

Whenever we celebrate something in the Church, we always have a good reason for doing so. We don't just celebrate things just because. We always have a reason why we observe these things. And sometimes that's very easy for us to see, to understand. Take a day like Easter, for example, when we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead. That's an easy one to understand, because we recognize that it means that we will rise with him, that because our Savior is alive, we can face all things. So it's very easy to understand why we celebrate Easter. Or take a day like Christmas, for example. Christmas when we celebrate Jesus being born of the Virgin Mary. We also understand why we celebrate that, because we recognize that Jesus has been born so that we can be forgiven, that God has become one of us so that we know that he will be with us always. So sometimes it's easy to understand why we celebrate some things in the Church.

But sometimes it's not so easy. Because why, Christians, do we celebrate Pentecost? What is the meaning of Pentecost for us today? It seems to be a day which talks about something that happened a long time ago to somebody else, when the apostles received the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on that day. And that was important for them, at least, but what does that have to do with us today? What is the meaning of Pentecost? Christians, Pentecost is an important day, a day just as important as Easter or as Christmas, actually. Because Pentecost shows us beyond all doubt that God is in fact with us, that God will take care of us through all things. And we can see that especially as we go through our Old Testament reading for today, from Joel chapter 2.

Because in the book of Joel, God is speaking to his fearful people, people who are wondering what is going to happen to them. Because God has told them in no uncertain terms that he is going to send them disaster because of their sins. They were going to lose their harvest to a plague of grasshoppers. And if they lost their harvest, they would also lose the way to worship the Lord. Because in the Old Testament, if the people wanted to worship God the way he told them to worship him, they needed things like grain. They needed things like wine. They needed things like calves and goats. And if they didn't have a harvest, they wouldn't have any of those things. And if they didn't have any of those things, then they wouldn't be able to worship God. And if they weren't able to worship God, then they would be effectively cut off from the Lord. And so Israel is wondering: what's going to happen to us? Where will we be able to go? Where is our comfort? Where is our hope? Where is the Lord?

And Christians, we also live in troubled times. I know that I've talked with many of you, and I've also heard from people I don't really know on the Internet, who have said things like, "Things seem to be terrible. Things seem to be getting worse, even than they were just a few years ago. How are we supposed to deal with all of these things?" We have an entertainment industry, for example--sports organizations or even Hollywood--who seem far more interested in preaching politics than they do entertaining, about talking and insulting the very people they're supposed to be serving. That can leave us wondering, what are we supposed to do with that? We also have an increasing division in our society, where we're not really interested in talking to the other side, to those who are opposed to us. We're more interested in scoring points or winning arguments against them to show how right we are instead. And that division seems to be getting bigger and bigger with each passing day. We also have a government which is trying to increase its control over our lives, sometimes in very negative ways. What are we supposed to do with all of that? Where are we supposed to go? Where is our hope? Where is our comfort? Where is the Lord in the midst of all of these things?

And Christians, God proclaims to us the same message that he proclaimed to his ancient people, the message which we hear in verses 12 and 13: "Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments." The Lord calls for us to repent, to turn away from our sins and to turn back towards the Lord. Because the reason why we probably are so afraid, Christians, the reason why we become so worried about what might happen is because we got complacent with the world. Things used to be easier. Things used to be so much better, and because they were better, we got comfortable. And then when things got worse like God said that they were going to get worse, it caught us by surprise. And so the Lord tells us, "Come back to me. Turn away from your sins. Turn away from your comfort with the world, and come back to me. Because I am gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and I relent over disaster." God has sent us these things, Christians, as a way of calling us back to himself, as a way of not looking to the world for our comfort but looking towards him who is our comfort in all things.

And when we do that Christians, when we turn towards the Lord who is our comfort, the Lord promises to us the same thing that he promised to his ancient people, where he says in verse 19: "The Lord answered and said to his people, 'Behold, I am sending to you grain and wine and oil, and you will be satisfied, and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.'" In other words, God is promising to us that he will give back to us all of those things that we have lost, that he will give back to us those things which he has taken away. That we will not be left wondering, we will not be left in doubt, but God will take care of us, just as he once took care of Israel. Because God gave back to them that grain and that wine and that oil, those things which they needed to worship him, so that they would not be cut off. And when they had those things, they would know that God was in fact among them, that God had remembered them and brought them back to himself.

"And more than this," the Lord says, "it's not just that I'm going to give you back what you lost. I'm going to give you back even more." As he says in verse 24, "The threshing floor shall be full of grain. The vats shall overflow with wine and oil." So not just what you lost, but even more, more than you can possibly imagine. And when I do this, the Lord says, verse 27, "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame." No longer would Israel say, where is the Lord? No longer would Israel wonder, where is their hope and their comfort? Because they would see that sign, that harvest which the Lord was going to give to them, and they would know that he was in their midst. They would know that the Lord was with them. They would know that they didn't have to be afraid. God was going to give them so much as a way of showing that he would be with them always.

But there's always a little nagging problem with that, Christians, and that is that this worldly sign, this harvest might be something that would leave a little bit of doubt. Because they might be able to look at that harvest and to say, "Maybe it's just a fluke. Maybe we're just having a good year, and then next year it'll just go right back to what it was." Just like we, who sometimes see things get better, can also watch them go down again. And so it seems to go up and down, up and down, all the time, and we're left wondering, "Is it ever going to get better? Are things ever

going to improve?" Because that's the trouble with worldly signs, Christians. They always leave us with that nagging doubt.

But God is going to take away all doubt. God is going to give them a sign which will never be questioned, a sign which will show beyond all doubt that he would be with them forever. And that sign, Christians, would be the coming of the Holy Spirit. Now that's important, because in the Old Testament, the Spirit was only given to a few people. He would sometimes be given to the kings. He would sometimes be given to the prophets. Sometimes be given to the judges, but that was about it. The Spirit didn't come to everyone, and he only came rarely, so that it would seem like he never came at all. You could basically say that the Spirit more or less doesn't show up in the Old Testament, because he comes so rarely. But when the Spirit would come upon them, he would come to all of them, not just to kings and to prophets, but to all people without distinction. To all people, no matter who they were. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, all of them would have the Spirit. And when they saw the Spirit at work among them, they would know beyond all doubt that God was in fact with his people, that God in fact was going to be with them always. And they could see that as the Spirit moved through his Church.

And Christians, we saw this happen at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down upon his Church, the 120 who were gathered together, the believers together with the apostles. And the Spirit rushed upon them like a wind, dividing like fire upon each of them. And the Spirit began to cause them to speak in languages they did not know, so that they were doing the mighty works of God in the sight of all people. And Peter stood up on that day and proclaimed the Gospel, the Gospel which was going out into all the world, that Jesus Christ had been given for their sins. And three thousand people came to believe in God on that day. Three thousand repented of their sins and turned towards the Lord. God was with his people beyond all doubt, and they could see that in the work at Pentecost.

And the Spirit continued to work throughout the book of Acts, coming to his people through preaching, coming to his people through baptism, coming to his people through miracles. Just as the Spirit continues to come to us today. Because when we believe in the Lord, Christians, when we trust in him by faith, we have the Spirit, the Spirit of God dwelling within us. We have become his holy temple. And Jesus gives us his Spirit as a way of showing us that he is with us through all things. The Spirit works among us through the Word and through the sacraments to show us that God is here today.

So that's the meaning of Pentecost, Christians, to show us that God is here. And the Spirit working among us today proves that beyond all doubt. God does his work through his Word and through his sacraments, so that you may know that because the Spirit is here today, all of our troubles will come to an end. Evil will be judged. Divisions will cease. Tyranny will be overthrown. Because Jesus will reign as king over all things and put all things under his feet on the Last Day. And we know that beyond all doubt, because God is here. He has given us his Holy Spirit at Pentecost and today, to teach us that he will be with us even to the end of the age.

Let us pray. O mighty and living Holy Spirit, come upon us today, and teach us always to trust in you, because you are at work among us to give us comfort in the midst of all of our troubles; for you live and reign with the Father and the Son, ever one God, world without end. Amen.