

Homily for 6th Sunday of Easter 2010

By Fr Steele Hartmann

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.” (John 14:26) At the end of John’s Gospel we have a report of the appearance of the risen Christ to his disciples. The risen Jesus comes to them, though they were behind closed doors, and says to them. “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (John 20:21-22) On that Easter Day the words of today’s Gospel, which were part of Jesus’ farewell discourse on the night of his Last Supper, were fulfilled: Christ’s peace came upon his disciples and they were filled with his Spirit. It is important to note, though, that this happened on Easter Day, for in our celebration of Easter we do not ‘remember’ Christ’s gift of his Spirit till some seven weeks later, on Pentecost Day. Easter Day and Pentecost are part of the same celebration; they belong together and are not separate. The latter is the culmination of the former and the whole point of our celebration. Jesus had said to his disciples, “Not one of you has asked, ‘Where are you going?’ Yet you are sad at heart because I have told you this. Still, I must tell you the truth: it is for your own good that I am going because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you.’ (John 16:5-7) What lies behind Jesus’ passion and death and makes sense of it is his gift of his Spirit. Today’s reading, with its reference to his sending of his Spirit, was chosen to turn our thoughts towards this aspect of our Paschal celebration and prepare us for the consummation of our feast.

Pentecost, of course, was a Jewish festival long before it was a Christian one. In this celebration the Jews commemorate the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, when God made his Covenant with Israel. Israel’s history is one of failure to keep the Covenant, of failure to abide by the law. This led the Prophet Jeremiah to proclaim: “See, the days are coming — it is YHWH who speaks — when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel, but not a covenant like the one I made with their ancestors on the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt. They broke that covenant of mine. ... No, deep within them I will plant my law, writing it on their hearts. Then I will be their God and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:31-33) The Prophet Ezekiel amplified this message: “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people and I will be their God.” (Ezekiel 11:19-20) In taking over this feast of Pentecost, we Christians see a parallel with the

gift of the law in Christ's gift of his Spirit — this being God's writing his law in our hearts and putting a new Spirit within us, his giving us a new heart and a new Spirit that will keep his law, so that truly we might be his people and he might be our God.

Ezekiel went on to say to his people, "When the sinner renounces sin to become law-abiding and honest, he deserves to live. He has chosen to renounce all his previous sins; he shall certainly live; he shall not die. ... House of Israel, in future I mean to judge each of you by what he does — it is the Lord YHWH who speaks. Repent, renounce all your sins, avoid all occasions of sin! Shake off all the sins you have committed against me, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why are you so anxious to die, House of Israel? I take no pleasure in the death of anyone — it is the Lord YHWH who speaks. Repent and live!" (Ezekiel 18:27-28, 30-32) Here I am reminded of our baptism. In a formulae, which may now sound a little quaint and old fashioned, we were asked: Do you reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises? Do you reject sin and the glamour of evil? In answering "Yes!" we formally commit ourselves to repent, to renounce all our sins and avoid all occasions of sin. Why do we do this? It is not so much that sin is a bad thing and for which we will be punished, as that we long for life and desire to see good days. (Psalm 34:13; Rule of St Benedict Prologue:15) This is what is on offer in our commitment to Jesus: "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full," Jesus says to us. (John 10:10) God's call to us in Jesus is the same as in Ezekiel's day: Repent and live! This is what keeping the law was all about: 'In them will live the one having done these things.' (Galatians 3:12; Leviticus 18:5) Keeping the law written on our hearts is tied up with the call to live, and it points to how we might live to have life to the full. This is our desire, what we hope for in Christ, and why we are Christians.

In these words of Ezekiel, though, we note a connection between repentance and the new heart and the new Spirit we are to receive in the new Covenant. St Paul, wise man that he was, says this: "I know nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my human bodily self, for to will good works is present in me, but to do them is not. I do not do the good I want to do, but I practice the evil I do not want. ... For I delight in the law of God in my innermost spiritual self, but I see a different law in my human bodily self warring against the law in my mind and capturing me by the law of sin that is in my human bodily self. Miserable man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Though I serve the law of God with my mind, with my body I serve the law of sin." (Romans 7:18-25) What St Paul is telling us here is that, though we might want to keep the law, we can't do it, for we really ARE sinners: when it comes to crunch-time, we stumble and fall. It was this realization that brought about his conversion, for he saw that left to ourselves we are doomed, and that only in Jesus is there any hope of salvation. He saw that Jesus was the one

good man who could and did do the good he wanted to do. That he could do God's will and keep the law made him God's son. That he sends on us his Spirit is our only hope that we, too, might be God's sons and daughters and keep the law and live. That we can repent and turn from evil is Christ's Spirit at work in us. (Rule of Saint Benedict Prologue:29) When we can do this, we will know we are saved. "For," as Paul puts it, "it is not the hearers of the law who will be just with God, but rather the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles [that is: us!], who do not have the law, do lawful things, these, though they do not have the law, are a law unto themselves; they will demonstrate the work of the law written in their hearts." (Romans 2:13-15) Christ's Spirit is intimately connected with the New Covenant; without it we are no better off than the Israelites were under the Old Covenant. As they rightly are in adult baptism, Baptism and Confirmation belong together (c.f. Acts 18:14-17) in the way that Pentecost belongs to Easter, for without Christ's Spirit the repentance, to which we are called and which we promise in baptism, is not possible.

In his *Rule*, St Benedict tells us that 'the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teaching.' Like St Paul, Benedict is a realist and he says to us that in this 'we must prepare our hearts and our bodies for the battle of holy obedience to his instructions.' Calling it a 'battle', Benedict knows it will be difficult, and so he advises us, "What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace." (Rule of St Benedict Prologue:35, 40-41) In this, though, Benedict recognises that this is really an impossible task he assigns us: left to ourselves we cannot do it. His counsel for us here is to have a go: "Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation." "Should you see, however, that the weight of the burden is altogether too much for your strength, then choose the appropriate moment and explain patiently the reasons why you cannot perform the task. This you should do without pride, obstinacy or refusal."

Here is Benedict's instruction on how we should pray — not in many words but saying it simply as it is, and leaving our tears testify for us as to how hard it is and to how hard we have tried. (Rule of St Benedict 20:3; Job 16:20-21) Benedict's bottom line, though, is: "Trusting in God's help, you must in love obey." (Rule of St Benedict Prologue:48; 20:4; 52:4; 68) It is only in this way that we open ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit. (c.f. Luke 1:35, 38) And it is only in having done this, knowing full well our own inability, that, when we find ourselves running on the path of God's commands, we shall recognise the Lord's power at work in us and find ourselves praising God: What marvels the Lord has done for me; Holy is his name! (Rule of Saint Benedict Prologue:29, 49; Luke 1:46) In this we shall know ourselves greatly loved by God and hear him say to us, as he once did with Jesus after his

baptism and when the Holy Spirit had come upon him: "You are my Son/my daughter, my Beloved; my favour rests on you." (Mark 1:11) To this we are called. For this we must long. So as we move towards Pentecost in this Easter season, let us pray the more earnestly, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who has the power to deliver out of the power of death, that he might send his Spirit upon us. (Hebrews 5:7)