

# Homily for the Feast of Pentecost

May 22-23, 2021

Readings: Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 3B-7,12-13; John 20: 19-23

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Some years ago, when I was teaching college-level theology, I used to have great fun with this passage from Acts chapter 2. I would read it loudly, with vigor and increasing energy, “We are Parthians, Medes and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Egypt and Libya near Cyrene! We are Jews and Jewish converts from Rome! We are Cretans and Arabs! We are Romulans, Klingons, Borg! Yet each of us hears them speaking in our own tongue!!!”

Then I’d visually scan the class.

Some students would look up from their laptops with a vague, “Wait, what?” look on their faces. With some it wouldn’t register. But often a few would break out in mile-wide grins, and I knew that I had found the Trekkers in that class. As the course went on, every once in awhile I’d play to them, dropping an obscure Trek reference into a lecture on some aspect of theology, delighted that for a few seconds I had them relaxed, smiling and totally on board.

The point of course was that the mission of the ecclesia gathered in the name of the risen Christ was to all peoples in the known world, not only to Jews and fallen-away Jews. The first century church had a hard time hammering out this point. Peter had described in Acts 10 how he had to overcome his revulsion at Gentiles, whom he saw in his dream as “unclean animals,” before he could answer the call to travel to the home of Cornelius the Roman centurion to preach the story of Christ. Paul, who would go practically anywhere, and Peter represented two opposite interpretations of the church’s mission—internal (as in, only to Jews) or external (to anybody, Jews included.) They finally reached a truce at the Council of Jerusalem in 50 A.D. in affirming the mission to preach the Gospel to all the peoples of the known world.

The Lukan writer has shaped this story to reflect the way the universal mission of the church was understood some years after the lifetime of the historical Jesus. His list of nationalities doesn't reflect where the Christian faith would actually be planted in the later chapters of Luke, but seems to have copied a pre-existing list of the major nations of the world at that time. The point had to do with the ethnic universality of this faith in a heretofore obscure Jewish prophet and miracle-worker, a faith expressible in a wide range of languages and local dialects.

But the Star Trek reference isn't all that far off base. Look at the stunning cosmic imagery, the incomprehensibly broad and breathtaking scope of the Spirit, portrayed in our liturgical texts for the major feast of Pentecost. The antiphon of the Responsorial Psalm is, "Lord, send out your spirit, and renew the face of the earth." The Pentecost Sequence preceding the Gospel embraces both the cosmic dimension and the richly personal one: "Come, Holy Spirit, come! And from your celestial home shed a ray of light divine! ... O most blessed Light divine, shine within these hearts of yours, And our inmost being fill."

Our Gospel reading from John 20 shows this cosmic Spirit emanating as a physical breath from the risen corporeal being of Christ, somehow present and perceptible among his friends gathered in the locked room. And the second reading from I Corinthians anchors every form of ministry in the all-pervasive and perduring Spirit: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service...different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone." The energy and dynamism of the Spirit gives energy and strength to all our ministry work, all our social justice projects, all of our hope.

Only in Hollywood would one think of evangelizing the Klingons, never mind the Borg. But human imagination today grows out of the fact that our understanding of the universe, though paltry, trains our technology on distant phenomena and stares into vast infinite reaches, far beyond the vision of our ancestors. The Hubble Telescope detected traces of two trillion galaxies, and the Hubble is now obsolete. What is this Spirit that fills physical space utterly incomprehensible to our tiny human minds? And at the same time, fills and transforms human hearts down through the generations on this tiny, fragile planet? Our ancestors were awestruck. And even knowing so much more scientifically, so are we.