

As students complete another school year, we celebrate Pentecost, a time to reflect on the Holy Spirit, a kind of graduation gift given by Jesus to his disciples and to all of us. The disciples have travelled with Jesus many, many miles and have overcome countless obstacles, healed the sick, and spread the gospel. They accomplished all this with the help of their teacher, their Rabi Jesus and his constant guidance. Now Jesus is returning to the Father, but before he goes, He gives the gift of the Holy Spirit. This gift is like a BACKPACK with essential items required to continue the Christ's mission. As our psalm says, "Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth." Today we explore what's inside the spiritual backpack and how it applies to OUR journey to continue the mission.

Imagine the backpack has the words "Holy Spirit" embroidered on the outside, but what does it mean? The word "spirit" comes from the Latin word "spiritus" or "breath." Just as each breath gives us life-giving oxygen, the Holy Spirit is essential to our spiritual life, leading us to an eternal life with our Father in Heaven.

Saint Cyril, a Bishop of Jerusalem during the fourth century, describes the Holy Spirit in terms used by Jesus as he spoke to the woman at the well. Jesus said, "I will give you living water," this water is the Holy Spirit. St Cyril says, "Water comes down from heaven as rain, and although it is always the same in itself, it produces many different effects, one in the palm tree, another in the vine and so on throughout the whole of creation. The Holy Spirit strengthens one man's self-control, shows another how to help the poor, teaches another to fast, and trains another for martyrdom." Our second reading supports this theme saying we each have different spiritual gifts, forms of service, and workings, but the same spirit, the same Lord, and the same God, who produces all of them in everyone.

How might we feel when we put on the Holy Spirit backpack? First, we should find peace. In the gospel Jesus appears to the disciples who've locked themselves up in room for fear of the Jews. Jesus says, "Peace be with you." These are not just words, but through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus imparts a PEACE on the disciples and on all of us.

What makes peace possible are the gifts associated with the Holy Spirit. Identified by St Thomas Aquinas, they fall into two groups, "knowing" and "following" God. The "knowing" gifts include: wisdom, understanding, knowledge and council and they give us the insight to KNOW God and His will for our lives. These gifts focus on knowing "divine things," understanding how to read our hearts to discern the truth, allowing God to counsel us, and keep us from wandering from the straight path of justice. We pull these gifts from the backpack to make major and minor life decisions with the peace of knowing the Holy Spirit will guide us.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit associated with "following" include fortitude, piety, and Fear of God. They give us the firmness of mind to avoid evil, like Jesus during his 40 days in the desert, remaining strong in the face of temptation. In piety we revere and honor God as a father and maintain that relationship through prayer. Finally, the Fear of God, is not a fear of punishment, but maintaining a sense of awe at His work of creation and our role in maintaining it. We live these Holy Spirit gifts of "following" through our Christian lives of loving one another, loving God, and loving ourselves.

We see an example of the Holy Spirit's work in today's reading from Acts. The Apostles are, "Filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in their own tongues of the mighty acts of God." They've moved from hiding in fear to gathering with the people and declaring their faith to the whole world. The apostles, especially Peter who denied Jesus three times, have let the Holy Spirit rain down upon them, taking away their past sins, and making them a new creation, ready to serve our Lord and king! The Holy Spirit backpack is ready for us to do the same.

How does the gift of the Holy Spirit play out in our everyday lives? For me, I see it most in ministry. At any given time 5 to 15 couples are preparing for the sacrament of marriage at St James. Each couple chooses a mentor couple, from a group of St. James volunteers, and they get to know each other through a program called, "Witness to Love." Biographies of the mentees, including a family photo, are sent to each engaged couple to make their selection. Time and time again, I see the Holy Spirit working to create the perfect match between couples and their mentors. I know this because I talk to both the engaged and mentor couples, and most of the time, they not only like each other, but they begin to need each other. Years after the wedding, I get texts on my phone with photos of the now-married couples having dinner with their mentors. I even have a couple who is doing weekly ministry with their mentors right here at St James. I have to believe this lifetime friendship between total strangers is all the work of the Holy Spirit.

Where else should we look for the Holy Spirit in our lives? Wherever the mission of God's love is active in the world, in our communities, and in our individual lives. Wherever peace is sewn to overcome fear, and wherever Faith accepts the Father's will, we will experience the Holy Spirit.

As a deacon, I have this small role during the mass to send you out into the world. I'd like to add this to my sending, "Happy Pentecost! Holy Spirit backpacks are available in the back of the Church after mass. Spiritual backpacks of course... Strap one on and together we will sing, Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth."