

Homily for Pentecost Day 2010

Ten days ago, the apostles had seen Jesus taken from their sight, and obedient to his last command they returned to Jerusalem, to wait for the power from on high, and while they waited they were constantly in prayer, together with Mary and some of the Lord's other followers. We know, of course, how long this wait lasted; we know that the power they had been promised came upon them on Pentecost Day, but they did not know this. They had no idea how long the wait might be. It would be a mistake to think this ten days of waiting is just empty time, time when nothing happens. This space is an integral part of God's plan, and is essential to the celebration of the Feast of Pentecost.

After the ascension the apostles return to Jerusalem, far more confident, more at peace with themselves, more hopeful than they had been a few weeks earlier. They seem ready to get on with it right away, but the time has not yet come. There are still things for them to learn, there are still subtle changes of approach that need to be made. The first thing, perhaps the hardest thing, is that they have to learn to wait patiently on the Lord. It must have seemed to them that there was no reason to delay, why couldn't they just get on with things there and then? We are very quick to see what looks like the perfect opportunity, what seems just the moment to act, but it isn't always so. Our natural reaction is to see the Holy Spirit as a tool that is at our disposal, something which we can grab when we need it and then we can get to work. But this is completely the wrong way around. The Holy Spirit is not a tool that we pick up and use as and when we please; we are the tool, the instrument, that is used by the Holy Spirit as and when he pleases. The apostles are left to wait in the upper room so that they can realise, take to heart, really feel, that God is in charge, that his plans matter more than theirs. And so they wait. Then suddenly all is turned on its head, and they are caught up in the whirlwind of God's life, whisked around and around, remade and remodelled, then thrown out into the city.

This whole process of transformation does depend on that time of waiting. This has been a waiting like no other waiting in the course of human history. They have been waiting with eager anticipation for God to do something which is possible for him alone. They have no doubt, they have no fear, all of that has been overcome by the Resurrection of Jesus. If that extraordinary promise was fulfilled, then so will the promise of the Holy Spirit. As they wait, they have the chance to take to heart more and more completely just what all this really means. As the days go by they realise more and more fully what it is they hope for, what it is they long for. As the days pass, and the apostles talk together and pray together, they share with one another their hopes and longings for what God might give them, and their collective hopes grow greater and greater. By the grace of God their hearts are expanded, made bigger and bigger so that they can then be filled with the great gift of the Holy Spirit. This is something we really need to get our minds around. As long as we want to take control, as long as we want to be in charge, as long as we want to be telling God what he should be doing, what we need, what we expect of him, we drastically shrink his ability to breathe new life into us, we dramatically restrict his power to act. If we will only listen to what we want to hear, we are deaf to all God's plans and dreams other than those which coincide with our plans. The only way to hear everything that God wants to speak to us is to put aside our pre-conceived ideas, to put aside all the things that we want him to say, and just to be available to him. This is what the apostles do,

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and that period of 10 days sees them letting go of all the boundaries and the borders and the preconceived ideas. At the end of it all their hearts are so expanded, so big, that they have no limits, no constraints, everything is available for God to use as he pleases, and that is the moment when the Holy Spirit rushes in.

In the gospel reading Jesus says of those who love him 'my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him'. That is quite a promise. The Trinity will come to those who love God not as a visitor - just dropping by for as brief visit, then moving on to let you get back to what you were doing before; nor as a guest, staying for a while, perhaps even becoming part of the family, then going on their different way. The Trinity comes to make their home with those who love God, to dwell with them, within them, to be a part of them, for all time and for ever. This is something that brings about a deep personal transformation.

One of the pieces of advice that I seem to give people again and again, in so many different situations, is to take control of their own lives. Many of the problems that people have stem from the fact that somebody else, or circumstances, or past memories and hurts, are dictating to them what they should do, how they should act. This is disempowering, degrading even, and they often need to know that it is permissible - even that it is necessary, to take control themselves. But this advice is only part of the story. It is always better for me to take control of my life rather than to let someone else control it for me; but being in control is not the ultimate goal, it is not the mark of success. I need to take control of my life so that I can then offer it to God for him to do with it as he pleases. One of the great lessons of Pentecost is that it is possible to be changed, dramatically changed and re-made; but the way to achieve this is not entirely through our own actions. Self-help can only take us so far. I take control of my life so that I can then offer it, whole and unencumbered, to the Lord. Only then are we ready, with our hearts expanded, to receive the challenging, consoling, wonderful and life-transforming gift of The Holy Spirit.