



October 17th

THE NEW SHOFAR

but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Pentecost: the birthday of Christ's Church

Pentecost is generally understood as being the official birthday of the Church. But years ago, *This Rock Magazine* reported that there were 34,000 Protestant denominations. That means that on the average, more than sixty-nine new denominations had sprung up every year since the Reformation began in 1517. So, whose birthday is it anyway? A good question given Pentecost speaks of the mission of the single Body of Christ in the world. Even in New Testament times, however, some people were leaving and groups were breaking away, departing from the faith of the Apostles and forming new variations to what Christ had in mind. Clearly we have not changed much since then! Even today we have people sulking over this, that or the other in church practices and people and then departing to set up their own house groups with like-minded protestors, forming more comfortable religious groupings. Built on dissent rather than the Holy Spirit, they end up far from the saving works of Christ. They break down rather than build up and reform.

Today's Gospel tells us what happened to the apostles. They were traumatized by the arrest and crucifixion of their master, bewildered by his post-Resurrection appearances and his command to prepare for the coming of his Holy Spirit. They had no idea what was going on and what was happening next. All they knew was how they were to wait for this coming of the Holy Spirit. Not having certainty about the future and the way forward was essential. If there was to be a Church and a divine mission continuing in the world, it needed to be led and empowered by God and not by the personal choices of a few. They had to wait on God and waiting is always difficult when we think we already know the way.

The Age of the Holy Spirit

With Pentecost comes the end of the Easter season. Christ has died, has risen and has ascended to the Father where he rules alongside of God on the heavenly throne. The language is important here – Christ *is reigning*. The Father's work he had carried out while on earth has not ceased. The power of sin and the Evil one had been broken and men and women set free, but that Good News needed to be proclaimed to all peoples in every corner of the world. What the Father Himself began and then achieved in Jesus is now unfolding among all peoples, empowered and guided by God's Holy Spirit.

This Spirit did something impossible for humans to achieve. He brought people from sixteen diverse geographical areas to the point where they could hear the Good News preached *in their own language*. Diverse yet one in the works of God. Who else or what else could break through such divisions and bring people together like this in a common cause? That is the Spirit. That is the power of the Word of God proclaimed. With the Tower of Babel we saw people scattered and languages mixed. Now that scattering has been brought to an end. In the Spirit we can be as one in Christ.

This unity is important in the New Testament. A Church divided is no Church and is incapable of bringing people to Christ. It is their sharing of love and faith that attracts the attention of the world and draws people into the Kingdom. Being anointed by the Spirit comes with an empowering for mission. This is the Spirit of our baptism, the Spirit of our Confirmation and the Spirit of our sacramental living. The Spirit that empowered the early communities to grow, is the same Spirit that empowered them during their martyrdom and is the very same Spirit here at work in our own time.

It was Jesus who inaugurated this new Age of the Spirit

Jesus had appeared to his disciples after His resurrection and graced them with the privilege of continuing with the mission given him by his Heavenly Father. He then empowered them to do so by breathing upon them and saying, “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” The gift of the Spirit would enable them to fulfill Jesus’ commission to preach the Gospel to all nations. Today’s Gospel passage also tells us how Jesus gave to the Apostles the power and authority to forgive sins. “*Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.*” Those words remind us of the Christian vocation we *all* have, to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven in the world of today, which is often fiercely judgmental and vengeful.

This same Spirit quietly works in us and through us every day behind the scenes in the basic activities of our lives and the lives of the people around us. He is there in all his fullness wherever people worship and pray in the name of Jesus. When we believe and trust in Jesus we have that Faith through the Holy Spirit’s work in us, filling us with Himself and His Gifts. The Holy Spirit leads us to turn away from our sinfulness and reassures us that we are still loved in spite of our sin, and that Jesus died on a cross just for those moments when we rebel against God’s way. He confronts us and urges us to take a good look at ourselves and where we are heading, to make a U-turn, to leave the old behind and try something new. He’s not afraid to challenge us and stretch us to go and do things for Christ – things we have never done before or ever imagined ourselves doing. But we do need to live in trust and in hope.

He’s also the One Who says to us, “Stop being so self-focussed. Stop looking into yourself all the time and being depressed by what you see or fool yourself into thinking that what you see in yourself is enough to get you through! Look up, look away, look to Jesus and let Him turn you around; let Him take control!”

Pentecost is all about what we are prepared to allow God to do in us

The feast of Pentecost celebrates the unseen, immeasurable presence of God in our lives and in our Church – the *ruah-Spirit* that animates us to do the work of the Gospel of the Risen One; the *ruah* that makes God’s will our will; the *ruah* of God living in us and transforming us so that we may bring His life and love to our broken world. God “breathes” His Spirit into our souls that we may live in His life and love; God ignites the “fire” of His Spirit within our hearts and minds that we may seek God in all things in order to realize the coming of His reign.