

Easter 7 May 24 2020

There was a very elderly woman at one of the parishes I served in Harlem. I would go and visit her every couple of weeks, to talk with her, pray with her and bring her communion. When I would leave, I would bless her, and as a very proper Episcopalian, she would always cross herself and say, “In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” Of course I would always say, “and the Holy Spirit.” I knew that she was “old school” that she had grown up with the 1928 Prayer Book and that every Sunday and every day for over 50 years, she prayed to God as the Trinity with that conclusion, “and the Holy Ghost.” I was a younger priest at the time, and I once attempted to have a conversation with her, that “Holy Ghost” was an older translation, from the era of early translations, and that the more up to date usage we employed in the church nowadays was “Holy Spirit.” But she would have none of it. “Holy Ghost” had served her well every day in her life up until that point and she saw no reason to change now. So, I gave in, and for her blessing, “and the Holy Ghost” it was.

Prayer: O wonderful God, by your gracious and life giving Spirit may we hear your Word this day and may the Spirit’s gift increase in us; this we ask in the name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

Today as we gather once more digitally, (and hopefully we don’t break the internet like we did last Sunday!), today we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus, the departure of the embodiment of God’s love in the world, and we gather in expectation of the coming of the Spirit of love, the great gift we are given on Pentecost which we will celebrate together next week. This is

the conclusion of our Easter season in this strange and topsy turvy pandemic time. Yes, the world is changed for us, but still as the Church we gather in praise and prayer to strengthen our faith for these strange days. The Gospel lesson we hear today from John is quite relevant for this time as well. In John's Gospel, there is a long discourse by Jesus during the evening prior to the crucifixion: gathered in the upper room with his closest friends and followers, Jesus washes their feet and uses that simple act as a demonstration for them of the love they are to bear to one another. Jesus teaches them a new commandment, to love one another, and then speaks of the coming of the Spirit of love for them. Finally, Jesus prays for the disciples, the prayer we hear today, the prayer that even in the times of distress, God will watch over them, that even without Jesus present with them they belong to God and they will know the truth of God's love as Jesus has shown them. Yes, this is a prayer for those close followers of Jesus together with him on that last night, but it is also Jesus's prayer for us, Jesus's prayer for you and for me, that even in the midst of the troubles we face, even in the midst of a pandemic and the economic distress and chaos around us, Jesus prays for us that God will watch over us and keep us protected by the fulness of divine love. This prayer in John's Gospel is John's version of the Lord's Prayer which we find in Matthew and Luke's Gospel accounts. This is the prayer that Jesus prays for us, that God will hold us ever so closely and ever so lovingly. As the time of his departure draws near, Jesus prepares the disciples, and Jesus prepares us with this profound prayer. With the departure of Jesus from the midst of the disciples

with the Ascension, Jesus no longer physical present with them an important transformation takes place: the church, the gathering of the faithful, the assembly of saints, we become the body of Christ now in the world. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit of love leading us in truth, the followers of Jesus now take up his lead, now become the body and the embodiment of God's love.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early church, despite any sort of formal or doctrinal significance, the presence of the Holy Spirit was central to the life of the church and the lives of early Christian believers. Some of this had to do with the trajectory of Christian witness: the earliest followers of Jesus had him physically present with them: they could follow him and hear him and learn from him. Even the next generation had the testimony of these early followers, they were the ones who knew those who had directly heard the Savior and could attest in their own lives of the power of God Jesus manifest. But of course, with each succeeding year, with time passing on, this close personal tie became strained, and the something else had to take its place in the early church, that early gathering of those who knew the power of God's love seen so plainly in Jesus' life. On the one hand, these new conditions gave rise to the composition of the Gospels, writing down the stories and testimonies about Jesus and showing his significance of the lives of the early believers. On the other hand, these conditions also gave a strong and renewed emphasis on life in the power of the Spirit. Experience of the Spirit of God was nothing new: throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the Spirit, the "breath" of God

plays a strong role the religious understanding of the people of Israel. As their religious understanding developed, the people of Israel saw God's Spirit as the creative force in the cosmos, giving rise to all that is, and then constantly interacting with God's people through their lives, in the prophetic call to justice and God's steadfast kindness. This life in the power of God's Spirit was part of Jesus' ministry, as seen from the earliest portrayals, in the Baptism of Jesus with the evangelists' testimony that the Spirit of God rests on Jesus and throughout John's Gospel and Jesus looks forward, points the way for the Johannine community, that the Spirit will be present with them to lead and guide them in their lives. But at even an earlier point in the experience of the first followers of Jesus, life in the power of the Spirit has a central place in Christian identity. Paul's letters, some of the earliest documents and testimony, are filled with references and examples of the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the early Christian communities. This was the Spirit of God that united the community in love. This is the Spirit that freed the gathering of early disciples and sent them out into the world to witness to the ends of the earth of the salvation given to all in the Risen Christ. This Spirit, this Holy Spirit of God promised to the early followers of Jesus is the spark that lights the fuse for the expanding mission of the church. The manifestations of that Spirit, its power and its depth, served as the catalyst to move the friends of Jesus into action based on their faith throughout their communities and throughout the ancient Classical world.

And in some ways, throughout Christian history, it has always been this way: the power of the Risen and Ascended Christ is given to those who

would follow Jesus in the awaited gift of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus was no longer present in the midst of the community, those friends of Jesus were not left on their own. In that time before the coming of the Holy Spirit with power into their midst on Pentecost, they returned to Jerusalem in an expectant mode: they continued to gather together in prayer, faithfully awaiting what Jesus promised them. In many ways, it must have been a difficult time for those disciples: all the joy and wonder unleashed on that first Easter, all the unexpected and unforeseen gift of the resurrection of Jesus must still have seemed so unbelievable and unreal. And yet now, after a matter of only a few weeks, Jesus was no longer in their midst, no longer the center of their community and their fellowship. So they wait, they wait for what God will do next...this cannot have been an easy time...so opening their hearts and souls in prayer, the disciples wait. Certainly, it must have taken courage to remain faithful, to keep praying and to wait in hope. Peter's call to resistance, to remain steadfast in faith, although written much later, I think gives an accurate portrayal of what the disciples must have prayed for with one another in that time. A call in faith to be humble, to cast all anxieties on God, because of God's care for the disciples. A call to keep souls open and to look at the world still through the eyes of faith.

And really, when it comes down to it, this situation is not really any different for us, for you and me, as well. We too have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, we too have recently known of the joy of Easter in our lives. We have shouted our own "alleluias" as well, and been just as awestruck as those first women who went to the tomb almost two thousand

years ago. And even though we know that next week is the Feast of Pentecost and that we will celebrate once again the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, we too, like that small community gathered in prayer together, we too no longer have Jesus in our midst. But we do have Jesus's prayer for us, a prayer that God will be with us always and surround us with God's loving kindness, a loving kindness which is so important in uncertain times such as these. This week, the President said we need more prayer, and I very much agree; however, to keep safe and to do our part to remain faithful, we will pray by being physically distant. We do not have to gather together to pray; rather, we will pray where we are, praying together though physically distant and showing our love for each other being keeping all safe and healthy. With Jesus's prayer for us, we will pray in the power of Jesus's Spirit of love for God's steadfast care for all. For us as well, for you and me, we must look forward in faith and hope; we also must resist the temptation to just throw up our arms and walk away, for we are called to resist and stand steadfast in faith as well, to stand fast with open hearts to the call of Jesus. You and I are also waiting, patiently and expectantly, for the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, to empower us to live fully in the love of God and to free us in service in the Name of the Risen Lord Jesus.

As most of you know, when I pronounce the final blessing, I employ a Trinitarian form, but one which is slightly different from the more traditional, but also more patriarchal "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." I pronounce the blessing in the Name of "the One who is, who is begotten Word and who is the Spirit of Love going forth." Today, it is enough for us

to rest in joyful expectation and anticipation of that Spirit of Love going forth coming to touch our hearts and fill our lives. Today it is enough to give God thanks in the season of resurrection for the almighty power of God's love we know in the Risen Christ. Amen.