

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 27, 2007 Yr C
Acts 2: 1-21: Psalm 104:25-35,37b., Romans 8:14-17, John 14:8-17,25-27
The Rev. Dr. Seamus P. Doyle

Today is the day we consider to be the birthday of the Church, the day when the action of God sent the disciples out into the streets to preach the Good News of God in Christ.

As we celebrate our birthdays we are reminded of our entry into the world. Some were born in a sterile environment; others were born in a cab, a car or an ambulance. Some were born at home others in a hospital. Then there are those who are born in the midst of a war torn country and in the midst of violence. Some were born as the result of violence and abuse. Some were welcomed into the world and bring joy, even in a war torn environment; others were neither welcomed nor wanted even in a sterile and safe environment.

The new cult of Jesus of Nazareth was born in the midst of chaos and the rumors of war. Followers of Jesus refused to fight and take part in an uprising against Rome. Followers of Jesus became known as people of The Way, Nazarenes and/or, Christians. They were considered to have magical powers. They were willing to die for their beliefs but not their country as their beliefs included everyone. Those who did not understand them, who disagreed with them, still said of them: *see how they have love one for another.*

In the midst of war and rumor of war, in the midst of misunderstanding and mistrust a small group of people trusted in the Spirit of God and shared their story of Jesus of Nazareth, how he loved everyone, how he went about doing good, how he healed individuals regardless of their

ethnic or religious background, even those, and especially those, who were outcasts of society. The story had to be told. They could not keep quiet about it any longer. The more they reflected upon his sayings and life experience the more they were convinced of the reality that they said: *were not our hearts burning within us as he opened the scriptures to us on the way.*

The scriptures Jesus opened for them was the scriptures with which they were already familiar. Frequently Jesus said to them, *you have heard it said but I say to you.* In other words, Jesus opened them to a new way of being Jewish, a new way of being spiritual, a new way of living their life in the service of others. It was this concept of service, of servant leadership, that was difficult to understand, for Jesus practiced what he preached and he preached with an authority they had not experienced in their lifetime.

Jesus believed the scriptures, took them seriously, lived them and made them a reality in his daily life. This was the Spirit of God living within him; this was him responding to the call of God, whom he called Abba; this was Jesus making a daily decision to *choose life* and live it to the full.

Belief in the scriptures is not intellectual belief. Belief in the scriptures is knowing the story, knowing the implications of the story for the times of Jesus and for our own times; knowing the depth of commitment that is expected of us as we take the scriptures as seriously as Jesus.

In the midst of war and rumor of war; in the midst of families breaking apart because of belief in Jesus, in the midst of fear of imprisonment by Paul, in the midst of all of this, they celebrated the birth of a new community. In the midst of all this danger a new community came into being, was given new life and, initially, few realized it was being born.

Like Jesus being born in a humble home, the new church grew in stature before God and humanity and then it was too late to stop it. As one Rabbi commented on the new sect: *If it is of God we can't stop it. If it is of man, it will die.*

Growth brought change and change brought discord. Saul was converted but he was not trusted. Finally he came to meet with the Apostles in Jerusalem, they had strong words with one another, and in the end they realized that their goal was the same; that the Spirit of God was at work everywhere, and without their permission. Paul was sent off to continue his work but they kept an eye on him for some time.

Dietary foods became a divisive issue. Peter did not want to make the necessary changes. In a dream, God invited Peter to eat what, as a Jew, he considered to be unclean and Peter told God so. But God convinced him otherwise. Change became inevitable. What was once a church born within the Jewish faith, was now developing into a new religion and growing people who had no roots in the Jewish community.

The spirit of God was alive and well in Rome, Athens and Corinth, before Paul got there and after he arrived. He took what was available to him in terms of their beliefs and used it to explain his new beliefs. Pagan traditions were Christianized; Pagan temples became houses of Christian worship. Change and adaptation became the watchword of the fledgling church. Trust in the Spirit became the basis of their faith.

The persecution by Saul of the Jewish/Christians was nothing compared to the persecution by Nero and other Emperors. This new religion

was not to be trusted but they trusted in God. They had the assurance of Jesus: *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

A child snuggles up in a blanket next to its mother or father. It lies there in complete trust that it will be taken care of and totally unaware of the danger around it. At this point in time it is experiencing unconditional love and unconditional trust.

The early church had complete trust that God would take care of them. They were led by the Spirit to take risks, to mix with outsiders, to share their beliefs with strangers and foreigners, to feed the poor, visit and care for the sick and those in prison. They were challenged to do things differently than they were used to doing. They were challenged to grow in their trust in God. They were challenged to act in a manner contrary to everything they had learned and accepted such as *an eye for an eye*. Their motto was one of Forgiveness.

When Jesus said he'd send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to be with them, they did not know what to expect. How can one describe the impact of the Holy Spirit on a community that is suddenly led by the Spirit? What words or images can one use to describe being hit by a bolt of lightning and your life is changed? How do you tell another person that you are no longer the person they once knew, that you are now Spirit led and Spirit filled? They are not going to trust you. They are going to avoid you, laugh at you, say you've gone crazy; that you've got religion, that you've lost your mind. They will find a name for you and label you "Charismatic" and then you

become “one of those people” who raise their hands in church, who say “Amen,” who “praise the Lord”.

Trying to explain the beginning of the early church, St. Luke used wonderful imagery to drive home the point of the impact of the Spirit on this community who had followed Jesus and were now filled with fear and locked behind closed doors. *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

What a joy. What a way to begin a new life. Speaking to everyone in their own language, the language of love, the language of forgiveness, the language of inclusiveness, the language of God. Led by the Spirit they grew in stature before God and humanity; they grew individually; they grew as a community; they grew in love and they grew numerically.

Against all odds the Christian church grew. Despite stress, strife, struggles and schism we are still a church celebrating the presence of the Spirit of God among us; sharing in the life of Jesus as we live out his commandment to love one another as he loved us; making God a real presence in the world as we live out our baptismal covenant.

We still live with the dream of unity; the dream of Jesus *that all will be one even as the Father and I are one*. We live with the knowledge, as Paul said, *When we cry “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing*

witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ.”

On this, the birthday of our Church, let us rejoice, sing praises, and invite the Spirit of God to lead or to continue to lead us to greater and better things in this life and to live with God in Eternity. Amen.