

The Day of Pentecost
The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin
Said Mass with Music
By the Reverend James Ross Smith

Acts 2:1–13; Psalm 104:25–32; John 20:19–23

In one of his letters, Saint Paul writes, “Live by the Spirit . . . and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other . . .” (Galatians 5:16–17). To illustrate this, he creates two lists. The first contains the “works of the flesh” and includes vices like fornication, anger, and carousing (5:19–21). The second is “the fruit of the spirit” and includes virtues such as love, joy, and kindness (5:22–23). Paul likes to talk about morality in this binary way because it’s effective. It’s also traditional. Remember Aesop’s story about the ant and the grasshopper.

But it is also because Paul can’t help looking at the world through the lens of before and after. For him, Jesus Christ is a person, but he’s also an *event* that has completely changed his life. For Paul, Christ’s death and resurrection have changed how he understands

time and history. He can't help drawing a line between the very messy present and an infinitely better future. Paul looks around at the "present evil age" with a clear eye, and he concludes that the *Now* is broken. Using a particularly vivid image he can even say that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now" (Romans 8:22) as it waits for the present age to end and "the coming age" to be born. And one of the ways Paul likes to talk about the two different ages is to compare flesh with spirit; and for Paul, the "present evil age" is very "fleshy."

But there's a problem: Christians, perhaps understandably, have taken Paul's flesh-spirit comparison and have assumed that when Paul talks about the flesh he's talking about the body and desire, and in particular about sex. And since he contrasts flesh negatively with spirit, then he must dislike bodily things. But that's not the case. Paul can write, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20)." Paul seems to be saying something like, "I love my life, right here, right now, in this body, even though

the world may be broken. I feel joy. I'm not afraid, because I know that God loves me." But we don't always hear these nuances. The flesh-spirit contrast is effective, and it can do its work on us. It's tempting to think of *spiritual* things as distant and ethereal, not as events taking place in the world as it is, messy and bound by time and gravity. As a result, we can end up with an image of the Holy Spirit that is, ironically, sort of spineless. Since the Spirit is the opposite of flesh, then the Spirit must always be polite and predictable, never strong or colorful or loud, and we begin to think of the Spirit—and the spiritual—in the most pale, safe, and insipid ways. And that's a problem.

Let me give you an example out of my own past; and it's a pretty earthy, bodily sort of example. In the late 1980s, I studied for a time at the Yale Divinity School. It was the height of the AIDS epidemic. Some of us seminarians had friends, family members, parishioners, clients, and patients, who were HIV positive or were sick. So, one of the things we decided to do was to form a prayer group. Two or three evenings per week, we went to a small chapel after eating dinner together in the seminary refectory, and there where we would

pray, mostly in silence, but sometimes by naming concerns, asking God to be with those we were working with or whom we loved. Now, it was also the after-dinner hour, and so, sometimes during all that spiritual silence, the sounds of rumbling stomachs became rather audible. One evening the chorus became so loud that we started laughing. We laughed, I think, because it was impossible in that moment to separate body and spirit. We were human beings, praying for the sick, the frightened, the dying, and for those seeking a cure. We were praying for people whose bodies were betraying them because a virus had invaded their cells and was wreaking havoc. We were praying for people with bodies *and* spirits. We were praying for *human beings*. As we laughed that night, it seemed to me that we were admitting that it didn't make sense for us to pray as if we were something less than fully human or something more.

Today we celebrate the Day of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The day brings to an end the great fifty days of Easter. Today, as on every Sunday, we remember that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his family and to his disciples. He had a

body—a glorified body to be sure—but a body. The stories of his appearances to the disciples can seem strange, and it's true that at one point the disciples wonder if he is a ghost (Luke 24:36) but taken together the stories make the point that Jesus is not just a shade, dream, spirit, or half-dead creature. He is alive. And the sequel to these resurrection stories is the sending of the Spirit. When we read today's lessons, we learn that the Spirit has substance. The Spirit arrives and the air moves, sometimes mightily like the wind as in Acts, sometimes with the warm, softness of Jesus' breath as in the Gospel of John, but it moves. It's in the world. It changes things. It gives the disciples' the power to speak about God's mighty acts in a way designed to touch individual human hearts. And, far from making the disciples soft-spoken or polite, it makes them joyful and very physical. To some, they seemed drunk (Acts 2:13). The scene in the gospel is different from the scene in Acts. It is quieter, but still intense. Jesus breathes and commits his followers to the work of discerning good from evil. But notice: these gifts are for humans who live in the world as it is; they are for human beings. It is not by mistake that in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin the words for spirit all have physical

as well as “spiritual” meanings. They mean breath and wind, and they can also mean the Spirit that blows where it will, the Holy Spirit, who is not constrained by limitations of time, space, or gravity.

In the end, the Day of Pentecost does not divide spirit from matter, heaven from earth. As the Scripture scholar, Michael Pahl has written, “[In the Bible], the coming of the Spirit brings sudden life out of dusty, dry-bones death . . . The Spirit groans with us in our deepest griefs and longings . . . anticipating with hope the fullness of redemption . . . The Spirit convicts the world of its harmful ways and guides Jesus’ followers into the fullness of truth regarding Jesus and his justice-bringing ways of love.”¹

Jesus tells us that the Spirit will be a Comforter for us, and that is true. But sometimes the breathing fiery Spirit asks us to act and that does not always make us comfortable.²

¹ Pahl, Michael, The Not-So-Nice, Not-So-Safe Spirit of God, in Thinking too much about too little for far too long . . . ,” <https://michaelpahl.com/author/michaelpahl/>. Posted on May 17, 2021. Accessed 5/22/2021.

² *Ibid.*

As we begin the long green season between Pentecost and Advent, let us not be lulled into thinking that this is just a quiet, summery seasons, a time for contemplation, but not for action. Let us be attentive to the promptings of the Spirit as we move forward, in this present age, as we discern God's call to pray, learn, and serve in a city uncertain of its future, in a world in which Christ has risen, and the age to come, though often hidden, has already begun.

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