

The Advent of Pentecost

Meta

Date: April 28, 2024

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Deuteronomy 4:32-40

Psalm 66:1-8

I John 3:11-24 or 3:18-24

John 14:15-21

Opening

Five weeks ago we gathered to celebrate the Day of Resurrection, a day which launched a season—the Great Fifty Days of Easter. This year we heard the Easter story from Mark's Gospel, which has the mysterious conclusion that the myrrh bearing women fled from the tomb after meeting an angel. Mark says trembling and astonishment seized them, and they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. This is the first response to the resurrection, not the final response. We need the season of Eastertide to follow this story and all that the resurrection means for us.

And that's what we've been doing since Easter Day. We have seen how the women of Easter morning do proclaim the risen Christ to the apostles. Our Gospel readings have led us to the resurrection appearances of our Lord. For three weeks, we're making sense of the resurrection event with all who witnessed the risen Christ. But when we come to the latter days of Eastertide, particularly the Fifth Sunday of Easter (today), a shift happens. This pivot occurs every year.

For the remainder of Eastertide, we no longer read Gospel stories occurring *after* the Lord's resurrection. We go back. And we go back to a specific place, a specific moment. We return to the Upper Room. Maundy Thursday, the night of our Lord's arrest. The lectionary takes us to John's Gospel, a portion of that Gospel known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse in John 13-17. The Church has intention, purpose, and wisdom leading us here, so we need to see why we return to Jesus' words *before* his resurrection.

When a man comes to the end of his life, you will know his inmost heart based on the conversations he chooses. When time is short, there is no use for things that don't matter. That's true for any man, and it was true for the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

What are the dominant themes in Jesus' farewell words? The Father, the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the relationship that Jesus shares with them. And then, the coming of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. There is more that Jesus says on Maundy Thursday in the Upper Room, but these are dominant themes running throughout.

It's another sermon for another day, but it's worth meditating on why Jesus speaks about the Father and the Holy Spirit so much *before* his death and resurrection, not after Easter. Another sermon for another day, but suffice it to say that these are the thoughts that burn within the heart of Christ to speak before his crucifixion and resurrection.

So, we are in the Upper Room because the Church is leaning towards Pentecost, not only the ancient church, but the living Church leans toward Pentecost. This is where our focus is meant to be. I'll speak more on this on the Day of Pentecost itself, but Pentecost is so much more than the birth of the Church. Pentecost is a cosmic mystery, which is constantly unfolding, and because that mystery is so great, the Church leans towards Pentecost to be ready for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Advent of Pentecost

In these latter days of Eastertide, we have a season within a season. It's another sort of advent, too—the advent of Pentecost.¹

You're familiar with Advent before we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus, his coming to earth. We remember his first coming, we prepare for his second coming in Advent. Advent in December is a season that readies us for Christ's second coming. In the Great Fifty Days of Easter, the second half of the season prepares us for the coming of the Holy Spirit. All the events of this advent of Pentecost—today, Rogation Sunday, the Ascension of Jesus—they lead us to the goal—the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church.

In his wisdom and his mercy, God gives us seasons to prepare for his coming. This is not only present in the liturgical year. It's present throughout the story of Scripture. The Lord sends prophets to prepare the way for Messiah. The Lord speaks of his death and resurrection to the disciples three times before Holy Week. He tells parables about his coming. The Lord sends his apostles to proclaim the Gospel and prepare the world for his return. The Church has given us a signal because God prepares his people for his coming.

Section 1a

With all the travails in the nations, there is no greater need on earth than that the Church pray and prepare for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is what the world needs from the Church. This is what neighbors need from the saints who live nearby. This is what children need from their parents, what spouses need from one another, what friends need from one another—intimacy with God the Holy Spirit.

It can happen all too easily that we lose focus of spiritual things in Eastertide. We have the clear call to Lenten disciplines, and when the season of fasting ends, we can lose the focus and commitment we had on spiritual things. Now is not the time to grow slack. Now is the time to seek the Life-Giver Himself, God the Holy Spirit.

¹ Eastertide as an advent of Pentecost is an idea original to Boris Brobinsky in his book, *The Mystery of the Holy Trinity*.

The Advocate Within

We need a more robust theology of the Holy Spirit, and maybe not in the way you might think. When we speak of the power of the Holy Spirit, we often speak about his gifts—signs, wonders, healing, spiritual gifts within the saints.

But note well how Jesus prophesies about the Holy Spirit in his farewell words to his disciples. He doesn't first speak of the Spirit's gifts. He speaks his Name—the Helper. The Greek word for Helper is one you may have heard, the Paraclete. It's a name with a range of meanings. Paraclete means Helper, Advocate, Counselor, Comforter.

And this Helper, the Holy Spirit, will speak his counsel, offer comfort, bring help in the innermost depths of our being. The Spirit will be present with us, not like our dearest friend who knows us better than anyone does. The Spirit will dwell within us, knowing us better than we know our very selves. This is the prophecy Jesus gave to his apostles about the Spirit: 'You know the Spirit, for he dwells with you and *will be in you.*'

That which Jesus prophesies for the disciples is that which empowered his life on earth—the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the very secret of our Lord's power on earth—the Holy Spirit. The story of Jesus is the story of the Holy Spirit descending and remaining on Jesus. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit within the womb of the Virgin Mary. Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit in the River Jordan, then led by the same Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Do not forget that the Spirit led Jesus into a place of weakness. The Spirit led our Lord into weakness because in weakness is the strength of God made perfect. How else can we explain the Lord's strength and his wisdom to renounce Satan's temptation? The Lord renounced Satan's lies with the truth of God, revealed in his Word. It is no accident that Jesus speaks of the Spirit as the Spirit of truth to his disciples in the Upper Room. Christ has not only learned, he has known that the Spirit leads us into all truth. More on that later.

When Jesus leaves the wilderness victorious over Satan, how does he accomplish exorcisms, healings, signs and wonders? By his communion with the Holy Spirit. Isaiah foretold it and Jesus embraced it when he proclaimed in the synagogue,

*'The Spirit of the Lord because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*²

St Gregory of Nyssa said that just as we cannot think of the Father without the Son, we cannot conceive of the Son without the Holy Spirit.³ The Son and the Spirit are inseparable. Both are sent by the Father into the world.⁴

And that doctrine is no abstract theory, but prompts an important question: can someone comprehend my life apart from the Holy Spirit? If my life makes sense apart from the Holy Spirit, I will

² *Luke 4.18-20*

³ Quoted in Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 160.

⁴ Sergei Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 246.

wasted precious years living in my own strength, glorifying my own name, when I was created and redeemed to live for the glory of God alone.

Jesus does nothing without the Spirit of God—the Spirit with whom he has been one since all eternity; the Spirit that overshadowed him in his conception; that anointed him in the River Jordan.

The Inspiration of Obedience

We see the Spirit so plainly in Jesus' works of power like exorcisms and healings, but Jesus wants us to see that the Spirit's presence is most evident in loving obedience. When he speaks of the Spirit in the Upper Room, he speaks about the Paraclete as the Spirit of truth, who will guide us into all truth. In the same breath, he says that if we love him we will keep his commands.

That is the secret of Jesus' obedience—the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. How else could he pray in Gethsemane, through loud cries and bloody sweat, 'Father, not my will, but yours be done?' Doesn't St Paul tell us that we can only say 'Abba, Father' by the Holy Spirit?

And this is how we understand Jesus' obedience even to death on a cross. Only by the strength of the Holy Spirit could Jesus endure the agony of his passion and crucifixion. On the cross, Jesus cried out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Yet in the mystery of that cry of dereliction, do not forget the crucifixion story from St. Luke. The last word of Jesus on the cross was, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!' How can one pray to the Father except by presence of the Holy Spirit? Even on the cross, in his final breath, Jesus was seeking his Father by communing with the Holy Spirit.

Finally, how can we understand the resurrection of our Lord Jesus apart from the Holy Spirit? The same Spirit who descended upon our Lord Jesus in his conception and in his baptism, descended on the Lord with resurrection life. As the great theologian of the Holy Spirit, Sergei Bulgakov said, the Holy Spirit still rested on the body of Jesus in his burial. How else do we account for the fact that the body of Jesus would not decompose? As Bulgakov said, echoing the church fathers, 'Jesus never lost the connection of his body with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit shared, as it were, the beyond-the-grave destiny of the Incarnate Word, not abandoning Him even in death.'⁵

And that my brother and sister, gives us a hint of why the Lord Jesus prophesies the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples *before* his own death. When the disciples become witnesses of his passion, and then his crucifixion, and then his resurrection, they will know anew that the Holy Spirit will remain with them throughout this life, when they are persecuted, when they are tried before kings and rulers, when they are martyred, through death, and through all the ages—the Holy Spirit will be with them.

Just as the Holy Spirit was and is present as Advocate, Counselor, Helper, Comforter on Jesus, so the Holy Spirit will be Advocate, Counselor, Helper, and Comforter upon us. Is there anything on earth that deserves our desire more than this? The world living in darkness, the Church living in her own brokenness, needs saints who desire the presence and help of the Holy Spirit more than anything else.

⁵ Ibid, 252.

Communion with God, Greater than any Gift

Time forbids us to explore greater depths and mysteries within our Lord's words in the Upper Room. But note two final details before we conclude. First, we remember the Spirit who comes is the Spirit of truth. He is inextricably bound with the Word of God. Never forget that God the Holy Spirit is the co-author of every book of Scripture. He inspired every human author on every page, every psalm, every prophecy, every promise, every Gospel word. The Holy Spirit dwelling within provides the inspiration and help to read and meditate on Scripture when you don't want to. The Spirit brings passages, verses, and psalms to your mind and your heart when you are tempted, weak, and weary.

The Spirit will never contradict the teaching of Jesus and his teaching entrusted to his apostles. If someone invokes the Holy Spirit yet contradicts the Lord and the apostles' teaching, you may be sure they are deceived.

And finally, when Jesus prophesies that the Spirit of truth will come, he speaks of him as 'another Helper.' This means there are two divine Advocates sent by the Father. Christ will be our Advocate seated by the Father in Heaven. The Spirit will be the Advocate living and dwelling within us. The Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves. What great Gospel news this is! I don't have to rely on my own resources; all I have to do is welcome the grace and help of the Helper, who is always seeking me.

More than any help he gives, the greatest gift is communion with the Spirit Himself. This is the unique gift of baptism. To know Him, to be known by Him; to have the promise that we will never be alone, ever. Oh, lean into that promise, Church. Not just because the Feast of Pentecost is on the calendar; lean into it so that Pentecost is ever new, that you and I become more fully alive in the Holy Spirit, just as our Lord was made fully alive by that same Spirit on the Day of Resurrection. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world and Pentecost without end. Amen.