

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

Pentecost Sunday

Year B

23 May 2021



Collect

O God, who by the mystery of today's great feast sanctify your whole Church in every people and nation, pour out, we pray, the gifts of the Holy Spirit across the face of the earth and, with the divine grace that was at work when the Gospel was first proclaimed, fill now once more the hearts of believers. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The feast of Pentecost brings the season of Easter to a glorious close. Though we hear Luke telling us today that the Spirit was bestowed fifty days after the resurrection, we know that we've already spent the entire Easter season "in the Spirit". The reason for this is made clear by the gospel reading. In John's version of events, Jesus breathed out his Spirit on the disciples on the very day of his resurrection, "the first day of the week". Each writer has a theological perspective that accounts for his particular chronology.

We have not spent the past seven weeks waiting for the Spirit. The feast of Pentecost allows us to cry a final full-hearted "Alleluia!" for all the Spirit has accomplished in us and will continue to do. We pray with fresh fervour the same response to the psalm that followed the story of creation at the Easter Vigil fifty days ago: "Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth".

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles 2:1–11

When Pentecost day came round, the apostles had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech.

Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled, each one bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished. 'Surely' they said 'all these men speaking are Galileans? How does it happen that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya round Cyrene; as well as visitors from Rome – Jews and proselytes alike – Cretans and Arabs; we hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God.'

Responsorial Psalm Ps 103:1, 24, 29–31, 34

R. Lord, send out your Spirit
and renew the face of the earth.
or

R. Alleluia.

Bless the Lord, my soul!
Lord God, how great you are,
How many are your works, O Lord!
The earth is full of your riches. **R.**

You take back your spirit, they die,
returning to the dust from which they came.
You send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the earth. **R.**

May the glory of the Lord last for ever!
May the Lord rejoice in his works!
May my thoughts be pleasing to him.
I find my joy in the Lord. **R.**

First Reading

The first phrase of the reading – “When Pentecost day came round” – alerts us to the fact that Pentecost was not a Christian invention. It had long been a Jewish observance. As stated earlier, it was an autumn harvest festival that became a commemoration of the revelation of God on Mount Sinai, along with the giving of the Torah and the making of the covenant.

Christians have overlaid this remembrance with their own meanings. Because of the account that we now hear from the Acts of the Apostles, Christians celebrate Pentecost in memory of the outpouring of the Spirit and the launch of the Church's mission to broadcast good news to the world.

Jewish tradition is not swept away however. The story as we have it cannot be understood apart from the stories of the Old Testament. These tell of God's continuing self-communication – in the act of creation, in God's response to the tower of Babel, in the making of the covenant, in the preaching of the prophets. All these lie behind this episode from the Acts.

The drama of the event is well captured in the text. There is no mistaking the divine energy at play. Readers who are attuned to this will have no difficulty maintaining the assembly's attention.

The biggest challenge is with the pronunciation of the proper names. It is essential that readers check the guide to make sure they have the correct pronunciation. Then they will need to rehearse the whole list until they are confident they can proclaim the reading without hesitation. Only then will they be able to communicate the excitement of the occasion.

Responsorial Psalm

The psalm for today is the same as that for the vigil, except with the omission of two verses and the addition of one other. Much of the earlier commentary is repeated here.

The response to the psalm – “Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth” – is a confident prayer taken from the body of the psalm. It is set out in two lines. The reader needs to insert a momentary pause between them but without prompting the congregation to respond prematurely. A slightly upward inflexion on “Spirit” and a glance at the congregation after “earth” should achieve this.

Psalm 103/104 is a glad song in praise of God as Creator and Sustainer of all things, chosen no doubt for its reference to the spirit which creates and renews all things. It rejoices in the splendour of creation, focussing on its harmony and good order. It chooses to be silent about nature's harsher features. The reader should be able to proclaim this exuberant psalm with ease.

A reading from the letter of St Paul to the Galatians

5:16–25

If you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence, since self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit, the Spirit is totally against such a thing, and it is precisely because the two are so opposed that you do not always carry out your good intentions. If you are led by the Spirit, no law can touch you. When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility; idolatry and sorcery; feuds and wrangling, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels; disagreements, factions, envy; drunkenness, orgies and similar things. I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. There can be no law against things like that, of course. You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desire.

Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

15:26–27; 16:12–15

Jesus said to his disciples:

'When the Advocate comes,
whom I shall send to you from the Father,
the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father,
he will be my witness.

And you too will be witnesses,
because you have been with me from the outset.

'I still have many things to say to you
but they would be too much for you now.
But when the Spirit of truth comes
he will lead you to the complete truth,
since he will not be speaking as from himself
but will say only what he has learnt;
and he will tell you of the things to come.

He will glorify me,
since all he tells you
will be taken from what is mine.
Everything the Father has is mine;
that is why I said:
All he tells you
will be taken from what is mine.'

Second Reading

After the exuberance of the Pentecost story and the accompanying psalm, it is quite disconcerting to turn to the reading from Galatians and find that most of it is a condemnation of "self-indulgence". Our high spirits are certainly brought to earth by this forceful charge. It is not until late in the passage that the list of the Spirit's fruits – "love, joy, peace . . . gentleness and self-control" – can lift our hearts again.

It may help readers – and therefore the congregation – to remember that Galatians is Paul's most impassioned letter. He is furious at the Galatians' apparent abandonment of the gospel of freedom in favour of the slavery of the law. He throws all his energy into persuading them to stay free. Hence his diatribe against self-indulgence, the opposite of living in the Spirit. When Paul is in full flight, as he is here, the words become a torrent.

Readers do not have an opportunity to explain all this. They must read the text as it is, with something of Paul's passion, even if congregations are taken aback. What is important is that when they get to the fruits of the Spirit they name them slowly, one by one, so that each can be appreciated. And the final words – "Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit" – need to be proclaimed as a stirring conclusion. They sum up Paul's heartfelt convictions and desires for us all.

Gospel

For the gospel text we return to Jesus' words of farewell to his disciples. The evangelist John gathers them together in the section of his gospel that extends from Chapter 13 to 17. Today's passage is a combination of two extracts – two verses from Chapter 15 and four from Chapter 16 – both of which make reference to the "Spirit of truth".

The horizons are vast. They extend from the depths of God, where Father, Son and Spirit enjoy an unlimited communion of life, to the depths of the disciples' hearts where the Spirit of truth teaches them all he knows. But this treasure is not to remain hidden from sight. Just as the Spirit bears witness to the Son, so too will the disciples bear witness. And just as the Spirit is sent, so too are the disciples. A little further on Jesus prays to the Father, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (17:18).

Thus we come to the end of the Easter season, but not to the end of the mission. The mystery of divine love made manifest in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the sending of the Spirit is ever present. We have revelled in the Spirit these fifty days, and still we pray, "Lord, send out your Spirit and renew the face of the earth".

Solemn Blessing – The Holy Spirit

May God, the Father of lights,
who was pleased to enlighten the disciples' minds
by the outpouring of the Spirit, the Paraclete,
grant us gladness by his blessing
and make us always abound with the gifts of the same Spirit.
Amen.

May the wondrous flame that appeared above the disciples,
powerfully cleanse our hearts from every evil
and pervade them with its purifying light.
Amen.

And may God, who has been pleased to unite many tongues
in the profession of one faith,
give us perseverance in that same faith
and, by believing, may we journey from hope to clear vision.
Amen.

And may the blessing of almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down on us and remain with us for ever.
Amen.

(Adapted from the Solemn Blessing for The Holy Spirit, Roman Missal p 714.)