

“Why Pentecost?”

Acts 2:1-21

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This morning, the Church all over the world celebrates Pentecost Sunday. It may be hard to believe but for hundreds of years until recent times, Pentecost was just AS important a holiday as Christmas and Easter on the Church calendar. Just to remind us again what this day is all about, Pentecost was the fiftieth day after Passover. Jerusalem was full of pilgrims from all over the Empire who had come to make an offering of the first fruits of their harvest in the Great Temple. After his resurrection, Jesus had remained with his followers for the next forty days, teaching and preparing them for his imminent departure for he had told them that the time would come when he would have to return to the Father. But before he left, he instructed them to wait in Jerusalem and to watch and pray together for the Spirit’s coming. This was HIS spirit which they were to receive and it would fill them all with his personal presence. He assured them that afterwards, then he—Jesus--would be closer and more intimate to each one of them than when he walked and lived among them throughout their three and a half years of ministry together.

When the day of Pentecost (from the Greek word *Pentekoste* meaning fifty) had arrived fifty days after the Jewish Feast of Passover and some ten days after Jesus had already ascended to the Father, their waiting was finally over. Luke tells us in Acts 2 that in the same Upper Room in which they had shared their last supper with Jesus, 120 of his closest followers were now gathered together where they’d been continually passing their days in fasting and prayer. Now that they were finally united (in “one accord” as Luke tells us), the sound of a mighty wind suddenly erupted within the chamber and small tongues of fire appeared which began descending UPON them and IN them just as their Lord had promised. These tongues of fire represented the presence of Christ’s own spirit filling and taking possession of them. Thus this event has come to symbolize the birth of the Church, the birth of a NEW people- the day we became the “Body of Christ.” With this event, Christ himself now took up residence within the heart of each of his followers through the agency of his personal spirit. After this, never again would he ever leave them.

But more than the reception of his Holy Spirit occurred. Those who had received it began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them. But what was MOST surprising was not just that everyone understood what the disciples said, but that all the people understood what each of them was saying in his or her own tongue! These were humble fishermen and tradespersons, not trained linguists and polyglots, and yet here they were declaring the praises of God in the crowd’s own languages. Luke describes the people who were in Jerusalem for the festival and how they had come from all four corners of the empire. He tells us there were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome. Thus, those followers of Christ found themselves saying things and doing things that people had NEVER seen and heard before in ANY synagogue or congregation and it left all observers wondering out loud, “What does this all MEAN?” “What the heck is HAPPENING here?”

In order to understand what IS happening, we first have to return to those days just prior to our Lord's arrest and crucifixion. Jesus had thrust his followers into a state of consternation and confusion with the sudden announcement that he was about to leave them. However, as painful as his departure might mean, he assured them that it was to their ADVANTAGE that he go away. He said in his Farewell Discourse in John, chapter 16:

*...for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you...When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (vv.7,13-14)*

The fulfillment of that promise was the outpouring of the gift of the Holy Spirit--God's OWN spirit and Christ's personal presence--on his disciples.

What this event represented was the birth of a whole new era- "the Age of the Spirit," as some have called it. Through his Holy Spirit, God was now taking up residence in the lives of any and all who would follow his son, Jesus Christ, with the result that our hearts would forever become God's new home. For three and a half years, Jesus had been a constant presence to his disciples- eating and drinking and teaching them while living beside them. Regardless of the time they spent together, his relationship to them was still limited. However, with the bestowal of his personal spirit upon them, he would now be present to them in a way that had been IMPOSSIBLE before this. From now on, he would INHABIT them; he would fill their hearts and minds and spirits with his personal and immediate presence.

This is the significance of Holy Communion, that by taking what represents his body and his blood into our OWN body to eventually intermingle with our OWN blood, Christ is saying how he wants to become one with us. He wants to be such an intimate part of our lives that he becomes an essential ingredient of our DNA so that he may transform IT--life's most essential building block--along with EVERYTHING ELSE about us- such is the power of Jesus Christ through his spirit, the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he has fully pledged himself to us through what St. Paul calls "a spirit of adoption" whereby we are now God's children and God becomes our Heavenly Father with Jesus Christ as our brother. No matter where we go or whatever befalls us, we can be assured we will never have to endure it alone for we now have God's personal presence to abide WITH us and IN us.

However, Christ's presence in our lives was never meant to be kept to ourselves or hidden under a bushel. Christ's OWN spirit has taken possession of OUR hearts and minds for the sole purpose of serving him and acting as his personal presence in the world. The disciples would NEED his spirit if they were going to fulfill the Great Commission Jesus had given them when he said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."(Matt.28:19, 20) Well that SAME commission has now through the ages come down to US TODAY. Through the presence of his Holy Spirit within each of us, he has made us all ONE and AS SUCH we now share a COMMON COMMITMENT along with a COMMON MESSAGE resulting in a COMMON WITNESS and a COMMON MISSION. When Jesus told his followers that after he left, they would do the works he had done and even MORE, what he was alluding to was that they would

then serve as his personal presence in the world. Through their unified heart and mission, they would represent Jesus to all the other peoples of earth. That is why we the Church are called “the Body of Christ”- because we now function as his arms and legs and voice, bearing his same message and performing his same acts of love wherever we go. The Church is God’s proof to the rest of the world that Jesus, his son, was REAL and WHAT’S MORE that he is ALIVE TODAY because if we ARE unified and we ARE faithful to what he has called us to do, then the rest will not only HEAR him in and through our own LIPS but SEE and ENCOUNTER him through our ACTIONS as well.

What this now means is that WE effectively represent the embodiment--the FULL INCARNATION OF JESUS CHRIST--to the rest of the world. Where the FIRST incarnation occurred with God taking on human flesh in and through the person of his SON, Jesus Christ, in that manger so many years before, there was now a SECOND incarnation with God becoming “enfleshed” in and through Jesus’s own followers--his Church--to become the “Body of Christ.” As those early disciples did, WE now possess the personal presence of CHRIST HIMSELF THROUGH HIS HOLY SPIRIT to accompany us, and with the love and support of one another, we are now fully equipped to go out into the world with all its attending challenges and risks and know that we can do so without suspicion or fear. Thus we TOO possess an uncommon courage and faith when we go forth, confident that we are never alone in our labors for God in the form of the Spirit is always with US as WELL. From now on, we find ourselves being enlightened and empowered and guided every step of the way by the SAME Lord in the power of the SAME Spirit those disciples were along this often unsteady journey we call life.

But the gift of the Spirit signified one OTHER thing- it also anticipates the *eschaton* or the long-hoped for age to come at the close of history. We receive now through his Spirit a foretaste or down payment of what awaits us in the Last Day- that day when God shall make his dwelling place in the midst of his people, and all sin and suffering and death shall be destroyed forever. As we are told in the book of Revelation “In that day, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be not more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” The prophet Amos looked to that day and saw a world where justice rolled down like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream; as did the prophet Isaiah who some seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, declared, “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox...and they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord” Of course, we know that scripture employs allegory and metaphor to express the beauty and magnificence of what yet awaits us, but we can be assured that the reality of that day will be far GREATER than any description the Bible may offer.

Therefore, with God through his Holy Spirit inhabiting and instructing our hearts and our minds, we, as the prophets had before US, ALSO yearn for that SAME long-expected day. We look forward to the time when the evils and injustices of the past and present will finally be righted, when “every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” But this is not merely some hope to make us feel good about ourselves when times may seem bad, but a hope intended to inspire us to achieve that SAME vision, to incarnate or make real that SAME dream through every word we speak and every act we perform. This is why the Church has always taken the lead in promoting the interests of the poor and widowed and the underprivileged, those who are often denied a voice in our society; why it has sought

fairness and equity for ALL persons--black and white, male and female, young and old, rich and poor--regardless of color, class, status, and now, sexual orientation. The Church has always served as the CONSCIENCE of our country, in fact, of the WORLD, and without her having been a voice of protest throughout the centuries, we would STILL have the scourge of slavery within our borders and children would STILL be the cheapest form of labor, working upwards of 70-80 hours a week in the mines and mills and fields; the races would STILL be segregated; women would STILL be denied a college education and the right to vote; and we'd have been embroiled in many more wars and conflicts than we already have. With the spirit of Christ in our hearts, we find our care and sympathy "for the least of these our brethren" deepened and broadened so that our lives increasingly become more like Christ's, while our hoping and yearning for that coming new age grows EVER STRONGER. THIS is why Jesus would have us pray, "thy kingdom come, they will be done, ON EARTH as it is in heaven."

My friends, the fact is that we share something that many people NEVER have and that is the personal presence of God, of Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit deep within our hearts, and he has assured us that wherever we go, HE goes, and that NOTHING will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. We also have the love and fellowship and support of our brothers and sisters—the Church, the Body of Christ--wherever we may be. And last but not least, we have the promise of a new kingdom in a new age that awaits us all in the Last Day- a day in which where there will be no more suspicion or hatred or suffering or death, and of that there can be no doubt. THIS is why this morning is such a significant anniversary for the church, and if WE can only trust the Spirit even as those first disciples did, then perhaps we TOO may leave others wondering, as THEY had on that first Pentecost, with the burning question, "What does this all MEAN?" Let us now begin to prepare ourselves to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion this morning.