong to (involving family background, parish, school, peer-group, etc), at some point, each of us has to make the faith his or her “own”. Taking into account our individual personalities, talents, interests, and so on, the Holy Spirit gives us the ‘push’ towards happiness in adult faith – meaning a sense of peace, fulfilment, love and purpose in life. Converts to the Church say they find this to be true.

The Year C optional gospel (John 14:15-16+23-26) takes this further by mentioning the help the “Advocate” or Holy Spirit gives us to do the right thing. This is the ‘behaviour’ aspect of religion. However, the sad fact is that we are weak at times, and the Church as an institution has had to battle with moral failure all through its history. If you read St Paul’s comments about the failings of Christians at Corinth (1Cor 5:1-13), you’ll see that this goes back to the earliest days. Even then, he was concerned that public moral failure had a bad effect on the Church’s ability to preach the gospel. In contrast, he said that good behaviour made the faith resilient, and acceptable to non-believers (Ephesians 5:8-17). I suppose that the Church has always had to balance the idea of an all-forgiving God with the need to avoid bad behaviour that would deter others from accepting Jesus. We have to operate at two levels – the public life of the Church, and the private conscience and belief of each individual. Getting the right balance between them is a difficult, on-going job. Come, O Holy Spirit!! *Fr Jim Dunne.*