

First Reading – Acts 2:1-11

Responsorial – Psalm 103(104):1,24,29-31,34

Second Reading – 1 Corinthians 12:3-7,12-13

Gospel – John 20:19-23

Sunday Gospel Reflection – Pentecost Sunday

May 31, 2020

The Gospel for this solemnity of Pentecost revisits Christ's first resurrection appearance to the apostles. In this episode, Christ appears, grants them his peace, and then does a curious thing: he *breathes* on them. Breathing on people is not exactly socially regular or meaningful in this day and age. However, when the context is considered, this is anything but a meaningless act.

Gleaning over the Old Testament, we gather some insight. In the book of Genesis, Adam's body had been formed, but was still inanimate. The Lord then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen 2:7). Later in salvation history, we see another incident, this time with Elijah. Stretching himself over a widow's dead son, he breathes upon the boy, and the boy is resuscitated. Lastly, in one of Ezekiel's visions, the prophet is brought to a valley of bones. He is told to prophesy to the bones, and flesh, sinew, and skin form themselves around each skeleton. Still lifeless, the Lord sends his breath upon them and an army, representing Israel, is mobilized (cf. Ez 37:9-10).

The significance of 'breath' might now be guessed at. Collectively, these examples suggest that the breath of God imparts a life force, movement, and the power of operation. However, the unique elements of each story also seem to provide another piece of the puzzle. In Elijah, we see that the breath of God is *healing*; it raised a boy from death to life, illness to health. In Genesis, Adam is the only creature who is made in God's image and likeness. No other animal is breathed upon, so the Lord's breath seems to communicate a *likeness* to God. And lastly, in Ezekiel we see that the bones of Israel are assembled into an army, awaiting their *commission*; the breath of God restores a community and bestows a mission. In summary, the breath of God denotes life, healing, divinity, and communal mission.

These key points now help us to understand the Gospel. Without question, healing and communal mission are imbued by Christ. This is especially clear when we read Christ's words after he breathes on them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). The Church community is given the mission to preach good news and the power to forgive and heal from sin. But this power is not a human capacity, only God is able to forgive sins (cf. Mk 2:7). Thus Christ says "receive the Holy Spirit".

However, the Holy Spirit doesn't 'come down' sporadically. Before Christ, the breath of God came upon inanimate and dead things. The disciples were very much alive! Something new is occurring here. Christ is elevating the life of humanity to *share in his very own*. The Church is invited

to partake in the very life of the Trinity. In breathing upon us, Christ bestows an unfathomable dignity and destiny.

Each Christian is thus called to a self-examination. Do I live according to this dignity and destiny? We have been given an incredible gift, how often am I grateful for it? It is for a reason that Pope Leo the Great once said: "Christian, *remember your dignity*." Much of the Christian life is remembering our dignity given to us by Christ and asking for his forgiveness when we fall. It is never too late to turn to Christ. Because he breathed upon us, so we can live and breathe. Remembering this gift at all times is the beginning of conversion and perfection in the Christian life.