

Pentecost
(Whitsunday)

I take as my text today from St. John's Gospel:

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.”

The passage from St. John which we read for the Gospel is phenomenal. In just a few words, John sums up not just the role of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives, he also defines the relationship of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity itself, to the world, and to us individually. This relationship is based on a deep understanding of the concept of love.

Divine love is the glue that holds everything together from the Trinity to all of creation.

It is love that binds together the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It is love that binds us to God.

For St. John, the proof or test of love lies in obedience — obedience to God and always moral, rising above self and sentiment.

Our Lord knew that, as mere human beings, real love was hardly within our reach; that we needed help even to approach the love extended to us in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Even more, Jesus knew that we needed a helper to bring to remembrance His words and the work He accomplished in the world

Today, we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, or more commonly in the Anglican Church, Whitsunday or White Sunday. The name, Whitsunday, is derived from the white garments once traditionally worn on this day by the newly baptized.

In those by-gone days, Pentecost, rather than Easter, was the time for baptisms and, although ranked as a major feast in the Church, it is no longer celebrated in such grand fashion as it had been not so many generations ago.

In Judaism, Pentecost was one of three great Jewish festivals, and like Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, attendance was required in Jerusalem. Thus, on this day nearly 2000 years ago, Jews from every part of the known world were in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

So, quite naturally the streets of Jerusalem would be filled with people from all over the world.

For the Apostles, and for the Church, this would be a momentous day in their lives; indeed, on this day, God would breathe life into the Body of Christ, as His Church would be known, and set into motion a movement that would change mankind and the world forever.

The twelve — for they had, since the Ascension 10 days ago, elected Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot — the twelve were engaged in prayer and discourse in the upper room, presumably the same upper room where the Last Supper was held, when it happened....

In the words of St. Luke:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Ghost...

St. Luke, in his description of the event, goes on to say that the Apostles spoke in tongues and were understood by all the people, regardless of their language.

Though the Epistle passage appointed for today concludes at this point, we know that Luke continued to describe how Peter was so empowered by the Holy Spirit as to speak openly to the crowds and persuade some 3000 to repent and be baptized.

Truly amazing: but, for us as Anglicans, what does Pentecost mean? What do we believe concerning the Holy Spirit?

In short, we believe that at Pentecost, a new spirit entered the world and began to transform it. That spirit is the Holy Spirit promised by our Lord to be a Comforter, that is, one who strengthens, and to be an Advocate.

It is He who, Jesus assured the Apostles, would bring all things to remembrance that our Lord had spoken to them.

He, the Holy Spirit, would dwell within them, and through them, establish Christ's Church on earth.

How could the Apostles remember all the words of our Lord, all the things that He taught them, all the instructions that He gave them? It was through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, just as Jesus had promised.

The Holy Spirit was sent, not just to the Apostles but also to the Church to consecrate it for its work. And the Holy Spirit was given to us as a principle of inward spiritual life.

It is not that the Holy Spirit was absent before Pentecost, but that since Pentecost, His presence has been characteristically different.

In his book, Faith and Practice, Frank E. Wilson described this different characteristic in this manner:

Christ provides a focus through which that Divine Power is concentrated within a sphere called His Church, where the Spirit operates to a special purpose. Nothing has been detracted from His prevailing presence, but a point of contact has been established for us human beings because we need points of contact with God.

What he is saying is not that the Holy Spirit works only through the Church, but that His Power is concentrated in the Body of Christ, the Church, and through our membership in that Body, we receive the benefit of His Power through the Sacraments and through corporate worship.

The Holy Spirit dwells within us individually to supply spiritual needs and to stimulate spiritual motives. In his companion to the Prayer Book, first published in 1804, Bishop John Henry Hobart used these words:

The Holy Spirit warms our cold affections, and inflames our hearts with devotion towards God, and excites in us those dispositions and affections which qualify us to approach the throne of grace.

Now, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles, there was a mighty rushing wind, cloven tongues of fire, and speaking in tongues, all symbols of Pentecost.

The mighty rushing wind symbolized the power of the Holy Spirit and was intended to strengthen the faith of the Apostles, and to draw the attention of the inhabitants and visitors of Jerusalem.

The cloven tongues of fire symbolized the fervor with which the Apostles were empowered to preach the Gospel. Immediately, the Apostles went into the streets and began to speak openly of Jesus Christ, St. Peter leading the way, urging people to repent and be baptized.

And, speaking in tongues, they were understood by each inhabitant, regardless of his language. St. Luke's interpretation of the speaking in tongues emphasizes the universal, worldwide scope of the Gospel.

Another symbolic aspect of Pentecost is the day itself, being a major Jewish feast that marked the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, in Christian terms, the Old Covenant. This first Christian Pentecost marked the beginning of the New Covenant, in that the old Law of Moses has been superseded by the new Law of Love.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He left behind His established Church; but, He had put it in a holding pattern, so to speak, having instructed the Apostles that they were to wait for Him to send to them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would open their minds to all the knowledge they had acquired.

We are living examples of the fruit of their work, the Gospel harvest.

We are proof that the Holy Spirit abides always in the Church. As the Lord promised, so He has fulfilled that promise:

I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth.

The Holy Spirit dwells within each of us, giving clearness to our faith by illuminating our minds, giving zeal to our charity by shedding abroad in our hearts the love of God, and giving strength and power to all our graces.

The Holy Spirit is present when we are baptized, and we receive Him at the time of confirmation during the laying-on of hands. He is ever present within the Church, which is His sphere of operation, and it is there where we should seek Him, as the Reverend Vernon Staley says,

Within the Church, the faithful Christian lives and moves in the region of assured grace. There is no covenanted security outside the Church.

Today we celebrate the anniversary of the arrival of the Christian Age, the coming to life of the Body of Christ, God having breathed His Spirit into it; and we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of Godhead, the glue, the love that binds the Trinity together as One, and us to God, the One Who strengthens and inspires the Church and each of us, for indeed our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.