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John 20:19-23 ¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Pentecost

This coming Sunday is [Pentecost](#) with the gospel reading taken from the Gospel of John. The Greek name (*pentēkostē*) refers to the Jewish Feast of Weeks. The name itself means “50th” and is taken because the festival occurs 50 days after Passover (Acts 20:16; 1 Cor 16:8). Because the early Christians received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on this day, the term is now more commonly used to refer to that event recounted in Acts 2:1–13 and celebrated on Pentecost Sunday.

The Feast of Weeks was the second of the three great Jewish feasts. Its name signified that it concluded the period of seven weeks which began with the presentation of the first sheaf of the barley harvest during the Passover celebration (Lev 23:15–16; Deut 16:9). Thus it was originally an agricultural feast marking the end of the grain harvest and was celebrated during the month of Sivan (May/June). Both Josephus (*Ant* 3.10.6 §252; *JW* 1.13.3 §253) and Jewish intertestamental writings (Tob 2:1; 2 Macc 12:31–32) refer to the feast as Pentecost. [AYBD 5:222-23]

During the Hellenistic period (324-64 BC), the ancient harvest festival also became a day of renewing the Noahic covenant, described in Genesis 9:8-17, which is established between God and “*all flesh that is upon the earth.*” By this time, some Jews were already living in the Diaspora (living in countries other than Israel itself). According to Acts 2:5-11 there were Jews from “*every nation under heaven*” in Jerusalem, possibly visiting the city as pilgrims during Pentecost. This group of visitors included both Jews and converts to Judaism.

In 70 AD, the Roman armies conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. At this point in history the offering of grains in the Temple as part of the festival was no longer possible. While this day continued to be celebrated, after the destruction of the Temple, the day commemorated the reception of the Law by Moses.

John's Pentecost

The first reading for Pentecost Sunday is the account from Acts 2 so familiar to every Christian. Luke's account is a very public event compared to the very private Johannine account. The Lucan account occurs 50 days after the Resurrection. The Johannine account occurs on the evening of the same day as the Resurrection.

Why the difference? Some scholars defend the basic historicity of the entire Lucan narrative; others conclude that it is essentially Luke's theological attempt to explain the coming of the Spirit, not an historical account of actual events. Some, holding to the historicity of the Lucan account in Acts 2, hold that John's account is symbolic only. The Second Council of Constantinople (AD 533) condemned the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia that Jesus did not really give the Spirit on that Easter evening but acted only figuratively and by way of promise. Some, like John Chrysostom, held that the giving of the Spirit was for one particular gift or another; others have said that Easter's coming of the Spirit is personal while Pentecost is ecclesial or missionary. And another set of scholars posit a narrower coming of the Spirit targeting special gifts intended for specific ministry (e.g., the forgiveness) versus a more general coming of the Spirit as a blessing and empowerment for the larger Johannine ministry of discipleship: love and holding to the commandments of Jesus. Some simply conjecture that since John is not overly concerned about date/setting but rather the theological implications, that the Johannine account is the same event – John has simply re-located the events.

The Roman Catholic view coincides with its theological sense of “both-and”. In a sense the very order of the Readings for Pentecost Sunday (Year A) outlines the sense of “both-and” as follows:

- Acts 2:1-11: the general coming of the Spirit
- 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13: the variety of gifts given – personal, ecclesial, missionary and more

³ Therefore, I tell you that nobody speaking by the spirit of God says, “Jesus be accursed.” And no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the holy Spirit. ⁴ There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; ⁵ there are different forms of service but the same Lord; ⁶ there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; ¹⁰ to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.

- John 20:19-23: the gifts given for specific ministry, e.g., continuation of the priesthood of Jesus is those that the community raises up for that particular ministry – in this case, the Catholic tradition sees the Sacrament of Reconciliation given to particular ministers to celebrate in the name of the community

²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Dr. Matt Skinner of Lutheran Seminary offers a great insight, referring to this scene as “The Spirit, at last.” He writes that:

In John, this is an incredibly weighty and long-anticipated scene. The Baptizer introduced Jesus in John 1:33 as “the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” Jesus himself has said that his ability to give the Holy Spirit “without measure” would offer proof that he is from God and speaks the words of God (3:34). He promised that “rivers of living water”—a metaphor for the Spirit—would flow from his innermost being. And of course Jesus has had much to say about the coming “Advocate”:

- It is “the Spirit of truth,” who dwells with believers forever yet cannot be received by “the world” (14:16-17).
- It is the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, who will teach Jesus’ followers everything and remind them of all he told them (14:26; cf. 16:13).
- It is the Spirit, whom Jesus sends “from the Father,” and who testifies about Jesus and equips people to offer testimony about him (15:26-27). This Spirit glorifies Jesus (16:14).
- It is He who can “prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment” (16:8-11).

The close connections John draws among Jesus’ promises about the Spirit, his glorification and ascension, his intimacy with the Father, and his commissions to his followers caution us not to skip over “the Johannine Pentecost” too casually, as if it serves merely as a final “Good bye, and good luck” from Jesus to his friends.

With this culminating scene, the christological climax of John’s Gospel (Jesus’ departure as the exalted Christ) is part and parcel of the Gospel’s apostolic impulse (the equipping and sending of the men and women who believe in him). That is, in the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ followers receive nothing less than the fullness of the glorified Son. Their lives (ours, too) can therefore accomplish ends similar to his life’s, insofar as they reveal God.

Peace be with you

This coming Sunday is [Pentecost](#) with the gospel reading taken from the Gospel of John. While the first reading ([Acts 2:1-11](#)) describes the events we associate with Pentecost Sunday, the Gospel of John account tells of the appearance of Jesus following of the events that took place at the tomb in the early morning of the first day of the week (John 20:1–18). There near the empty tomb of Jesus, the risen Savior first appeared to Mary Magdalene. Our gospel contains the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus. These three appearances take place in Jerusalem. There is a fourth and final appearance of Jesus later in a section referred to as the “Epilogue” of John. This appearance is at the “Sea of Tiberias” in Galilee (John 21).

The people involved in the Johannine scene in the garden, despite the testimony of Mary Magdalene, are locked in a room *for fear of the Jews* (20:19). The proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection has not dispelled the fear. The “we” and “they” of v.2 are still active forces in the account. The disciples (we) have not overcome the fear that the Jewish leadership (they) have created throughout the Passion.

The Johannine account of the first post-resurrection appearance to the gathered disciples is linked to the events of the Resurrection by the simple expression “*that first day*.” As the startling and disturbing events of the last three days had unfolded the community’s overriding response was fear. They had gathered, but had locked themselves away out of fear of what persecutions the religious authorities might bring against them. It is into this complex of uncertainty, perhaps doubt and hesitation, that Jesus appears

“*Peace be with you*” is in some way a conventional greeting (*cf.* Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:3; Gal 1:3) used by St Paul in his letters as a reflection of a standard option for the opening of a Greek letter. But here the greeting has an additional purpose – Jesus is fulfilling a promise from his Farewell Discourse: his gift of peace (John 14:27). The peace is given to a community who will experience the world’s opposition always and its persecution often. The gift of peace is an explicit reminder that their way in the world will be graced with the enduring promise of Christ.

The biblical idea of “peace” is complex, but peace is not simply the absence of war or hostilities. Peace is a positive notion in the biblical sense and has meaning of its own. At its root, the biblical idea of “peace” stems from the Hebrew *šālôm* which means to be hale, whole and complete [AYBD 5:2-6]. The Greek word *eirene* (peace) appears in almost every writing of the NT. It describes a relationship of goodwill between God and humans.

The Fourth Gospel affirms that peace is intimately related to Jesus himself. It is a gift related to the commission to forgive sins (20:19, 21, 26) and go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, but also before his death he promises them: “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid*” (14:27). The difference between the world’s peace and that of Jesus is not explained, but it has to do with John’s notion of the world (*kosmos*). “*In the world you will have trouble. But take courage! I have conquered the world*” (16:33). In Christ peace is available to them. The difference must not be drawn along philosophical lines, as if the peace of Christ “has nothing to do with the absence of warfare nor ... with an end to psychological tension, nor with a sentimental feeling of well-being” (Brown, 653). Caesar’s peace enforced by violence is not the same as the peace of Christ which derives from his victory over evil through the absorption of suffering. The two are dramatically different ways of bringing peace.

Prior to his death, Jesus told his disciples they would all be scattered and abandon him (16:32). Jesus was alone before the high priest and eventually before Pilate as he was condemned to death. The disciples, and especially Peter who had denied him three times (18:17–18, 25–27), would have felt deeply ashamed that they had abandoned Jesus in his *hour*. Thus when Jesus appeared to them behind locked doors, his greeting of “*Peace be with you!*” showed he was not holding their failures against them; rather, he was offering a restored relationship – that they remained in the goodwill of God.

“*When he had said this, he showed them his hands and side.*” By showing them the nail prints in his hands and the spear wound in his side Jesus removed any doubt they had that the one who stood before them in that locked room was Jesus crucified but now risen from the dead. He predicted that the disciples’ sorrow at his death would be turned to joy following his resurrection (16:20–22), and now “*the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.*”

As the Father has sent me, so I send you

This coming Sunday is [Pentecost](#) with the gospel reading taken from the Gospel of John. The Fourth Gospel speaks often of Jesus being sent into the world by the Father: to do his will (6:38–39; 8:29), to speak his words (3:34; 8:28; 12:49; 14:24; 17:8), to perform his works (4:34; 5:36; 9:4) and win salvation for all who believe (3:16–17). That the disciples were sent to continue the words and works of Jesus is foreshadowed at various places in the Gospel: Jesus urged them to lift up their eyes and see fields ripe for harvest, and told them he had sent them to reap where others had labored (4:35–38), he said those who believed in him would do the works he had done and greater works than these because he was returning to the Father (14:12); he told them, “*I ... chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you*” (15:16), saying that when the Paraclete comes “*he will testify to me. And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning*” (15:26–27), and when he prayed for his disciples he said to the Father, “*As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world*” (17:18). This last text, which

parallels 20:21, confirms that the sending of the disciples was 'into the world', i.e. with a mission to the world. The other texts reveal the essential content of their mission was to 'harvest' men and women for the kingdom by their witness to Jesus by word and deed, alongside the ongoing witness of the Spirit.

We are sent just as Jesus was sent – How and in what manner was Jesus, the Word of God, sent into the world? A great deal of our understanding of the Jewish theological interpretation of the Old Testament comes from original writings of the Hebrew scholars. The Old Testament was originally recorded in Hebrew and then translated (with interpretative embellishment) in Aramaic - known as the *Targumin*. For example:

- *Isaiah 52:13 (Hebrew) "See, my servant shall prosper.."*
- *Isaiah 52:13 (Targumin) "See, my servant the Messiah shall prosper.."*

In fact many of the OT citations in *John* are taken from the *Targumins*.

In Jewish understanding, the *memra* - Aramaic for the *Word (dabar* in Hebrew) -had several characteristics. It means more than "spoken word"; it also means "thing", "affair", "event", and "action". Because it covers both word and deed, in Hebrew thought, *dabar* had a certain dynamic energy and power of its own. When connected to Yahweh it took on the divine. Its energy and power were from God. The Targuminic reflections on *memra (Targum Onkelos)* offers some insight into the meaning of the *Word* in Jewish thinking:

The *memra* was highly personified (e.g., *Isaiah 9:8, 45:23, 55:10; Psalm 147:15*)

When the word of God came to a particular prophet (*Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1*) it challenged the prophet to accept the word; when he accepted it it impelled him to go forth and give it to others and it became the word that judged men.

The *memra* was a means of making a covenant (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Exodus 34:10*).

The word was is described in the OT as a light for men (*Ps 154:105, 103*)

The *memra* was life-giving (e.g., *Dt 32:46-47*)

For the Psalmist the *memra* has the power to heal people (e.g., *Ps 107:20*)

Salvation was by means of the *memra* (e.g., *Wis 16:26*)

The revelation of God to his people came through the *memra* as His agent (e.g., *Genesis 15:1; Ezekiel 1:3*)

The *memra* was an agent of creation (e.g, *Psalm 33:6; Is 55:10-11; Ws 9:1*). In *Is 40:11* God says, "*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty. Rather it shall accomplish what I want and prosper in the things for which I sent it.*"

The *memra* was bearer of the judgment of God (*Wis 18:15; Hab 3:5*)

The *memra* was the agent of the theophany, or visible manifestations of God's presence (*Gen 3:2*). John uses this thought (*Jn 1:14*) in the use of the term "dwelling", which loses something in the translation. The Greek literally reads "pitched his tent/tabernacle", describing the place of God's presence among His chosen people. The Greek word for dwelling uses the same/near equivalent consonance sounds as the Aramaic work, *Shekinah*, meaning theophany.

From the opening Prologue of *John* we see the portrait of Jesus as the fulfillment of all of these Targuminic themes. Jesus is personified (*vv. 1-2*), the agent of God and creation (*v.3*), the life-giver

(v.4), the source of life and knowledge (vv.4-5), the maker of covenants (v.12), the means of salvation (v.16), the same as God and different (God and human natures), and the visible presence of God on earth.

The short answer to the question “How was Jesus sent in order that we be sent?” Is to be “*memra*” for others in your life.

Receive the Holy Spirit

This coming Sunday is [Pentecost](#) with the gospel reading taken from the Gospel of John. John 20:21–22 form a key passage in Johannine theology. The disciples receive the Holy Spirit at this second coming of Jesus: the *eschaton*, the final era, is now; future is present. In 7:39, the Spirit had not yet been given, since Jesus was not yet glorified. On the cross, Jesus, manifesting the nature of God, which is love, delivers over the Spirit (19:30), symbolized immediately afterward by the flow of the sacramental symbols of blood and water. And now, at his first encounter with the believing community, he breathes the Spirit again as he celebrates the re-creation of God’s people. Simultaneously, he sends out these disciples just as the Father had sent him (v. 21). His mission becomes theirs; his work is placed in their hands. And that mission, that work, is to manifest God who is love in their words and deeds. Through them now, enlivened by the Spirit, will the presence of God become known and seen and felt in the world. .

Although the text does not use *parakletos*, there is unanimity among commentators that the *Holy Spirit* is the Advocate promised in the Farewell Discourse of the Fourth Gospel. That discourse had outlined the role the Advocate/Holy Spirit would play in relation to the disciples. The Holy Spirit will:

- be recognized by the disciples (14:17)
- teach the disciples everything (14:26)
- guide the disciples along the way of all truth (16:13)
- take what belongs to the Jesus and declare it to the disciples (16:14)
- glorify Jesus (16:14)
- bear witness to Jesus in order that the disciples will also bear witness to Jesus (15:26-27)
- remind the disciples of all that Jesus told them (14:26)

Fr. Raymond Brown nuances these promises in that the *parakletos* describes that aspect of the Holy Spirit which is specifically concerned with witness so that a believer is assured of all the power needed to be witness. Brown [1139-43] makes a case that the full power of the Holy Spirit manifests in other ways not connected to the witness of the person/community – e.g. baptismal regeneration, sacramental forgiveness of sins, and gifts that build up the community.

Thus Jesus’ words about sending his disciples as the Father sent him applied immediately to the apostles both with respect to Christian mission and to them in their specific roles/gifts within the church. It is in Baptism that all believers are privileged to share in this Mission in so far as they all are recipients of the Spirit whom he bequeathed to his disciples (see 20:22). With the particular enabling that Spirit provides, each plays a part in continuing the work and witness of Jesus. What is clear in text such as 1 Cor 12:3-12 (the second reading on Pentecost Sunday, Year A) – to one a particular gift is given, to another, another gift – all from the same spirit.

Whose sins you forgive

This coming Sunday is [Pentecost](#) with the gospel reading taken from the Gospel of John. Many scholars see a parallel between John 20:23 and Matthew 18:18: “*Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*” The parallel becomes clearer when we know that the words “forgive” in John 20:23 are the Greek words *aphiēmi* and *krateō* which mean “send away” and “hold” respectively [EDNT 2:314]. But even

with the parallels aside, the meaning, extent and exercise of the Matthean and Johannine powers has been a source of division with the post-Reformation Christian community.

The Council of Trent rejected the proposal that this power to forgive sins was offered to each of Christ's faithful – something one often sees in commentaries from a Reformed perspective. The Catholic Church has always held that the power to forgive sin was to be understood as that ministry to which the ordained minister was called; something it had maintained as the teaching of the church and only formally declared at Trent when it was challenged by the Reformers. As Fr. Brown notes [1041] this is not a debate that can be settled solely on exegetical grounds – nor does the Catholic Church propose such a solution. The Church looks to Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

The Church has also looked at Jesus' own action toward sin as expressed in John. In 9:39-41 Jesus says that he came into the world for judgment; to enable some to see and to cause blindness for others. Deliberate blindness means remaining in sin; and, implicitly, willingness to see results in being delivered from sin." [Brown, 1042] So as Jesus was sent into the world, so too the apostles and their successors to exercise discriminating judgment between good and evil. This idea of the apostles as agents of discriminating judgment is reinforced by the idea that the Advocate/paraclete is working through the apostles as an avenue of the outpouring of the Spirit that cleanses people and begets within them new life. All-in-all this passage is a declaratory statement that the core of Jesus' ministry, forgiveness of sin and the restoration of right relationship, continues within the community generally, but in specific sacramental ministries in the particular sense.

This gospel passage makes clear that there is a strong relationship between the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit – and Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit points to the Resurrection as the start, the source and the reason for mission. As Jesus has been sent, so too are we sent on mission. Those are the final words of the celebration of the Mass: *Ita missa est* – Go! [the church] is mission!