

Mass of Holy Spirit

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

September 8, 2008 | St. Ignatius Church

Readings: Ephesians 2:17-22; Luke 4:16-21

The first reading tells us that Jesus spoke peace to “those who were far off” and “those who were near.” In a word, Jesus spoke peace to “everyone.” In acknowledging that this message of peace is for everyone, the reading underscores the fact that we are all “fellow citizens” with no strangers among us and all members of “the household of God.” God’s house is not an architectural artifact, such as a church, mosque or synagogue, but a construct of “living stones,” of people who share the message of peace that Jesus preached near and far. What holds God’s house together — the mortar, if you will — is the Spirit of God who dwells within every human heart and holds us all together in peace. Those who speak peace, whatever their religious convictions, are members of God’s household and agents of God’s Spirit.

This is the Spirit we invoke at this liturgy, not an exclusive possession of the Catholic tradition, but the universal voice of God that speaks peace in every person and culture.

In his short story, *Luxurious Hearses*, the African Jesuit Uwem Akpan writes about a young boy named Jubril who is fleeing tribal and religious riots in Northern Nigeria. Jubril is Muslim and was unexpectedly saved from a rampaging mob by a Christian named Mallam Abdullah. Jubril is on a bus overcrowded with fleeing Christians of various denominations who would doubtless do him violence if they knew he was Muslim. The author drops the reader into this cauldron boiling over with the deadly consequences of ethnic, religious, and tribal conflict.

Akpan writes:

Having lived through the ordeal in Mallam Abdullah’s house and having just heard the testimony of Yohanna about the generous southern Christians, Jubril felt that with heroic people like this, his nation would rise above all types of divisiveness. Instinctively, in his yearning for consolation, he envisioned the different peoples of his own country at a deep, primordial level, where one’s life was irreversibly connected to one’s neighbor’s, like a child to its mother’s. [169]

The author continues:

The frightened bus passengers had now turned inward for strength, and peace reigned among the different religions on the bus. Everybody seemed tired of screaming about their god in someone else’s face.

For those of us who read *Three Cups of Tea*, Jubril’s fictional capacity to envision people linked together at a deep primordial level is evidenced in real life by the Balti villagers of Korphe. When Greg Mortenson staggered into their village, they did not see stranger,

white person, American or Christian — they saw an exhausted, depleted, emaciated, suffering, fellow human being and they took care of him. He, in turn, saw in 84 kids writing with sticks in the dirt not illiterate, dirty, indigenous and abjectly poor, but children hungry to learn, to know and to understand, children famished for the freedom that education offers. If those Balti villagers were “good news for the poor” sojourner; Greg Mortenson “proclaimed liberty” to those held captive by ignorance. Both experienced the “recovery of sight” that frees us to see beyond the stereotypes and caricatures that blind us to the deeply rooted desires and dreams we share with Muslims, undocumented immigrants, fundamentalist evangelicals, gays, creationists, gang bangers, nerds, jocks, whomever.

The energy and impetus to do what those villagers did and what Greg Mortenson does — to speak peace amidst the dissonance, the rancor, the divisiveness and mistrust that plague us individually and as a nation is the Spirit of God at work in every person and culture. It is that simple. When we find ourselves able to rise above all types of divisiveness; when we find ourselves able to stand with the weak and the vulnerable; when we find ourselves in solidarity with men and women different from us, then, whether we acknowledge it or not, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us and is sending us as surely as that Spirit was upon Jesus and sent Him.

Today, I ask that together we name and celebrate as God’s Holy Spirit that force which impels us to acknowledge that we are as tightly tied to one another as a child is to her mother. Let us together acknowledge that God’s Spirit speaks peace to you and me, and pray that the same Spirit rather than some less noble force guides us through this year. Today, we amplify the volume of the voice within us that speaks peace, so that it is not shouted down by other self-serving voices that fill our airwaves.

We are all frightened passengers on this bus known as planet Earth. It is past time for us to stop screaming in each other’s faces. Let this be a moment for us, like those fictional passengers, to turn inward and find that strength that sends us out as speakers of peace and builders of God’s house here on Earth.

And so we conclude with the traditional prayer for this liturgy: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people, enkindle in us the fire of your love that, together, we may remake the face of this earth.