

- At the beginning of Walker Percy's novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, a doctor is walking down the street in New Orleans. He reflects on a case he has just seen. Keen observation of detail, and knowledge remembered from medical school, leads him to a diagnosis. He may have just seen a rare case of bubonic plague in a city that used to host America's largest port.
- This memorable scene raises a question: What is the difference between an *isolated* case and an *epidemic*? A doctor sees what might be a case of a disease that once devastated large sections of Europe. What keeps this from happening again, in modern day America? *After COVID*, this is not a hypothetical question.
- Some quick research on the internet tells me there are three key variables concerning an epidemic: (1) a change in the *virulence* of the disease; (2) the disease's introduction into a *new setting*; and, (3) a change in *how susceptible* we are to the disease. In other words, *strength, context* and *vulnerability* affect whether or not epidemics occur. Also called outbreaks, we fear them because harmful viruses or germs can suddenly spread widely, and out of control. An even more frightening example than COVID would be an unconfined spread of the dreaded ebola virus, which causes high fever and uncontrolled hemorrhaging.
- But what about *positive* examples? Can we imagine a *desirable outbreak of healing* rather than an outbreak of human decimation? Just a few weeks ago we heard about an outbreak of the Holy Spirit among the community of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Suddenly *and* unexpectedly, the disciples and others were overcome by the '*symptoms*' of wonder and joy. They experienced a marked change in their ability to hear and speak to one another intelligibly, *even across* barriers of language and culture.

- With Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit of God, we *can* see how the three key variables affecting an outbreak *also* apply to a positive situation. (First) The **strength** of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit suddenly and visibly increased on Pentecost; (Second) God brought this power into the **new setting** within the hearts of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem; and (Third) they were **more open** to that power in their common life, affecting them dramatically (3). Once again, we have **strength**, **context** and **openness** as the three key variables.
- Hebrews tells us that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."¹ When that letter was written, a two-edged sword was a fearful object. But in our own day, we can substitute something we associate with medicine and healing: "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any surgeon's scalpel..." So, just as a sword **negatively**, and a scalpel **positively**, can cut to the very center of our bodies, the word of God can cut to the center of what it means to be human. Like the Holy Spirit, the word of God penetrates the heart and mind and soul, as well as our physical embodiment. And like the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the word of God can cause *an outbreak of joy and wonder*, of spiritual learning and insight, among ordinary people like us.
- In our first reading today, we hear about what may be '*an isolated case*.' Jeremiah has been called by God to receive God's Word, and be a living witness to it. The problem is that, whenever God's Word emerges in the prophet's speech or conduct, *and* when it is written down, it causes *disruption* and *trouble*. So much so that Jeremiah laments how God's Word has caused him to undergo continuous reproach and derision from others. Given this, he wants to *hold the Word in*, and no longer give voice to it. But he tells us that when he tries, the *living and active Word* within him is something like *a burning fire* shut up in [his] bones"!

- Here we must name the paradox we find in these Bible texts about God's word and the Holy Spirit. In Jeremiah's experience and in that of many other biblical figures, the power of God's word can be experienced as being like *fire*, which has obvious *destructive* effects. Or think of another analogy from the field of medicine, that of chemotherapy and radiation. For some people, the word of God and the Holy Spirit can have an effect similar to the kind we associate with these treatments. The destruction of what ails us in pursuit of our healing can be powerful and unpleasant. Because of their side-effects, people *reluctantly* receive these treatments *as a means to an end*, never for their own sake. Paradoxically, when it comes to our spiritual healing, many of us don't want to risk experiencing what might have a similar power – the power of God's Word and Holy Spirit in our lives. Or, we allow ourselves to be in *denial* about the gravity of *our spiritual illness*. [pause]
- **Three times!** *Three times* in our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us **not** to be afraid. He tells us *not to fear any adversity* that might come from his Word being *in* us. What he tells us quietly, he wants us to proclaim openly. He knows that we fear losing our safety and comfort, or our social status, by witnessing to his power. **Do not be afraid**, he says, of *division* that might come between us in our earthly communities, through being faithful to him. For he has not come to prop up the *artificial peace* that is often a false veneer on our present life. Instead, he brings a *sword* - the kind of sword that pierces between soul and spirit. Luke quotes Jesus as saying that, in addition to *division*, he has come to *bring fire to the earth*.² Surely, Jesus means the fire of the Holy Spirit, which consumes all that is *not* godly, and burns up all that is *less than* holy, within us, and between us.
- We are attached to many things. Our attachment to outward things, even our attachments to our relatives and friends – **if** they come *before* our attachment to him – *may get cut* by God's living word, and **consumed** by the fire of the Holy Spirit. This was the cost to Jeremiah of being faithful to the

Word within him. Five hundred years later, Jesus predicted the same cost for his disciples, if they would witness to the Spirit-implanted Word within them.

- God could easily bring an outbreak of the Holy Spirit among members of the Church today, and *an outbreak* of his Word within us. *Beyond our control*, of course, is the **first** variable, *the strength* of his transforming Holy Spirit, which *suddenly* could appear among us. Also beyond our control is the **second** variable, how God could unleash his word *in this context*, and *in this particular community* of Jesus' followers. But *unlike* the first two, we **can do something** about the **third** variable affecting an outbreak of the Holy Spirit. We can **increase our openness** to God's power coming among and within us, which could affect us dramatically.
- Let me be clear ~ I'm **not** thinking here about things like speaking in tongues or the gift of prophetic utterance. Instead, I am thinking of God's power manifest in things like *increased giving* to help those who are needy; having *an increased expectation for honesty and integrity* in our workplaces and public life; and things like *increased selflessness* in our relationships with others. God's joy, wonder and love, *can* be more powerful within and between us. All we need to do is *be more open* to receiving his life-giving gifts. (As John says, at the end of Revelation:) "**Amen**. Come Lord Jesus!"³



Pentecost fabric altar frontal, Wells Cathedral, England



Pentecost, an image found on the website, buildfaith.org

PROPER 7, June 25, 2023, Year A

Notes:

¹ See Hebrews 4:12-13

² Luke 12:49

³ Revelation 22:20