

Weekly Reading – Monday, May 26, 2009

This coming Sunday, May 31, 2009, is Pentecost. It's important for Christians to keep in mind that Pentecost was a long-standing Jewish festival, one which had its roots in a harvest festival but which had acquired nationalistic overtones by the time Peter stood up to preach on Pentecost. As with other feast days, the lectionary offers some choices. I will stay with the Eastertide pattern of having the text from Acts replace a reading from the Old Testament, and so begin there.

Acts 2: 1 - 21

To speak of Pentecost as "the birthday of the church," as some like to do these days, risks trivializing it. It's a complex narrative that really extends through 2: 42. In broad outline, it might be viewed in the following major sections: 1 - 13, the outpouring of the Spirit and proclamation of the mighty works of God in all the languages of the known world; 14 - 36, Peter's Pentecost Day sermon, beginning with the traditional text for the day from the prophet Joel; 37 - 42, the response to Peter's sermon. The given lection, 1 - 21, takes us through the coming of the Spirit, Peter's introduction and reading of Joel. Interpreters will be helped by keeping the entire narrative in view. As noted above, Pentecost had by then taken on nationalistic overtones and become a time for celebrating God's special choice of Israel and its coming vindication. Peter reframes Pentecost and Joel to undermine that interpretation and say to the believing community, God has done a new thing, and you missed it! In other words, Peter is calling the believing community to repent or to wake up. By dynamic analogy to our own time, the heart of Pentecost preaching may not lie in marveling at the gift of speaking many languages, but the call addressed to the insiders those who may be sure they are the chosen ones, to wake up and turn around (repent). In some settings, this call is appropriately directed to the church. Another tact one might take is to reflect on the church's origins in the gift of the Spirit and the church's continuing dependence on the Spirit for vitality, direction, and power. The legacy of the modern era has been to place such high value on human power and capacity as to neglect our need for God. A third interpretative direction would be to note the dialogue between Spirit and Scripture, as Spirit moves in 1 - 11 and is then interpreted through the lens of Scripture in 14 - 36. In Acts it's never one or the other, neither Scripture alone nor Spirit alone, but a both/ and.

Romans 8: 22 - 27

Paul offers a different lens on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in this brief excerpt. One might think of the Spirit, as Paul understands it here, as analogous, to the fiery cloud and pillar of God's presence that accompanied the Hebrew people during the in-between time from the Red Sea to the Promised Land. In that time, God's people lived between liberation and fulfillment, something had happened, but the fullness of God's work had not come to pass or been completed. The Spirit aided the people in this in-between time. So, here in Romans, Paul seems to view the Spirit as helping and sustaining believers in a new in-between time, between the first and the second coming. "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Living between the times, with the sense that something decisive

has happened and yet the work is incomplete and we participate in both those dimensions, is a tough existential reality for believers. The Spirit comes to our aid as we seek to live faithfully "this side of the Promised Land" (which is where we always live). In these few verses Paul's understanding of the Spirit's work is closer to John's (see below) than it is to other parts of Paul that link the Spirit to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

John 15: 26 - 27; 16: 4b - 15

Keep in mind that these verses are part of that unique Johannine section, The Farewell Discourse. As such, they are parting words from Jesus to his own, the disciples. They are not public proclamation but intimate speech, as a Korean pastor I once heard called them, they are Jesus' "dying words." Here Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit, describing it in legal terms as "the Advocate," and as "Spirit of Truth." The metaphor there is one of the believers being on trial in a world that is deaf and blind to God, but the Spirit coming as their defense attorney, their "advocate." This trial image accounts for the sequence beginning in verse 8 about proving the world wrong about sin, righteousness and judgment. In a typical John type bit of irony, though it may seem it is the faithful who are on trial, really it is the world and "the ruler of this world" that is in the dock. Preachers could take up the subject of the world being wrong about sin, as we often today want to believe that sin is passé and that we are really all okay. Other themes that are mingled in here have to do with the necessity of Jesus going in order for the Spirit to come, see verse 7. This is a fascinating pastoral theme, which highlights the complexity and ambiguity of grief. In this grief, of Jesus leaving, there is loss but also gain and new life. Sometimes, death works this way in human experience too. We experience loss and grief, but also an empowerment. Finally, in verse 12 and following, we get the theme heard earlier in chapter 14 of the Spirit as the continuing teacher/ revealer of Jesus. The disciples simply are not ready to hear some things now. In time, due time, the Spirit will "guide you into all truth." But the qualifier is to keep the Spirit tied to Jesus. "He will not speak on his own . . . he will take what is mine and declare it to you." In this we have the seed of notions of on-going or progressive revelation. But lest that idea give free (too free) rein to human imagination, there is "checkpoint Jesus." "He will glorify me, because he will take all that is mine and declare it to you."