

Feast of Pentecost 2014

The French writer Jean-Paul Sartre wanted to explore the agony of many human beings who feel trapped in the midst of life. He wrote a play about hell, and gave it a suitable title: *No Exit*. Three people arrive in hell, which consists of a large sitting room with mirrors around the walls. There is no exit in the room, and no interval in the play. The three characters are on stage all the time since they are condemned to spend eternity together without leaving the room.

They pass the time reflecting on what has happened in the past, but they cannot use that to change their lives now. As they remain locked within the room, the final line of the play is “Let’s go !” But they can go nowhere. For them hell is being tied to a past and a present that cannot be changed. They have no prospect of a future that is different from the present time. All they have is mirrors. And that’s hell !!

It’s one thing to be locked in a room with no exit. It’s another thing *to lock yourself* in a room because you believe that the world beyond the door is hostile, and that if you leave the room you will face certain death. The world may not get into your room, but neither can you get out. In today’s Gospel this is the scene John writes to depict the condition of the disciples following the death of Jesus. Since the crucifixion they have been bunched together behind locked doors. They have locked themselves in: this is an assembly that fear has gathered together. They are in a room that just mirrors their fears and provides no way out for them. For these disciples, it must have been hell.

I suppose some of you think that priests and other religious are pretty much “together” – confident about their faith and their mission and able to fairly easily work through the difficulties and challenges of life. I can tell you it isn’t so. Recently I re-read a part of my personal journal and was powerfully reminded of a particularly difficult time in my life. Just now I find it hard to believe how depressed I really was – but what I wrote was the truth about how I was feeling and I do remember feeling that life was only going to get worse.

However the evangelist John shows us that there *is* an exit from this paralyzing fear – through the peace that Jesus brings. Into this room of

trapped people, Jesus comes with peace. He breathes the Holy Spirit on his disheartened followers. As the risen Jesus breathes on them, the disciples breathe *in* the Holy Spirit. For these disciples who were nearly dead with fear, this really is a breath of life. The Holy Spirit is the breath they take at Pentecost, the breath that gives them all new heart.

In my own life what happened was that some very “Spirit-filled” people came into my story. With this group of seven or eight people – over a couple of years the personnel changed a little – we formed a mixed community of priests, religious and lay people, male and female. We lived in several houses over a couple of parishes, but came together regularly for shared prayer, spiritual direction, and of course regular meals and social activities. We were challenged and we were changed. In time we all gradually went our various ways, and we meet only rarely. But I think that even now we all recognize that this was a graced time. What was becoming perhaps the worst time of my life became my Pentecost.

Have you ever had something like that happen to you?... where something –or someone – has really changed you? Do we really value those experiences and recognize the working of the Spirit in life?

The same Spirit of God is in our midst here. As St. Paul says, it is the same Spirit “working in all sorts of ways in different people.” The Spirit is not shy of difference, but is free to deal with people as individuals: there is a variety of gifts. It’s not that our differences are smothered by the Spirit; rather our differences are funded by the Spirit who works not to standardize everyone to factory proportions, but to make variety his mark. That’s why the Church should always strive for unity, not uniformity, in its members.

Part of our own task is to discover how the Spirit has gifted us in individual ways, and to appreciate the Spirit’s different gifts in other people. Hell is where everyone is the same because nobody has a future different from the present. There is no variety of gifts in hell. But the Spirit of God opposes hellish hopelessness. Today we are all gathered in the one room. Here. And there is an exit. But before we say “let’s go” we ask the Spirit to awaken us to the gifts with which he has graced us, and we thank him for their variety. When we do that we can all go in peace.

