

## **PENTECOST SUNDAY**

*Gospel: John 20:19-23*

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

### **REFLECTION 1:**

### **LEAD KINDLY LIGHT**

In 1833 a sailing vessel was leaving the shores of Italy. On that boat was one of the most brilliant intellects of all time - John Henry Newman. He was returning to his native England after a visit to Rome. Though not a Catholic at the time, Newman was deeply interested in the Catholic Church. Wide reading and deep study were pointing him to the Church that had its centre in the Eternal City. Because he was in such an uncertain state of mind, the following incident meant much. His ship suddenly ran into a calm, the dread of sailors when sails ran ships. Not a breath was stirring. The sea was as smooth as glass. They were unable to move. There they drifted for over a week, marooned in the midst of the sea. In those dismal days Newman wrote his immortal poem, 'Lead Kindly Light'. 'Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead thou me on! Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see, the distant scene - one step enough for me'. There is more to the poem, but this is enough to show us how Newman was groping for the light. Now, back to the boat... One day Newman noticed the curtains on his cabin window billowing with a bit of a breeze. He rushed to the deck and shouted, 'Wake up, wake up, the calm is over. There's a breeze! Look!' Beside themselves with joy, the sailors shouted, 'Wind at last!' In no time the sails were hoisted and the ship pulled out of the calm.

In a similar way the Holy Spirit came down upon the apostles on that first Pentecost day: 'Suddenly, as with the sound of a mighty wind...' . They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in different tongues, to speak in such a way that those of different languages understood them'. Like Newman and the sailors, Our Blessed Mother and the disciples were gathered in that upper room, praying for the Holy Spirit. They too were praying: Lead kindly light. They were begging the God of light and love, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, to calm their fears, to give the fire and the light they needed to preach Christ for the world. The boat on which Newman and his companions found themselves stranded in the sea, was no worse off than the tiny bark of Peter before the first Pentecost. Newman prayed for light and help out of the uncertainties and doubts of his present faith. The breeze of the Holy Spirit came to his heart and the same Holy Spirit came to the Infant Church and drove it, spurred it on its apostolic way.

This Pentecost that same breath of the Holy Spirit is blowing the bark of Peter. Like Newman and his companions in that boat, like Mary and the apostles in that Upper Room, we are living in days that are darkened by wars and violence, Syria, Ukraine, Sudan and the Congo, to mention just a few, where civilization seems at a standstill, and the forces of good seem helpless, unable to move in a sea of indifference. At such times we should cry out with Newman: Lead Kindly Light! To us this Pentecost, there comes the breath of God like a mighty wind to blow away the clouds of doubt and fill our souls with the breeze of the Holy Spirit - uplifted, encouraged and spurred on. Can't we hope that the same Holy Spirit will help all nations today to understand what is for its peace? Beg the Holy Spirit to help the world's leaders to solve their problems. Beg the Holy Spirit to help you solve your problems. Cry out in the words of Cardinal Newman, 'Lead, kindly light!'

## REFLECTION 2:

## WE BECOME WHAT WE CELEBRATE

The story is told about a grand old lady who reached her 100th birthday. A local reporter approached her for an interview – ‘What is the secret of your long life?’ she was asked. ‘I didn’t touch fried food’ was her thoughtful reply.

Today we celebrate another 2,000-year-old reality – the Church. If we were asked what the secret of the Church’s longevity is, I think the answer must be – ‘We are still here, because of the resurrected Jesus’. Addressing the disciples in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, Jesus breathed on them and filled them with the Holy Spirit and that same Spirit fills each and every one of us.

St. Ambrose who was bishop of Milan before St. Patrick came to our shores, once wrote, ‘Remember that you have received the spirit of wisdom and understanding of counsel and strength of knowledge .... preserve what you have received, God has sealed you, Christ the Lord has confirmed you and has given you the guidance of the Spirit in your heart’.

With these words, Ambrose gave fitting testimony to what has transpired in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2: 1-11) and the Apostle John of what happened on that Pentecost Day (John 20: 19-23). Both are descriptions of the gift of the Spirit. While the account given in Acts is quite dramatic, with wind, fiery tongues and great noise, John’s message underlines the subtlety and flexibility of God’s Spirit who can be gentle as a breath, infusing light and life and all good gifts mentioned above, into its recipients. As the Risen Lord breathed on his disciples, it reminds us of the creative breath of God at the time of creation in Genesis. Just as God’s breath called forth life and continued to support the life of every creature, so also would the spirit Jesus breathed on his own support, sustain and empower his disciples. Pentecost is not just a historic event in the past, rather it is an ongoing celebration of God’s life-giving spirit, always present and always nearer to us believers than our own heartbeat.

When the Risen Lord breathed the gift of the Spirit on his followers, he also pronounced his peace upon them, not once, but twice – Shalom. This peace represents more than the usual greeting of peace among friends, rather Jesus was proclaiming the dawn of a new era, where those who believe can taste and see and know eternal life. Jesus was also realising the promises he himself had made during his ministry. Among these promises were the assurances that his disciples would be able to do the same and even greater works than he and that he would always be with them.

These promises of the Risen Jesus have continued to be realised in his followers through all these centuries. Each generation has both the privilege and responsibility to acknowledge and accept the gift of the spirit, so that the peace and forgiveness won by Jesus are available to all. We are to become makers of peace and agents of forgiveness in a world so much in need of healing and wholeness and so, we become what we celebrate!