

## What Does This Mean?

We call this feast day “Pentecost” or “The Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles”. It celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit onto the Apostles and the beginning of the Church’s mission. Some consider it the birthday of the church. It represents the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to the Apostles to send an advocate, the Holy Spirit. It is also the fulfillment of promises given in the Old Testament to “Abraham and his seed”.

From this moment on, with Jesus no longer incarnate, The Apostles, and subsequently, WE are the church -- the ones who are to fulfill both the church’s mission and *misseo Dei*, which is Latin for the mission or will of God. In the world, we, the Church, are the body of Christ and the means of His continuing presence.<sup>1</sup> “The Descent of the Holy Spirit was the making of a new covenant by God with the new Israel – the Church – whereby the grace of the law-giving Holy Spirit took the place of the law of Sinai.”<sup>2</sup>

This feast day is also known in Anglican tradition as Whitsunday, Whitsun or White Sunday variably because: Priests and catechumens wore white instead of the priests’ usual red robes; or, because there was some misinterpretation about the word because in Old English it was pronounced similarly to “wit”; and, The Augustinian canon John Mirk (c1382 – 1414) was quoted with the following interpretation: *Good men and women as we knowen well all, this day is called Whitsunday, for because that the Holy Ghost has this day brought wit and wisdom unto all Christ’s disciples.*<sup>3</sup> That includes us.

While preparing for today the same question kept coming to mind . . . . What does this mean? Especially, what does this mean to *us, today?*

At first glance, the Collect for today seemed intimidating: “Shed abroad this gift throughout the world by the preaching of the Gospel, that it may reach to the ends of the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord . . .” On the other hand, we are not strangers to such things! This very church community has a long-standing history of observing what is wrong in the world and acting to affect healing.

Our own beloved Fr. Bill Burnett offered a prophetic ministry to needy people of Whidbey Island, especially the gay community and people with AIDS. He raised awareness in the community, with health care workers and everyone who was touched by the AIDS epidemic. He ministered to our extended community by helping to form the Whidbey Island AIDS Task Force. The programs and skills he inspired in our island community became the role model for large cities whose representatives felt overwhelmed by the crisis and helpless to respond. They came here, to rural Whidbey Island, to study our home-grown approach and reproduce it in their cities. Bill took one small scary step into a very controversial ministry and worked together with all those called to join him in healing the brokenness of disease and homophobia.

In 2003 Fr. Alexander Tkachenko came to Whidbey Island for the second time. When his mentor, Fr. Bill, asked me to help him create an English language brochure for Children’s Hospice, of course I said yes to what seemed a simple, singular task. Sixteen years later, we are still working together. A humble, home-based pediatric hospice service has developed into a full blown pediatric palliative care and hospice movement

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrase from Doors of Perception, John Baggeley, p. 8

<sup>2</sup> The Meaning of Icons, Leonid Ouspensky & Vladimir Lossky, p. 199

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia on Pentecost & Whitsunday

throughout Russia and neighboring countries. Now we're building a cathedral and working on World Peace, but those are stories for another time.

Every single step you and I take in applying our gifts according to God's will creates a ripple effect in the world. We are wise to keep from underestimating our influence for good. We are not the only ones being called. We don't have to have all the answers, skills or know-how. All that is required of us is to apply ourselves prayerfully and in the faith that God will work out the rest of it.

Our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, vividly describes how the Apostles were given the ability to speak in foreign languages so the people in Jerusalem, who were victims of various diasporas, multi-national refugees, and immigrants, could hear in their native tongues and truly understand the "good news", the Gospel. Having just completed the Old Testament year of Education for Ministry for the second time, I can truly attest to why the New Testament is called the "*good news*"! But back to the story in Acts, amazed and perplexed, people responded in two ways: As we might also ask, "What does this mean? Or, with fingers wagging, "They are filled with new wine." It seems there may always be some doubt.

In Romans we hear that "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God . . . joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." Hmm. "What does *that* mean?". The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates the word "sons" into "children", but in a well-intended effort to be inclusive the statement loses some of its meaning. *All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons and daughters of God . . . joint heirs with Christ.* That's a much more potent and intimate expression to my ears. Children, as a general term, can be found on playgrounds or in day care, play with toys and are cute and dependent, but sons and daughters have serious responsibilities well beyond childhood. The Sons and Daughters of God will engage in transformative relationships in a new community. We, in this church, are the modern-day version of that community.

This section of John's Gospel is included in what is called his "farewell" to the Apostles. Yet, after three years of living with, teaching and being an example for them, he finds that the disciples still really don't get it. How frustrating that must have been for him! Are we, unfortunately, much like them at times? We hear the words, but resist taking that first, brave step forward into the unknown to embrace the truth of our ministries, our calling, our gifts, into transformative healing.

The very first time I heard this Gospel reading was about 30 years ago. I was sitting right over there and remember being absolutely astounded and utterly convicted. It resonated within me like the ringing of a giant bell! – I know this description is accurate, I have rung bells. "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these" -- the proviso being if it is asked in Jesus' name. As a virtual Christian blank slate back then, the message was loud and clear to me -- I could do anything with God's help. Anything.

As I looked for answers to "What does this mean?", I found that all of this is about taking responsibility for the blessing that God bestows upon us. Taking responsibility for the gifts we are given. While the descent of the Holy Spirit coming with the sound of a roaring wind and flames upon the head of each Apostle is very exciting, that excitement is really, not the point. The Apostles were being equipped, miraculously equipped, to enter more fully into an arduous, dangerous, controversial ministry.

One of the most difficult things about receiving gifts of the Holy Spirit is keeping one's perspective. When we experience the descent of the Holy Spirit, it is essential to remain grounded and to stand ready to utilize the power that is being conveyed through us, and not just treasure a lovely or exhilarating moment in our hearts.

Spiritual gifting is serious business.

We don't get to choose what is given to us, nor God's purpose for it and for us. Receiving is easy, but putting that gift into action requires discipline, preparation, acceptance and often courage. These experiences are not intended to glorify our spiritual lives, though they may bring joy and affirmation. They are given to equip us to fulfill God's will on Earth.

Our spirituality is a gift to our community.

Instead of lifting us up "above it all", it plunges us right down into the mess so we can perceive what needs to be healed. Prophecy isn't predicting the future. It is truth telling, *i.e.*, the ability to see how present events connect to God and God's purposes, *misseo Dei*.

For the next two years we will be a community which is reflecting and re-creating itself. Each of us is responsible for the portion we give to the community as we continue to build and grow into our future.

Our Pentecost story must be one of being equipped to truly hear each other and speak to each other in Christ; to receive the gift of a common language spoken in different ways to each of our various members.

If you think about it, we honor Pentecost every time a presider says during the liturgy: "The Lord be with you." and we respond, "And also with you." The most important thing for us to remember is that Christ is with us. Turn and look at the person next to, in front of, or behind you – find someone to look at. This is where you see Christ among us. And know in the deepest part of your heart that Christ is what they see when they look at you. Let us speak the common language of Christ's love to each other.

On this day of Pentecost let us pray to God:

Equip us to hear,  
Equip us to speak,  
Guide our hearts and minds,  
Fill us with your spirit,  
Fill us with your love.  
Make us one people, with one heart, and one mind,  
The heart and mind of Christ.

And the people said, *Amen*.

Footnotes:

- 1 [Doors of Perception](#), John Baggeley, p.8 (Paraphrase)
- 2 [The Meaning of Icons](#), Leonid Ouspensky & Vladimir Lossky, P. 199
- 3 "Whitsun", Wikipedia