

This weekend we are celebrating Pentecost, the day on which the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples of Jesus in the form of tongues of fire and then sent them out to proclaim the gospel to the world. Pentecost presents certain liturgical challenges because the readings for the novus ordo Vigil Mass, the novus ordo Sunday Mass and the TLM Mass are all different from each other. What is consistent between the two forms of the Sunday Masses is the Pentecost account from Acts of the Apostles.

One of my favorite things to do when I am working on homilies is to look for patterns in the readings. When patterns appear in the story of salvation history, God is speaking to us the same way a great story speaks to us when they try to get us to go deeper into their stories. Salvation history is full of types—foreshadowings—of something to come later. Sometimes those types foreshadow something greater—Moses is a type for Jesus, The Genesis flood and the crossing of the Red Sea are types for Baptism, Noah’s ark is a type for the church. Other times those “types” are opposites or negative images of each other; something happened in the past and then God used the same “ingredients” to correct it. For example, the virgin, man, and tree present at the Crucifixion correct what happened with the virgin, man, and tree in the Garden of Eden. Or the way in which Pentecost corrects what happened in one of the options for the Vigil mass readings, the Tower of Babel.

In that reading from Genesis, the people have begun to repopulate the earth after the Great Flood. As they were leaving the ark and then again as Noah was offering the sacrifice, God told Noah that all creatures, including humans, should be fertile and multiply and fill the earth. The people were fertile and they did multiply, but the Genesis account tells us that they migrated together. They all had one language. The implication is that they weren’t spreading out the way they were instructed to do. Instead, they found a nice place to live and decided to build a city. And in this city they built a tower to the sky. Genesis tells us that they wanted to make a name for themselves; otherwise they would be scattered all over the earth. There are two problems here: First, they were defying God by not spreading out and filling the earth like they were told to. Much, much worse is that they were challenging God by desiring to make a name for themselves; they were taking pride in their own achievements (the tower that reached to the sky) and basically saying, “Hey God, we don’t need you anymore, we can take care of ourselves.” God came down and saw what they were doing and realized that, having done this, nothing that the people

presumed to do would be out of their reach. So he confused their language and forced them to scatter over all the earth.

Now for the Pentecost account in the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples and others were all gathered together in one place. Acts tells us that they are all Galilean so presumably they all spoke one language. God came down...this time in a rush of wind and fire...and caused them to speak in different tongues. Sound familiar? It's pretty much the same story in both Genesis and Acts—but with completely opposite results. The prideful, disobedient unity at the Tower of Babel ended in confusion and chaos. Through the humble, prayerful, and obedient unity of the disciples at Pentecost, God began his work of reuniting what he scattered at Babel. The Tower of Babel and Pentecost are negative images of each other.

So here we are gathered together, presumably in humble, prayerful, obedience to our Lord. What happens when we leave here after Mass? Are people of the Tower of Babel or we a people of the Pentecost? When we scatter out into the world—into our homes, workplaces, communities, friends, wherever we go from here—do we sow discord and confusion or do we bring people back to Jesus? The gifts of the Holy Spirit have come upon us. How will we help them to grow and bear fruit that will last?