

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Fifty Days Later

Jesus died on the vigil of the Passover. Like our own feasts, the Passover has its frame in Jewish practice: the days of preparation, with their unleavened bread, the fasts, the eve of the Passover with its games and traditions, the great Seder meal with its special symbolic foods; then, fifty days later, Jews celebrate Pentecost, the feast of Mount Sinai, the moment where the liberated people meet their God on his holy mountain, and make their new Covenant with him. The great feature of this feast is the celebration of the Law, which Moses brings down from the mountain on tablets of stone. Ever since, the people of God have tried to transfer that stone Law to be written on their living hearts. So, even in the Old Testament, the whole effort of the people was to try to make the Word of God into their Flesh. Incarnation is the human destiny: God must become human, so that humanity may become divine. Indeed, God never changes; he is the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega.

Fire From Above

The scene on Sinai was pretty fiery, with clouds of smoke and thunderous flashes of light; the Christian Pentecost is also a feast of fire, betokening the descent of God the Holy Spirit to the earth. It is also a Christian feast, which presages the taking of our flesh by the forceful Spirit of God, which hovered over the waters of the deep in the first Creation, and which now irrupts into the waiting cosmos as a new fire of transforming power. The Church hasn't left any of the meanings out which belong to fire: fire is wild, untameable, destructive: so the strong structures of sin and of earthly power lie at its mercy. Fire cleanses and purifies, so all the ephemeral evil which we give room to in our hearts and minds is combustible before it. Fire melts the frozen and solid, and introduces fusion and flow into what seemed immovable or rigid. Long-established barriers come down, hard cold metal begins to fuse and flux, the very imprisoned heart of humanity finds its chains dropping from it, the gates falling from its jail. Fire warms our senses and vivifies us; it gives brilliant light and life to our dwelling-place. Such are the Spirit's effects as He enters the world, engendering new creation, new life where darkness and death had seemed to reign. The small flames which enliven the Christian altar should recall to us

this billowing descent of fire-in-the-wind which Luke describes as the inauguration of the Christian mission to the whole world.

"A Flame Divided, But Undimmed"

Those words from the *Exultet* at the Easter Vigil come back to our minds as we consider the *destination* of this descending fire: where is it going to, so dramatically? It is directed to every single human heart, each one a scene of God's creative power. We often think of our lives as small, knowing as much as we do about the vastness of the Universe, and feeling as we do our own insignificance in the human world. But the Church does not think of any human heart as small and narrow. We are created for the vision of God; and that means that there is for each of us a life that is going to be great enough for God to enter into it, and make his home in it. If the fire of the Spirit should break out in our small room, let it burn, let it demolish and destroy, in the name of that divine scale on which our making was first conceived. Let it destroy what is confining and limiting, let it loosen the ties which keep us trapped in our past, and open our eyes to the sky that leaps over us, an open space which the ascending Jesus turned into a Way that leads to life. Even Solomon, living in the palace where he was born, knew that his true home was a tent, a house that had no permanence.

Peace And Forgiveness

God does not roughly take possession of our lives. He comes very gently to our side, with healing for all that afflicts us: our poverty, our lack of joy, and our grief. But his true message is to be known only in his power. God is not some wilting compassion, like our piteous capacity to wring our hands and complain. The compassion of God raises the dead. It has power over our sins, and gives us power over them too. Jesus breathed on them and said, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. At that moment he invests his Church with the power to expel the demonic weakness of the earth, the paralysis which keeps us mourning all our lives. Pilgrims need their strength, and courage: love of God, knowledge and wisdom: understanding, and awe in the presence of God. These strengths are the gifts of the Spirit, to bring our frailty to the fullness of life.

Fr Philip