

## The Gifts of Pentecost

One afternoon a couple of weeks ago I was lying down for a rest when I suddenly heard the sound of a siren. That's not terribly unusual, even in a small town like Carman, but the sound was soon amplified by a second siren. The sirens grew louder and louder as I listened, seeming to come close to my neighbourhood and even my street. "What's going on?" I wondered. Then my daughter Rachel knocked on my bedroom door. "You've got to come and see this," she said. I got up and joined her in the living room, where looking out the window we saw a parade coming down our street. Along with two fire trucks and a school bus, there were all kinds of decorated cars, golf carts, a wagon, bicycles, horses and even two miniature goats. The adults and children who were in the parade's vehicles were honking their horns and waving as they drove along, many of them holding up signs that said "We Miss You." We had no idea what was happening and why this parade was taking place on an ordinary weekday afternoon. It was only afterwards in talking to a neighbour that we learned the parade had been organized by the staff of Carman elementary school as a way to reach out and boost the morale of students and parents who have been doing classes from home during the pandemic. A similar parade organized by an elementary school took place in Morden last week, giving those experiencing isolation fatigue a brief but welcome break.

Well that experience I had a couple of weeks ago was nothing like what occurred on the first Pentecost, although there are some similarities. The disciples who gathered in a house in Jerusalem that day had no idea what was taking place either. There they were, feeling discouraged and dejected, still coming to terms with the fact that Jesus was gone- ascended into heaven, when suddenly they heard the sound of the rush of a great wind filling the house, then saw tongues of fire dancing on each other's heads and then began to talk in languages they didn't even know. It was a powerful, dramatic experience that amazed and confounded those who witnessed it, so much so that some of them thought the disciples were drunk. Pentecost marks the birthday of the Christian Church, an event that transformed a fearful, hiding huddle of disciples into those who went out boldly to proclaim the Gospel, becoming a movement that would turn the world upside down. At Pentecost God gave an incredible gift – the gift of the Spirit, poured out on everyone with energy, life and grace.

The gift of the Spirit – a gift that brought the Church into being and that continues to shape and bless it today. In Hebrew the word for Spirit is "ruach", a feminine word which also means "wind or breath." Those three words appear a lot in Scripture, reminding us that the Spirit is at work in us and our world, giving life and breath, guiding and leading us. "The wind of God's Spirit blows wherever she pleases" John's Gospel says, revealing the freedom of the Spirit to touch us in different ways. Some people experience the Spirit as a gentle whisper or nudge, urging them to do something or go somewhere. Others experience the Spirit calling them into a particular vocation or direction for their lives. Still others feel the Spirit's comforting and

sustaining presence in times of need. When have you experienced the presence or action of the Spirit in your life?

One experience I have had of the Spirit happened two months ago when we first went into lockdown mode because of COVID-19. Suddenly I got the idea that I would send a daily reflection to those in our parish with email as a way to keep in touch for as long as the lockdown lasted. I didn't know exactly what this reflection would look like, but I wanted it to be something short and simple – a verse from Scripture, a poem, an image, a joke, something that would help inspire people and give them hope during this challenging time. I thought I would call it “Bread for the Journey” to indicate the spiritual nurture I hoped it would give. And I have to say, it has been a real joy to do this ministry. I've never had to worry about what to send each day: there is so much creativity out there right now and something has always come my way -. someone will send me a poem or image, I'll come across an idea myself, or something will just show up. I truly believe this was a Spirit-led initiative, and that the Spirit continues to guide and help me each day with what is meaningful to share.

As well as our individual experiences of the Spirit, there are collective ones as well. Notice that the story of Pentecost doesn't take place in a synagogue, or temple or church – those places where we think God would normally choose to be. Rather it takes place out in the world: in a house and out on the streets. The Spirit is everywhere, within us and around us, bringing different people together, as well as bringing new understanding and knowledge. And I wonder if those two things: the Spirit's presence in the world and her ability to bring about greater understanding isn't what we are seeing in the midst of the pandemic right now. The Spirit has been at work in this difficult time, leading us to a deeper understanding of many things. Think of the knowledge we are all gaining through this experience, not all of it positive unfortunately: a greater awareness of how the elderly, especially those in Personal Care Homes are being treated in our country, a deeper understanding of the loneliness many people live with along with the suffering of those who live with mental illness, a greater appreciation for those who are essential workers, who we often previously took for granted. Such deeper understanding and awareness will hopefully lead all of us to build a better world, not just for some, but for everyone.

The first Pentecost was a dramatic, vivid, action-filled event that we often celebrate today with lively worship and singing, wind instruments or wind blowers, red, yellow and orange streamers, and birthday cake. Because of COVID-19 we can't do that kind of celebration this year. But Scripture reminds us that there are other ways in which the Spirit comes – gently and quietly. At the very end of John's Gospel on that first Easter day the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples in a locked room. After saying “Peace to you” he showed them his wounded hands and side, then took a deep breath and breathed into them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” That was how the disciples initially experienced the Spirit and perhaps that will be ours as well this year – a very different Pentecost, but one that is no less real, as we celebrate quietly and apart from one

another the many gifts the Spirit brings. May God grant us the grace to know those gifts and to open ourselves to the Spirit's presence in our lives, that we might be filled with deeper joy, peace, understanding and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.