



6th Sunday of Easter



Date: Sunday, May 21, 2017 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Acts 8:5–8, 14–17

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 66:1–7, 16, 20 | **Response:** Psalm 66:1

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:15–18

Gospel Acclamation: John 14:23

Gospel Reading: John 14:15–21

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

I'd like today to talk about three things: firstly, the Holy Spirit, secondly, a sign of that Spirit present in our country this week. And thirdly, I'd like to briefly say something about Catholic schools which you may have noticed from some of the children wearing their school uniforms this morning, is being celebrated today.

In the first reading we continue to hear from the Acts of the Apostles and see Philip fulfilling a prophecy of Jesus that the Good News would be preached in Samaria. Samaria was home to the Samaritans – the neighbours of the Jewish people who they thought were foreigners and heretics. Given their inherent opposition to each other, Philip is being very bold in entering ‘enemy territory’ to preach the Word of God. So it is interesting to see here the unity with which the message of Jesus Christ was received. They could not argue with the truth that was demonstrated before their very eyes. Remember we read that the multitudes with one accord heeded Philip, and there was much joy in that city. Joy is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the First Reading we see the early sacrament of confirmation, where they laid hands on them and received the Holy Spirit, thus incorporating the Samaritans from Samaria into the early Church, by giving the Spirit of Joy, and sharing with them the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Peter teaches in the second reading that believers in Jesus must “always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pet 3:15). Peter imagines a situation of open hostility to the Gospel in which Christians are being made to suffer for doing good. But however hostility to the

Gospel is couched, it must be met with bold witness, inspired by the Spirit of truth. That is what Philip did in going to Samaria. And That is another characteristic of the Holy Spirit. Truth. The Holy Spirit does not lie. That is the preserve of the Evil Spirit, whom, among his many titles, is called the Prince of Lies. This Spirit of Truth is often seen in the gifts of Knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

In today's Gospel Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit. He says "I will not leave you desolate... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever." This Counselor is the Holy Spirit, a gift from the Father and the Son to us so that we are never alone.

The Holy Spirit offers other gifts or signs of her presence: counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. And when the Holy Spirit is present in our lives we see it in the fruits of: charity, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity. We know that when we lack these in our lives, when we are unkind, not at ease, impatient, jealous, angry, etc., we need only ask God for the grace to see His Spirit, and invite the Holy Spirit back into our lives. Sometimes this can be done by taking a moment to pray, or to say sorry. Sometimes one might need sacramental grace as well – but don't underestimate your own prayers. As I often share in the confessional, the evil spirit is constantly working against the Holy Spirit. Our choice as Christians is to learn to listen for and to the Holy Spirit. The fruits of the evil spirit are despair, a desire to compare, and to lie. We need to ground ourselves in the joy and truth of the Holy Spirit. We might ask ourselves where is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives today? Where is the Holy Spirit in the life of our country today? Are our lives characterized by the joy, wisdom and understanding of the Holy Spirit?

This brings me to my second point, because I think for those of us who were looking for the Holy Spirit this week, we may have glimpsed it in the announcement by the South African Council of Churches on Thursday about their 'unburdening report'. It is the first part of a three-part process, of See-Judge-Act. Catholics are, I'm sure, familiar with this classical method of pastoral discernment. As Bishop Malusi said on Thursday, one cannot unsee what one has seen.

The corruption in our country has reached dangerous levels. In fact, the SACC is asking itself the question, at what point does the Church withdraw moral legitimacy from a democratically elected government? Because a legitimate government should be a steward not a plunderer. This is too complex a topic to try to summarise here – but for those of you who are interested, I have placed the presentation that was given at Regina Mundi Catholic Church in Soweto on our website and I strongly encourage you all to inform yourselves. Print it out, read it, share it with friends and co-workers. Discuss it as a family. Because part of the way the Spirit works in the world is that it opens our eyes and allows us to see again – to see Christ, and Christ suffering in the poor, who are really the ones hurt the most by all of this. I'm sure we'll be hearing more about the report's findings, and what the government will do about it, in the coming weeks.

Thirdly, allow me to say something about our Catholic School system. To our learners and teachers who build the communities of love and support that we so desire in our catholic schools; but also to the parents who sit on parent bodies, governing boards, help at tuck-shops or do anything to help our catholic schools. In fact, we should thank parents more often! But for what everyone does for the Catholic School System, thank you!

As you know – the Catholic Church has a proud history and tradition of educating people as best she can. She does this because she believes in truth. Faith and science, or rather Faith and Knowledge in all its forms, are not opposed. Because all comes from God. But there is another reason – a reason that I think is being overlooked today. The Catholic Church wants all members of the Church to develop their free will and their conscience so that they might freely, joyfully and gratefully experience the awe in God's creating, and develop and deepen the loving relationship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit with each and every person. The Church knows that to do that well, for a human being to flourish, human beings, boys and girls, need to be educated. We have a serious education crisis in our country. And it begins at the earliest of ages. Much has been written about the legacy of the Bantu education project and so we cannot easily or quickly place blame – but we must work for a solution. We all know that in Catholic Schools we try to impart values. That's not to say other schools don't impart values, or that those values are immediately embraced – but I like to think the values in a Catholic education are more universal and open to the full breadth of humanity, and are not limited to the more narrow nationalistic

or party-political tendencies. I know for example, that a recently returned presidential candidate bemoaned that children going to certain schools were critical – well – I think that’s a good thing. Because it shows that where values are lacking, there needs to be a call to return to those values. Not a call to change the instruction so that the lack of values is no longer a concern. We should all guard against any such debasement of values and standards. In fact against the lessening of our expectations. In crucial moments we must demand more, not less.

I hope that in the Catholic Schools, this see-judge-act method I mentioned earlier is taught, so that the youth of tomorrow will not be easily manipulated by lies and the work of the Evil Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always a wonderful guide in making decisions. My prayer is that at school, alongside all the other important things children learn, they will be taught how to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible so that they might know how to make good decisions. And these decisions need not be difficult – in fact, for the values to take root and to shape one’s character, they in fact need to be very simple and mundane. In Catholic Schools we should celebrate friendship, faith and family. Parents should always encourage their children to actively decide to be friends with the lonely, to refuse to allow bullying to take place in school, or to stand up for the weak and the persecuted. And children, you don’t need to wait to hear from your parents – in fact, very often the way you love, the way you are kind and generous, the way you respond to the Holy Spirit – with such spontaneity and simplicity and innocence, actually helps your parents to learn from you – or more accurately to re-learn what has been forgotten. So please let your children play. Not on the computer, but in relationship with each other – because that is where so much of these fruits, such as joy, peace, forgiveness and understanding are made visible and real for them.

So let’s give thanks to God for our Catholic Schools. For all the educators, teachers, administrators, parents, learners, sports coaches, boarding masters, volunteers and benefactors. Let us continue to pray that we educate every child no matter their background or ability, so that they might flourish and come to know the God who loves them.

Let’s pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide leaders in our country, and offer good example to all who are relying on them. We cannot un-see what we have seen. We cannot lose hope at this crucial moment. Liars and those taken

over by the guiles of the evil spirit will never withstand the truth, because it is the truth that will set us free.

Let us pray for our leaders, for our judges, for our journalists, for our civil servants, and for all who contribute to the economy and labour to keep the seventh commandment. Let us pray for all who work for the common good – that their hearts and minds might be opened to the holy spirit, that a spirit of joy, and peace might return to our country and our lives. Amen.

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