

Pentecost Sunday, 9th June 2019

“Credo in [...] unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam (I believe in [...] one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church)”. Today, we celebrate of course the beginnings of the Church. And since we believe that she is, in those words of the Creed, “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”, we believe that she has always been so, even from the very beginning at Pentecost.

This becomes clear when we read through the story in the Acts of the Apostles, as we indeed did in today’s Epistle. We are told that “they were all together in one place” (Ac 2:1). The Church first needs to be “one”, to be united “together”, so that the Church can consequently grow organically as a single unit, as it were. The call and choice of Christ had brought the disciples “all together in one place”, in that same Upper Room in which he had personally appeared to them after his Resurrection. Now the Holy Spirit, “the unity of the Spirit” (to employ that phrase of St Paul to the Ephesians, 4:3, and also employed by us in our prayers: *“in unitate Spiritus Sancti”*), was coming to cement their unity.

“And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a mighty wind coming” (Ac 2:2). The Spirit, naturally difficult for the author of the Acts of the Apostles to describe properly, comes “from heaven”, comes down from God and is God. He is indeed the Holy Spirit, which in Semitic languages, including Aramaic, is expressed instead as the ‘Spirit of holiness’. It is the Spirit who therefore makes us holy; who indeed makes the

Church holy: the “one holy [...] Church” (*Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*).



The “one holy [...] Church” – but there is still a bit missing: “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”. As with the first two, “one” and “holy”, the other two, “catholic and apostolic”, are also related in some way to the Holy Spirit. Let us continue our reading of the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: “and it filled the whole house where they were sitting” (Ac 2:2). The Spirit “filled the whole house” – for “whole” St Luke has here ὅλον, a Greek word which actually forms part of the word καθολικός (‘catholic’), meaning ‘according to the whole’, namely ‘universal’.

I realise that simply filling a “house” in Jerusalem, even if “the whole house”, is not especially universal in its implications; yet we heard in today’s Introit, from the book of

Wisdom, that: “the Spirit of the Lord hath filled the whole world (*Spiritus Domini replevit orbem terrarum*)” (Ws 1:7). The Holy Spirit is therefore himself, by his very nature, truly universal, indeed catholic (with a small ‘c’ that is). Although it was impossible for the Church to immediately be a worldwide organisation as such when the Spirit came that Pentecost, since the disciples were still locked away in the Upper Room, “there were”, nevertheless (to get back to the story), “dwelling at Jerusalem, Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven” (Ac 2:5).

If the Church was therefore unable as yet to go out into all the world, all the world, “every nation under heaven”, could still come to the Church: “the multitude came together, and were confounded in mind, because that every man heard them speak in his own tongue. And they were all amazed, and wondered, saying: Behold, are not all these, that speak, Galileans?” (Ac 2:6-7). We might wonder, in our turn, why it was that “the multitude” recognised the disciples as Galileans: despite their speaking “with divers tongues” (Ac 2:4), did they still speak with a distinctive Galilean accent?! We certainly know that St Peter had an accent, since it was one of the things which gave him away while he warmed himself at the house of the high priest: “Surely thou also art one of them; for even thy speech doth discover thee” (Mt 26:73).

From a group composed, it would seem, completely of persons from Galilee, a provincial part of a remote part of a

relatively far-flung Roman Empire, the Church instantly grew on the day in which the Holy Spirit came into an international community; given that a number of “the multitude” (Ac 2:6) were subsequently won over by St Peter and the other apostles: the Church growing from “about an hundred and twenty” (Ac 1:15) Galileans into “about three thousand souls” (Ac 2:41) “out of every nation under heaven” (Ac 2:5). The Church has, therefore, from the very day of its birth been “catholic” (with a little or indeed big ‘C’!).

The apostles preaching at Pentecost to their international audience reveals the final of the four: “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (*Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*). Not simply because the Church was here made up of the twelve apostles (St Matthias having already replaced Judas), but also because the Church was being “apostolic” in the true sense of the word: missionary (the Greek ἀπόστολος meaning ‘messenger’). And so the apostles were being, just that, ‘apostles’, ‘messengers’ of the Good News, as they proclaimed the message of Christ on that Pentecost in Jerusalem.

“*Credo in [...] unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam* (I believe in [...] one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church)”. I believe the Church has always been, and indeed always will be, all four of these things, precisely because “I believe [...] in the Holy Ghost (*Credo [...] in Spiritum Sanctum*) [...]”, with whom she continues, despite everything in her past and present, to be filled (cf. Ac 2:4).