

Pentecost 10

There is a legend which says that once Michelangelo had finished carving his statue of Moses, he stepped back from it and said: “Speak, Moses.” It was that good. It was that real even for the man who had created it. And it is true: words are what make us real. We live in a world of words. Words, words, words. Imagine a day without words. Imagine the people you love unable to speak to you. That is what happens in death. We stare at the deceased person’s body, we hear his or her voice in our memory, but we know that all the words which this person will ever speak have already been spoken. A poet—I believe it was Edna St. Vincent Millay—wrote these words about a loved one who had just died: “All your lovely words are spoken. Once the golden box is broken, beats the golden bird no more.”

But there are words and there are words. Some words are precious, some are ordinary. Some words suffer from inflation. Think of the overworked and therefore undervalued word love. Think of how the same words can change their meaning because of the context in which they are used. “I’ve had enough,” a sick person says to a kind caretaker who is feeding him. A wife uses the same words to

address her husband who has been unfaithful to her many times over.

Yes, words are the world in which we live. They are the tools we use to construct a world for ourselves. How does our world look today? Or more accurately: How does our world sound today? Is it one of frustration and anger? Is it one of deception? Or is it one of joy and peace and truth? If it is the latter, then we know what shape our minds and hearts are in, for words express our minds and hearts. When our minds and hearts are joyful and peaceful and true, they will of necessity create a world of true, peaceful and joyful words.

But sometimes words are not enough. They cannot bring to expression all that we feel and understand. Then we have to do one of two things: we have to dispense with them altogether and be quiet, or we have to pile up many words to express what seems to be beyond expression. And these many words will probably be poetic words, that is, words which can evoke a feeling, perhaps an image, in our minds and hearts.

That is what this sequence for Pentecost does. To describe the Holy Spirit, it resorts to words and phrases which can move our

hearts. It calls to the Spirit as we would call to a beloved: “Come.” It gives the Spirit different titles: Father of the poor, giver of gifts, light of hearts, the best of consolers, the sweet guest of the soul, etc.

But some people are not very poetic and want all this flowery language to be translated into something concrete, something which they can understand. “What is the Holy Spirit,” they ask, “and how can it be recognized? And what does it mean to live in it?” For such people St. Paul comes to the rescue. Here is what he wrote to the Galatians: “Live in accord with the spirit and you will not yield to the cravings of the flesh. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity. Since we live by the spirit, let us follow the spirit’s lead.” That is concrete and clear, is it not?

We can taste the Spirit by taking the temperature of the mental and verbal world in which we live. If our world is characterized by the good traits which Paul has enumerated, we are living in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has descended upon us, and all is well. If not, we have to plead with the Spirit to help us build a new world for ourselves, a world of words which express a mind and heart which are at peace and are joyful and seek what is real and true.