

CHAPTER 2010 : SPIRITUALITY BY FRANK BARNES

11 May 2010 Day of Recollection

Eucharist 18h15

Mass of the Holy Spirit

Homily

Very fittingly, I believe, we are celebrating the mass of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that anointed the Lord at the beginning of his ministry and the one who will be with us throughout our deliberations if we are ready to listen to his voice and if we are ready to be challenged by the fire of his love. We come, not unlike all those that gathered in Jerusalem on the first day of Pentecost – we come to Rome from the Diaspora – we come from our various ministries and we carry somehow within us the hopes and aspirations of those we serve. We come certainly with a sense of pride in just how the Spirit has been present in all that we do but we come also with that deep desire to be more aware of his presence, more aware of just where he would like to lead us. It might seem at times that we will be speaking different languages and yet if we are in tune with the Spirit we will indeed understand one another but for that to happen we must allow ourselves to become as clay in the hands of the Potter, ready to be moulded, ready to be used; ready to let go, ready to listen to one another in fraternal love and charity.

Let's take a very brief look at Salvation history; we know the Spirit was there; It was there in the deep desire of our ancestors in faith to belong – no doubt there at the heart of such an experience was the covenant promise echoed throughout Salvation history: *I will be your God and you will be my people.* Such a promise was a summons to relationship – a summons to intimacy; it was summons to form community as well as a summons to be present in the world in a different way. It took many centuries for the Hebrews to form a community – it took many centuries of searching, of faithfulness but also downright struggle to create an identity – a feeling of belonging, a feeling of being called – of being chosen.

The desire to belong, the desire to be part of a group is innate in the human psyche. And thus there will always be tensions because, slowly but surely, distinctions are created between those who belong and those who don't, in other words – there is a distinction between insiders and outsiders. This could also be called inclusion and exclusion and we know that such ideas will always be based on race, nationality, class, religious belief or whatever. Exclusivity will always tell us that we are secure in our shared assumptions and prejudices and so it is we interpret the world around us and I dare say we even dare discern the will of God. Such aspirations and such exclusivity are woven throughout the tissue of Salvation history – yes a chosen people, a people set apart, different and thus demanding deferential treatment from God; yes the chosen are held in a special place in God's concerns and affections – so we always have to be careful for such

notions can turn to extremes of nationalism and injustice – something that the prophets throughout the ages were well aware of.

Maybe here we realise that the discernment process is not an easy one – it is often painful. It may mean that at times we have to leave the safe havens of all that brings us joy and comfort in our various ministries – it may mean that we will indeed have to move out into the deep, into the unknown when deep down we would prefer to remain in the comfort of all that is known and safe. Without listening to the voice of the Spirit we may well believe that our way of doing is the only way.

But let us move on a few centuries to the time of Jesus and the culture of his day. If we take a closer look at the gospels we soon realise just how exclusive the religion and culture of the day had become. They were so exclusive that the demarcation line between those who belonged and those who didn't was very clear indeed. In fact it could not have been clearer – there were Jews and non Jews; the sinners and the righteous ones, the impure and the pure and, it was in this chaotic myopic world, that Jesus preached his gospel, a gospel that struck at the very root of all that was exclusive; a gospel that broke down that very clear demarcation line between the pure and the impure to such an extent that paradoxically those that deemed themselves to be insiders were in fact outsiders and the outsiders were very much insiders; and Jesus considered to be impure those that we think to be pure and he will see as pure those that we think as impure.

Yes with Jesus the assumptions and prejudices of an exclusive religion were challenged to the core – the once myopic self centred opinions and beliefs that were so dearly held were challenged by his way of being and doing, and for the first time the vast horizons of God's covenant, of his love and mercy brought about indeed the dawning of a new era. And all of that somehow came together in the great event of Pentecost – the pouring out of the Spirit. Surely the Spirit had been there all the time but it was in the person and ministry of Jesus that such an outpouring found its source. When we look at the early fledgling Church we realise that the first group of Christians had received a message that brought about a change of horizon and the horizon was no longer tribal or national. The walls of separation, the boundaries that human beings had always tended to create to distinguish between those who belonged and those who didn't came tumbling down and there, in the faith of our early Christians, was an astounding global vision that saw all peoples not as outsiders or as threats to their own purity – but as insiders. Yes the myopic vision had gone and for once a unified horizon stretched out before them to the ends of the earth.

This is indeed the work of the Spirit – a Spirit that does not scatter but gathers, a Spirit that does not separate but brings together – a Spirit that says we are all brothers and sisters. We all know that even after the outpouring of the Spirit there were tensions amongst the believers; after all it is not easy to let go of so many assumptions and prejudices that have become part and parcel of who we are. Some would have preferred to remain closeted behind the walls of Jerusalem – in some way, no doubt, going back to

their rather cosy and myopic vision of God; but thank goodness through the likes of Paul, through his daring and ability to take risks and aided also no doubt by persecution, Christianity was able to break out of such complacency. Yes it could not have been easy for this group of early Christians to confront the changes of mentality and culture which the mission to the Gentiles involved. In many ways the early believers were indeed a group of rather reluctant ethnically prejudiced believers who were indeed pushed by the powerful initiative Holy Spirit into their Universalist destiny. The early Christians were not necessarily willing tools of the Spirit but were rather dragged screaming to their destiny of breaking down the barriers of exclusion and entering into a new vision of reality.

For ourselves as a Society the abiding presence of Jesus in our mission, through the action of the Holy Spirit, is the very foundation of all that we have accomplished since our very foundation and yet throughout our own history, no doubt, we have all felt the tensions as the Holy Spirit pushes us towards new horizons; as we are chided into leaving behind certain assumptions and maybe certain ways of being missionary. Yes there are problems of focusing on what should be our priorities; problems of personnel, problems of ageing, problems of communities and yet the Spirit is there and we know that he is not always so gentle. He is the great disturber and his ideas often unsettle us and yet, as we know, only those with imagination and a readiness to be disturbed will be in tune with the call of discipleship. If that were not the case then it would mean that we have for too long grown used to our own complacency and superficiality. No doubt tensions will appear here in the next few weeks, maybe tensions concerning the vision the Holy Spirit is trying to reveal to us – but then tensions healthily dealt with can bring growth and an ever more keen awareness of the mission we have been entrusted with.

What is true is that constantly the Spirit will lead us to new horizons – we must not be afraid but rather, we need to be like Abraham, ready to take the risk; ready to sacrifice certain things that belong only to our world of assumptions and prejudices. In that sense the Spirit is inviting each one of this evening to listen intently to one another, to listen to one another's dreams, to share the burdens we carry but also the hopes for the future. The Spirit is asking us to surrender our own personal agendas as he calls us once more to metanoia and to mission. Archbishop Helder Camara once said that: *Mission is leaving, walking away, abandoning everything, going out of one self, breaking the shell of selfishness which imprisons us in our "I". It is to cease revolving around our own selves as if we were the centre of the world and of life. Above all it is to open oneself up to others, as brothers and sisters, discovering them encountering them.*

Maybe this indeed is what our mission is here over the next few weeks. If we listen intently to one another and the murmurings of the Spirit within then he will open to us the challenging horizons of a new tomorrow. Today, therefore, may the Spirit set us aflame with his love so that we be aware of his power deep within us and may we be fearless as we strive to discern together the vast horizons of the mission we have been entrusted with.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Gracious Father we praise and thank you today for the gift of your Spirit. It is your Spirit that will lead us to the truth, which will empower us to proclaim the gospel of your son to the ends of the earth. Make us ever aware of your Spirit dwelling deep within us. May he renew in us our love and our faith so that we may never tire of witnessing to your great love for us. We make this our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ your son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.