

Pentecost

Memorial Day recalls the sacrifice of Americans who died for our freedom. This long weekend begins the summer months when we slip into vacation mode, led by the spirit of children set free from the more burdensome tasks associated with school. Yet even they learn through Memorial Day that freedom comes at a price, that one person's sacrifice leads to another person's joy.

This year Memorial Day weekend coincides with Pentecost, which brings to fulfillment the fifty days of Easter Time. Good Friday is a kind of Memorial Day when Jesus Christ sacrificed his life so that we might have joy in his resurrection.

This promise of new life hides within today's responsorial. Psalm 104 praises God for all the wonders of creation: the earth, the sea and the sky; plants and animals; valleys and mountains that point toward the Lord; the sun and moon marking the times that God set in place. If you ever want to praise God for the wonders of nature that surround you, Psalm 104 will give you words.

Near the end, though, it turns on a dark reminder of the end to the glorious life that plants, animals and humans receive. One verse says to God, "You take away their breath, they die, returning to the dust from which they came." But then, restoring its theme of joyfulness, the psalm immediately continues: "You send forth your spirit, and they are created, and you renew the face of the earth." Death is part of life, but new life is also part of life. Psalm 104 describes this new birth as God sending forth his spirit into the world. Recall from the Book of Genesis how God breathed life into the nostrils of the new human being he had formed from the dust (2:7). This psalm says God does that again and again.

St. Paul used the word "spirit" in a variety of ways, often referring to the Holy Spirit, but also to the human spirit. For example, at the end of his letters, he sometimes prays for the persons who read them, writing, "May the Lord be with your spirit." We echo this frequently during the Mass when the priest or deacon says, "The Lord be with you," and you respond, "And with your spirit." The dialogue implies that we all have a human spirit along with a human soul and body, and we are praying that the Lord will be with our spirit.

On Pentecost, the refrain we sing for our responsorial makes an even bolder prayer: "Lord, send out your Spirit." We're not just praying that the Lord will accompany our human spirit, but that he would send his own Holy Spirit to the earth again.

That Holy Spirit is the One who can renew the face of the earth, bringing new life around us and within us. The Spirit fulfills a Memorial Day promise: the sacrifices of the past lead to the joys of the present. The Spirit encourages us to sacrifice so that the people we love may enjoy newness of life.

Sometimes we have not opened our human hearts to let the Lord be with our spirit. Instead, selfishness is with our spirit. Impatience is with our spirit. Prejudice is with our spirit. Anger is with our spirit. On Pentecost we want more than having the Lord be with our spirit. We want God to send forth his own Spirit to renew the face of the earth, beginning with each of us. That Spirit strengthens us to sacrifice so that others might have joy.

Sunday, May 28, 2023