

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

PENTECOST – YEAR A

The Christian Feast of Pentecost

On the Feast of Pentecost we commemorate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of God's Church: the same Spirit that continues to empower people like us to carry on the ministry of Jesus throughout the world today. Christian Pentecost ('fiftieth' in Greek) is celebrated 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. Its events are described only in Acts 2 (today's First Reading), where the symbols of the mighty wind and tongues of fire are especially important.

Originally Pentecost was a Jewish agricultural feast called *Shavout* or the Feast of Weeks, celebrated 50 days after Passover, when Jewish people recalled the giving of the Law by God to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). It is still observed as a holiday by practising Jews today.

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 12: 3–7, 12–13

The cosmopolitan population of Corinth came from all parts of the Roman Empire. It was a wealthy city with a reputation for fine architecture and sport, but also for debauchery, where 'living like a Corinthian' was a euphemism for living a dissolute life. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians gives us a vivid picture. In today's reading, Paul answers messages he has received from the Corinthians concerning strife and disharmony among the members of the local church.

No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit

A test for discernment: it is only through the Spirit that we can truly declare Jesus as our Lord.

There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit

However different our gifts, they all come from the same source: the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians seem to have been bringing many gifts to the Church (see the list of gifts in 1 Cor. 12: 8–10) and discussing which ones were the most important. However, Paul's definition of a gift is wider than our present one. For him, gifts are all the graces bestowed on a given individual that can be used for the benefit of the Church: from practical gifts like administration and helping the poor, to miracles or speaking in tongues.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good ...

For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body.

What matters for Paul is that gifts should be a factor of unity and not division among the community, and used to uphold the Christian faith. Gifts are to be used not for self-glorification but for the common good.

Gospel John 20: 19–23

For further notes on the Gospel, see the *Prego Plus* for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year A. (The two passages are identical, save for the end verses).

In contrast to the tradition of Pentecost falling 50 days after Easter, St John



suggests that the Resurrection, the Ascension and the arriving of the Holy Spirit all happen on the same day. Here the Spirit comes 'on the evening of ... the first day of the week' (i.e. the Day of Resurrection). This has puzzled theologians, but it is accepted that the exact chronology is of secondary importance.

The coming of the Spirit gives fulfilment and meaning to Jesus's words in John 16: 16–19, where Jesus tells his confused disciples that he would see them again 'in a little while', and his promise to send them the Spirit after returning to his Father (John 15: 26 and 16: 7).

The doors being locked ...

Having appeared to Mary of Magdala that morning, the risen Jesus now appears to his terrified disciples as they meet behind closed doors. As friends of Jesus, they are aware that the Jews may be out to arrest or even kill them.

Jesus's promises fulfilled

In his description of the scene, John illustrates how everything that is taking place is a fulfilment of the promises Jesus made to his disciples as he prepared them for his death and subsequent return. (See John's Farewell Discourses, Chapter 13: 33–38, and Chapters 14 to 17, and the note above).

'Peace be with you'

This is a normal Middle Eastern greeting which can be translated as 'May God give you everything'. Its close repetition gives it more significance and recalls Jesus's words to the disciples: '*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you*' (14: 27)

The commission

Jesus sends out the disciples to proclaim the message of God's forgiveness (as is also recorded by the other evangelists: Matthew 28: 19, Luke 24: 47 and Mark 16: 15). They will be able to fulfil their tasks now that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Since the sixteenth-century Council of Trent, this power to forgive sins is formally exercised in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.