

June 12, 2011 - Feast of Pentecost (A)

Readings for the Feast of Pentecost (Cycle A):

1. Acts of the Apostles 2:1-11 Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34 Response: "Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth."

2. 1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13 Sequence: Come, Holy Spirit, come!

3. John 20:19-23

Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading

by Bill Hunt

Today's liturgy is part of the Easter Season in which we celebrate the glorification of Jesus. In addition to Jesus' resurrection and ascension, this Sunday we reflect on one particular aspect of that glorification, the gift of the Holy Spirit. We ponder this mystery through the eyes of John the Evangelist and the community for whom he wrote.

The date for our liturgical celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit (seven weeks after Easter) is based on the chronology found in volume two of Luke's Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles. The first reading for Pentecost Sunday reflects this chronology. It is surprising, then, to read in John's Gospel that the risen Lord confers the Spirit on his disciples at his first appearance to them "on the evening of that first day of the week." With our modern historical consciousness we are quick to ask: When DID Jesus send the Holy Spirit, on Easter or on Pentecost?

To answer that question we must try to step back in time and get into the mind-set of ancient writers and their audiences. Both Luke and John were more interested in the meaning of the events related to the glorification of Jesus than in a precise time-line. In fact, the chronology each adopts becomes a vehicle for the message each one is trying to convey.

Pentecost (from the Greek word for "fifty") was the second of three great Jewish feasts that involved a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. (The other two were Passover [Hebrew, "Pesach"] and The Feast of Booths [Hebrew, "Sukkoth"].¹) In Hebrew, Pentecost was called "Shavuoth" or the Feast of Weeks. It occurred a week of weeks after Passover to celebrate the end of the spring grain harvest. (7 x 7 = 49 days, counting both the beginning and the end of the series = 50 days)

In Luke's chronology the gift of the Spirit comes after forty days of appearances by the risen Jesus and ten days after his ascension. This chronology is highly influenced by stories about Moses and Elijah in the First Testament.² The number forty is associated with both of them.

¹ It seems that the feast commemorating the rededication of the Temple (164 BCE) or the Feast of Lights or Hanukkah was also a pilgrimage feast in the first century of our era. See, for example John 10. 22-23.

² "The First Testament" is equivalent to "The Old Testament." Unfortunately today, for many "The Old Testament" has negative connotations of being secondary or outmoded, and "The Hebrew Bible" does not include a number of books that the early Church considered to be inspired. "The First Testament" refers both to the sacred books written in Hebrew and to the slightly larger collection translated into or originally written in Greek, which was widely used