

**PENTECOST, Year A, B, and C**  
**THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH**

Acts 2:1-11; Ps 104:1,24,29-31,34; 1 Cor 12:3-7,12-13; Jn 20:19-23

***TONGUES AS OF FIRE*** (Acts 2:3)

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun  
Sunday, May 23, 2010, 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

There appeared **tongues as of fire** (Acts 2:3),  
and all were filled with the **Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:4).

On Pentecost the **Holy Spirit** came in the form of **tongues of fire**.

**St. Luke** is a **brilliant writer**,  
and when he wrote his **second book**, the **Acts of the Apostles**,  
he was on fire,  
inspired by God,  
enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit,  
and he **expertly** used **symbols**.

St. Luke connected the **Holy Spirit** and **fire**.

St. Luke was well aware that in the **Old Testament**, the Hebrew Scriptures,  
that **fire** is a **symbol** for the **presence of God**.

Let's do a little **quick review** of **Old Testament** instances when **God** appeared **as fire**,  
because they are the foundation or background to Pentecost and tongues of fire.

When God established the covenant with Abraham,  
God appeared as a **burning coal**, a **flaming torch** (Gen 15:17) – **God as fire**.

When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai,  
God spoke from a **burning bush** (Ex 3:2) – **God as fire**.

When the Israelites journeyed through the desert for forty years,  
God led them by a pillar of cloud by day,  
and a **pillar of fire** by night (Ex 13:21) – **God as fire**.

When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments,  
“The Lord came down upon Sinai in **fire**” (Ex 19:18; 24:17) – **God as fire**.

When Moses and the Israelites put up the meeting tent,  
at night a **cloud** hovered **over the tent**,  
and there was a **fire** in the **middle of the cloud** (Ex 40:38),  
and the cloud and the fire represented the presence of God – **God as fire**.

Let's recap what St. Luke used as the **biblical basis** for **God as fire**:  
the **flaming torch**, the **burning bush**, the **pillar of fire** at night in the desert,  
the **fire** on **Mount Sinai** at the giving of the **Ten Commandments**,  
and the **fire** over the **meeting tent** after the giving of the Ten Commandments.

Let's be agreed that **fire** is a **good symbol** for **God**,  
and on this feast of **Pentecost**, that **fire** is also a **good symbol** for the **Holy Spirit**.

Then St. Luke takes a **familiar symbol**, fire, and gives it a **new twist**.

On Pentecost, the **fire** appeared in the shape of **TONGUES** over their heads (Acts 2:3).  
The **shape** of the **flames** is very **intentional** and highly **symbolic**.

St. Luke could have used an **Old Testament image**:

a torch, a burning bush, a pillar of fire.

St. Luke could have used **another body part**:

an ear, a hand, a finger.

St. Luke used the **TONGUE** on purpose.

For St. Luke, the **TONGUE** is a symbol of **SPEECH**.

We use our **tongues** to **talk**,  
and most of us **talk quite a bit**.

If we were to do **human body weight comparison**,  
and compare the **total body weight** to the weight of the **tongue**,  
the **tongue** is only a **few ounces**,  
and the **tongue** is **really small** in comparison to the rest of the body.

The **tongue** may be **small**,  
but the tongue is **huge** when it comes to our **speech**.

What we say with our **tongues** can do **great good** or cause **terrible harm**.

The **tongue** is a **small organ** with a **big effect**.

**St. James** wrote about the **power of the tongue** in his epistle, his letter (Jas 3:1-12),  
and he has **three examples** of how **small things** can have a **big effect**:

how a **bit** in the **mouth of a horse** can point its entire body in a certain direction (Jas 3:3);

how the **rudder of a ship**, small as it is, directs an entire vessel (Jas 3:4);

or how a **little fire** (e.g., a burning match, a cigarette butt), small as it may be,  
can set a huge forest ablaze (Jas 3:5b).

**Our tongues** are like a **burning match** next to a **tinder dry forest**.

**Our tongues** are like the **rudder** at the **back** of a **fully loaded freighter** on Lake Superior.

What we **say with** our **tongues**, what comes **out of our mouths**,  
can do **tremendous good**,  
but it can work **horrendous evil**.

Just think of the **nasty things**, the **filth**, the **bad stuff**,  
that we sometimes say with our tongues.

We use our tongues to tell **lies**.  
We use our tongues to **scream at people** when we're mad.  
We use our tongues to make **insulting, cutting, hurtful remarks**.  
We use our tongues to **make fun of people** that we don't like.  
We use our tongues to **gossip** and **spread rumors**.  
We use our tongues to **talk back** and **disrespect**.  
We use our tongues to **taunt** and **humiliate**.  
We use our tongues to **curse** and **swear**.  
We use our tongues to **tell dirty jokes**.  
We use our tongues to **tempt people**,  
to do **drugs**, to do **sex**, to **go together** on an **evil scheme**.

Our **tongues**, small as they are, have the **potential** to do **horrific damage**,  
to be the **most destructive organ** in our bodies.

So on Pentecost, **fire** came **over each person's head**.  
If there is any place that **God needs to be present**,  
it is in our **heads**,  
in our **minds**,  
in our **thoughts**.

Then, **after** we have been **thinking**, either for an instant or a long while,  
if there is any **organ** in our bodies that **needs the guidance of God**,  
it is **our tongues**.

The way that we use **our tongues**,  
the **words** that come out of our mouths,  
should always **glorify God** and be **helpful to our neighbor**.

Think of an **important relationship** or **situation** in your or my life right now.  
When it comes to that person or that circumstance,  
just think of what it would be like if **every thought in our heads** was **directed by God**,  
and that when we used **our tongues**, that **every word** that came out of our mouths,  
either to that person, or about that person, or about that situation,  
was **directed by the Holy Spirit**.

Pentecost is about **fire overhead** and **tongues**:  
the **presence of God in our minds**  
and **well-governed speech**.

On that **first Pentecost**, when the **first disciples** received the **Gift of the Holy Spirit**,  
it **changed everything**.  
Just think of the **transformative effect** that the **Holy Spirit** could have **on us**  
if the **fire** was **always over our heads**  
and if our **tongues** were **always guided by the Holy Spirit!**

**Pentecost** is an invitation to **let the Holy Spirit** take **control** of our **minds** and **direct** our **words**.

Our **little tongues** are **very small organs** that can do **immeasurable good**.

What if we used our tongues to always speak **the truth**?

What if we used our tongues to always speak **politely**?

What if we used our tongues to always speak **constructively**?

What if filled our speech with **compliments** and **encouragements**?

What if we used our tongues to express **welcome** and **kindness**?

What if we used our tongues to **build people up** when they were feeling low?

What if we used our tongues to speak **intelligently** and to **share good information**?

What if we used our tongues to always **guide others to do the right thing**?

What if we used our tongues to **pray**, and to **sing**,  
and to **offer God** our **thanks** and **praise**?

We can use our **tongues** to do **immeasurable good**!

When we allow the **fire of God** to rest **over our heads**  
and the **Holy Spirit** to **guide** our **tongues** with the **words** we speak,  
the **Holy Spirit** has the **power** to **change everything**:  
our relationships, our families, our neighborhoods,  
this parish, our American culture, and the world.

Tongues as of fire came to rest over their heads (Acts 2;3).

*“May the fire which hovered over the disciples as tongues of fire  
burn out all evil from your [our] our hearts,  
and make then [us] glow with pure light”* (Solemn Blessing, *Sacramentary*, p. 273).