

Homily for the
Solemnity of Pentecost
Preached by Fr. Brendan Freeman
(May 27, 2007)

[Scripture Readings: Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23]

Many years ago in the 1960's Psychology really hit the religious life with a vengeance. There were sensitivity sessions, there was the book, "On Becoming a Person" by Carl Rogers that you just had to read and there was a popular little book entitled, "Why I am Afraid to Tell You Who I Am". I suppose to read the book would have been an indication that you were one of those who was afraid, so you did not want anyone to see you reading it which again only reinforces the fact that you were afraid to tell people who you were or are or will be. We can express who we are by sharing intimate things about ourselves or by simply giving our name and where we are from . We do this at meetings sometimes and an indication that you are afraid to tell people who you are is the nervousness with which you await your turn to give out your name—it is worse if you have to stand up and do this. Very few of us like to be the focus of attention this way. Someone described it as being like a deer caught in the head lights of a car. We want to vanish into the safety of the woods or fade into the background or the wall paper, as it were.

One gets the impression that the Apostles were something like this after the death of Jesus. They hid out, didn't want to be seen, sort of snuck around Jerusalem and met behind closed doors or dispersed. They were not about to tell anyone who they were. This all changed with Pentecost. We read they were given the power to express themselves. The exact words are, "...the Spirit gave them the power to express themselves" (Acts 2:4). This is quite remarkable because everyone there, and the text makes it clear there were people from many different nations and languages present, could understand what was being said. But, to me what was more remarkable was the content of what was being said. It was not a teaching or a sermon. It was a prayer, an ecstatic prayer of praise, a preaching, the text says, about the marvels of God. Remember, what we are attending to here is the birth of the church. The narrative is telling us what is the essence of the church. It is the prayer of praise, it is worship of the Father by the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit; it is the celebration of the marvels of God, it is the liturgy of the church or what Benedict calls the work of God.

The tongues of fire in the story represent the presence of the Holy Spirit. Fire is also the symbol of love. The Sacred Heart is always shown surrounded by fire. The message is that at the heart of God, at the heart of the Church and at the heart of each one of the Baptized is the fire of love. When the disciples were given the power to express themselves this fire burst forth in praise and worship of God. This praise and recounting of the marvelous works of God is still the heart of the Church. It is still powered by the fire of love called the Holy Spirit. This is the mystical church where the lack of love by one is made up for by the burning love of another. In

this way a lonely, forgotten widow who is bearing her cross in love can be supplying more to the church than a world renowned theologian. At the heart of the church only love counts. As St. Paul says love alone endures.

The church of course has many dimensions and functions but when the community gathers to worship we are brought into the essence of the church—the church at prayer. St. Augustine spoke of the "vox totius Christi", the voice of the whole Christ. This is the worshipping community, this is what the church was founded to do—to praise the wonderful works of God and in doing that to praise God Himself.

As a consumer society we have in the background of everything we do the little voice saying, "what's in it for me"? When we come to the liturgy this gets translated into, I don't get much out of it—it doesn't appeal to me. Today's feast is telling us what we get out of it when it says, "...the Spirit gave them power to express themselves". This is a tremendous gift. We can find ourselves by expressing ourselves and here we mean at the deepest level of our existence. When we praise and worship God in the power of the Spirit we are actualizing our true and essential nature as beings who are a communication of God. God expresses himself through us and we express ourselves through the Spirit.

Truly, Pentecost is the birth of the Church and the birth of our deepest and truest self.