

Homily – John 20: 19-23
Pentecost Sunday, Year B
22 / 23 May 2021 Riverstown / Sooeey

Once, a mother took her five-year-old son with her to a concert by Ignace Paderewski, the great Polish pianist. The mother and her son got their seats close to the stage. And there the mother was delighted to meet one her old friends sitting adjacent to her and she got involved talking with her. Meanwhile, she failed to notice that her son had slipped away to do some exploring. At the right time the lights dimmed, and the spotlight came on. Only then did the mother see her five-year-old son on the stage, sitting on the piano bench, innocently picking out “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little star.” Before she could retrieve her son, Paderewski walked on to the stage. And walking over to the piano, he whispered to the boy, “Don’t stop... keep playing.” Then, leaning over the boy Paderewski reached out his left hand and began to fill in the bass. Later, he reached around the other side of the boy and added a running obbligato. Together, the great maestro and the tiny five-year-old boy mesmerized the audience with their playing.

Today we celebrate the beginnings of the Church, the great feast of Pentecost: a day when Jesus, true to His

promise, sent His Spirit on the apostles encircling them, working with them and empowering them. And to me, this story of the great maestro and the tiny five-year-old little star at the piano makes a fitting image of the Holy Spirit coming upon the disciples to bring out the great music of transforming them into true, courageous and active followers of the Risen Lord. Yes! On the first Pentecost, the Holy Spirit whispered encouragement to the disciples and moulded their feeble efforts into something powerful.

In the Hebrew Tradition, Pentecost was one of the 3 great feasts. They have the Passover, the Tabernacles and then the Pentecost. Now, Pentecost literally means 50th. It is a feast celebrated on the 50th day after the Passover feast by the Jews, and in Christianity Pentecost is celebrated on the 50th day after the feast of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Now, Jesus had just been arrested and crucified as a criminal. And the disciples self isolated from fear of the Jews. And here the Risen Jesus enters the still locked Upper Room where the disciples were, and He stood among them, not in His glory; but as the Jesus of the Passion showing them His hands, His feet and His side; the wounds that He had.

And the first thing He says to His disciples is this: “Peace, be with you”. Immediately after that He tells them: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you”.

Then Jesus empowers them by breathing upon them saying: Receive the Holy Spirit. And He goes on to say: “For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.” Though these words directly refer to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we need to remember that they also remind us of the Christian vocation we all have: to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven.

One of the popular comedies of William Shakespeare is *The Merchant of Venice*. Antonio, a successful merchant of Venice, got into trouble because of his generosity. His friend Bassanio asked Antonio for a loan. Antonio agreed, but as all of his assets were tied up at sea, the two went to Shylock, a Jewish moneylender. Shylock agreed to lend them 3000 ducats, but only if Antonio would sign a bond offering a pound of his flesh if the loan was not repaid in three months’ time. Antonio assented to the arrangement. Unfortunately, Antonio was not able to keep his word. The case reached the court. Shylock refused Bassanio’s offer of 6,000 ducats, twice the amount of the loan. He demanded his pound of flesh from Antonio.

Everyone present at the scene pleaded for the life of Antonio. But Shylock was adamant that he wanted the will to be carried out. Thus, the court must allow Shylock to extract the pound of flesh. At that very moment, a young Advocate arrived offering to serve as Defense Lawyer for the case of Antonio. Now, when his turn came to speak, the Defense Advocate argued that the bond allowed Shylock to remove only the flesh of Antonio, and not any drop of 'blood'. Thus, if Shylock were to shed any drop of Antonio's blood, his 'lands and goods' would be forfeited under Venetian laws.

Well, the young Advocate stepped in, at a moment when Antonio was in utter hopelessness. He was sure that he would lose his life. But in this crisis, the Defender's arguments, reasoning and presence brought hope and great change to the troubled life of Antonio.

Now, the disciples of Jesus too were in great hopelessness after the Ascension of Jesus. The message of Resurrection had given them hope and courage. However, that lasted only for forty days. Again, after the Ascension they confined themselves behind locked doors. They were filled with fear, and were gripped by a terrible sense of failure and inadequacy. And they weren't confident about sharing the Gospel with others.

But then, Pentecost came and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. No longer were the disciples confused, no longer were they timid. The Spirit launched them into the world to be witnesses to the Resurrection of Jesus and to preach His Good News to everyone.

There is a lesson for all of us here. When we look at our own lives in the present context of the Coronavirus Pandemic, we realize we too have been hiding in fear behind locked doors, living in self-isolation just like the apostles. A lot of things have changed since the first outbreak started in Wuhan in late 2019. And just like the apostles, we are all confused and worried and we keep asking: Will we ever get back to ‘normal’?

Yes! We just don’t see how we can cope. And to a certain extent we cannot cope if we simply rely on our own efforts. But, Pentecost says: we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is still with us and within us; encircling us, working with us, commissioning us and empowering us.

More than a century ago, a great sailing ship was stranded off the coast of South America. Day after day the ship lay there in the still waters with not a hint of a breeze. The captain was desperate; the crew was dying of thirst. And then, on the far horizon, a steamship

appeared, headed directly toward them. As it drew near, the captain called out, “We need water! Give us water!” The steamship replied, “Lower your buckets where you are.” The captain was furious at this cavalier response but called out again, “Please, give us water.” But the steamer gave the same reply, “Lower your buckets where you are!” And with that they steamed away!

The captain was beside himself with anger and despair, and he went below. But a little later, when no one was looking, a yeoman lowered a bucket into the sea and then tasted what he brought up: It was perfectly sweet, fresh water! Yes, for all those days they had been sitting right on top of all the fresh water they needed!

Well, what we are really seeking is already inside us, waiting to be discovered, waiting to be embraced: the Holy Spirit of God living within us from the moment of our Baptism. And the Holy Spirit is whispering to us at this very moment, “Lower your buckets where you are. And taste and see!”

Remember dear friends, Christ will never leave us alone. He sends the Holy Spirit to be with us to energize us until the end of time. God bless you all, **Amen.**

