

Second Reading — Pentecost, Holy Trinity, Corpus Christi : Year B, 2021

On these great feasts that come after the end of Easter Season and lead us into Ordinary Time, the second readings include passages from Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans, and from the Letter to the Hebrews.

The second reading for each of the feasts has been chosen to deepen our understanding of God's revelation and the essential Christian truths being celebrated in the feast.

Main Themes for the Feasts

We can think of these feasts as further aspects of the revelation of God among us, complementing what is already revealed to us in the feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, Holy Week and the Ascension. Here the focus is on the mission given to the disciples and the infant Church community, and the nature of God's continuing presence among those who follow Jesus and go out to be witnesses in his name.

The feast of Pentecost is one of great drama and energy: the Spirit of God fills the universe and almost consumes the apostles, signifying the birth of the Church and the salvation for all in Jesus Christ.

We can see the Most Holy Trinity as the feast that celebrates the 'face' with which God is actually revealed to us; not God as remote or from heights far beyond us but God living amongst us. It is Jesus himself who revealed the Father to us and who promised us the Holy Spirit as a continuing support and advocate for each person who turns to God.

Like the feast of the Holy Trinity, the feast of The Body and Blood of Christ or *Corpus Christi*, leads us towards a deeper understanding of the mystery of Jesus' living presence among us. In this feast we celebrate and give thanks that, through consuming the Eucharist, our own bodies become intimately connected to the risen Christ and can thus be lifted up with him to divine life.

Pentecost Sunday, Galatians 5:16–25

As Paul comes towards the end of this letter, with powerful language he stresses the freedom of those who truly live in the Spirit. This is not a freedom to be self-indulgent; that is the life of the flesh. Instead, the freedom of those who live in the Spirit is the freedom to be different and to develop virtues that express justice and love in community, which life lived in the flesh destroys.

The Most Holy Trinity, Romans 8:14–17

Through the Spirit we are brought into the closest intimacy with God, as adopted children who can speak to God in the same way a child speaks to a parent. As God's adopted ones, we are also 'heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory'.

The Body and Blood of Christ, Hebrews 9:11–15

This is a challenging reading for the modern mind to grapple with. Only on the Day of Atonement could the high priest go into the Holy of Holies. There he sprinkled animal blood to take away his sins and the sins of the people, to start the year anew before God. By contrast, Hebrews tells us that Christ's sacrifice, in his own blood, purifies us once and for all before God. Christ's sacrifice cancels sins under the previous imperfect covenant and brings us into a new covenant so we may receive 'an eternal inheritance'.

Background to the Readings

Paul had preached the Good News in north and central Galatia about 50 and 54 AD, and his short but powerful *Letter to the Galatians* seems to have been written from Ephesus soon after, to those predominately Gentile converts. This makes it one of his earliest writings. Paul had not insisted that the Galatians follow the Law or that the males be circumcised, as had happened in some other communities. However, after Paul left, Christians of Jewish origin arrived. They insisted that Gentile converts also had to observe the Jewish Law. Paul objected strongly and set out to defend the truth of the gospel he had proclaimed when he was with them, sometimes with great emotion. Using his own faith journey as an example, Paul urges them to maintain their faith in Jesus, to preserve their freedom, and to live in the Spirit.

Paul's *Letter to the Romans* is the longest and the most studied of Paul's letters as it is regarded as the most important theologically. The key questions of justification and the Law are similar to those in *Galatians* but here they are more fully reasoned. Paul wrote from near Corinth about 56/57 A.D., addressing the letter mainly to Gentile Christians but with an awareness of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem as well. Some people in Rome knew him but he had not founded this community so his tone is cautious as he seeks to persuade his audience of the truth of his preaching to the Gentiles.

The Letter to the Hebrews is regarded as a brilliant sermon of great literary merit. Its key point is that Christ is both the perfect sacrifice for sins and the priest who offers himself as a sacrifice; He died for us and for our sins. The author is not known but he had a sophisticated knowledge of the Old Testament in Greek and understood Jewish biblical interpretation techniques. He was probably writing to Jewish Christians, possibly in Rome, sometime from the early 50s to the late 60s in the first century A.D.

Further Reading

Raymond E Brown S.S., *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*. Chapters 27–32: A Once-and-Coming Christ at Pentecost. Liturgical Press

Raymond E Brown S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Chapter 19, Letter to the Galatians; Chapter 24, Letter to the Romans; Chapter 32, Letter (Epistle) to the Hebrews. Doubleday

Brendan Byrne S.J., *Galatians and Romans*. Liturgical Press

David N Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Eerdmans

Daniel J Harrington S.J., *The Letter to the Hebrews*. Vol 11, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

Robert J Karris O.F.M., *Galatians and Romans*. Vol 6, New Testament, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Liturgical Press

John J Pilch, *The Cultural World of the Apostles*. The Second Reading, Year by Year. Year B. Liturgical Press