

05/23/21

Festival of Pentecost

The ongoing miracle of Pentecost—the peace of Christ

John 14: 23-31

Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. **24)** He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me. **25)** These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. **26)** But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. **27)** Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. **28)** You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I. **29)** And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe. **30)** I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me. **31)** But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel-text for this high Festival of Pentecost is again taken from St. John’s record of our incarnate Lord’s “Valedictory Address—the words which He spoke to His disciples at their final meal together before His Passion would begin in earnest. He spoke to provide strength and comfort to them for the time of trial and fear they were about to go through. Only later— after they had seen and spoken with their risen Lord and received His instruction and had time to reflect on what He had told them—would His words become fully clear to them.

“You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you,’” Jesus says. “If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I.” We confess in the Nicene Creed the Church’s faith that, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Son is essentially equal to—“of one substance with”—the Father. But here, as the Church Fathers and as Martin Luther correctly observed, Jesus is speaking of the different and lowly way of being which He had willingly adopted for our sakes. For you and me, as St. Paul says, He who is by nature true God had “emptied Himself” in humble obedience to His Father’s saving

will for us and had made Himself a Servant—to suffer and to die so that we might live. Now that time of His lowly servanthood was about to end. The time was rapidly approaching when Mary’s divine Son would “go to the Father” by way of His cross and His resurrection. He would ascend to heaven to sit at the Father’s right hand of power, to take up again for Himself that greater glory and majesty which belongs to Him from all eternity, to rule all things for the benefit of His Church. That is why Jesus tells His disciples that they should rejoice for Him. And only then, after Christ Jesus was exalted in this way, would the Holy Spirit come to them—to equip them for their work, to fill their preaching with faith-creating and life-giving power, to begin through them the work of gathering Christ’s Church—the work of spreading the Gospel of the Incarnate One, crucified and risen, to the ends of the earth. On this Festival of Pentecost, we observe and meditate on the glorious fulfillment of that promise of our Lord, and we take to heart the blessing which He speaks also to us here, “Peace I leave with you,” says our Redeemer, “My peace I give to you; ...Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” With grateful hearts we remember today that it is the third Person of the Trinity—the very Breath of God, the Holy Spirit Himself—who fills the Gospel with the power to implant that Peace of Christ in our hearts.

I

Because He was now going to His Father, Jesus tells His disciples, they could expect to receive “the Spirit whom the Father will send in My name.” During this same talk with them on that Thursday of the first Holy Week, Jesus also says that He Himself would send the Spirit—a perhaps somewhat incidental but nevertheless clear Scriptural support for the western Church’s creedal confession that the Spirit “proceeds from (both) the Father and the Son.” It is St. Luke who, in the Book of Acts, has recorded for us the miraculous fulfillment of our Savior’s promise.

On the Jewish harvest-festival of Pentecost when the streets of Jerusalem were crowded with pilgrim-worshippers from all over the Mediterranean world, the Holy Spirit came to Jesus’ followers in a most majestic and awe-inspiring way. There was a sound of a mighty wind—the life-giving Breath of our Triune God Himself. Tongues of fire, Luke tells us, rested on each one of them—the warming flame of God’s love which can thaw even hearts which have been iced-over with unbelief and sin. And the Holy Spirit enabled these disciples—these working men from Galilee—to speak in the languages of all those pilgrims who were gathered in the city. In their native-tongues—Greek and Hebrew, Egyptian and Persian and Libyan, the dialects of Phrygia and Pamphylia and more—those pilgrims

heard proclaimed to them the Gospel of Christ Jesus. In their own languages, they heard how the incarnate Son of God had died to atone for their sins and how He had risen in triumph over the devil and over the grave. That first Christian Pentecost is often called the “Birthday of Christ’s Church,” and it was marked by our Savior-God with all these wonders.

II

And yet there occurred an even greater miracle that day. “Peace I leave with you,” Jesus says, “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” By far the greatest wonder of that first Christian Pentecost was that, as St. Luke tells us, on that one day some three thousand people were brought to faith in Christ through the preaching of those Apostles. On that one day, three thousand men, women, and children were baptized into the Christian faith. On that one day, three thousand people received into their hearts that blessed peace of which our Redeemer speaks here.

St. Luke has left us a record of the sermon which the Apostle Peter preached that day. There were no gimmicks in it, no rhetorical tricks, no special methods of persuasion. To show them their need for a Savior, Peter preached to them the Law in all its sin-condemning sternness. He told those people that, though Jesus of Nazareth had been innocent and had worked such wonders before them, they had, in Peter’s words, “taken (Him) with lawless hands and had crucified Him and (killed Him).” And then Peter also preached the Gospel of Christ in all its Spirit-filled, faith-creating power. He told them that the grave could not hold the Lord’s Anointed. Christ Jesus had risen in triumph over death, and now He was proclaimed to them as the chosen One of God who sits at the right hand of the Father. “Repent and believe the Gospel (and be) baptized in (His) name,” Peter told his hearers, and he promised them that they would receive the Lord’s full pardon for their sins and would themselves be gifted with the Holy Spirit who would keep them firm in their faith. That was the simple Gospel-message which St. Paul calls “the power God unto salvation”—the Gospel-word about Christ through which the divine Helper works faith in human hearts. That was the Spirit-filled Word which brought the peace of Christ to some three thousand people on that one day—the peace of His blood-bought forgiveness, the peace of His resurrection-victory, the peace of being made children of our Triune God.

III

On this Festival of Pentecost, the Church gives thanks for this great gift of the Holy Spirit who continues to work through her preaching and her teaching to bring that peace of Christ to human hearts. Today we do not

hear the sound of a rushing wind; we see no tongues of fire; and gaining the ability to speak in other languages requires hard work and study and time and sweat. But the greatest miracle of that first Pentecost continues to occur. Where the Gospel is preached, there faith in Christ Jesus is created and sustained by the Holy Spirit also today. There hearts are warmed by the Spirit with the love of the Father who has sent His Son to be our Redeemer. There hearts receive the forgiveness which Christ has purchased for us with His death on the cross and the new life which He won by rising again from the tomb. There the Holy Spirit continues also today to bestow that peace which passes all understanding on all those in whose hearts He has created—through word and sacrament—saving trust in the crucified and risen One.

That is our confidence as we take up anew the assignment our Lord has given to His Church. This Feast of Pentecost reminds us of the promise which He has spoken through His prophet Isaiah, that His Gospel-word will not return unto Him empty, but it will accomplish that which He intends—to gather to Himself a people of faith. That sacred promise of our Lord lends both urgency and joy to our work here at Old Zion as we seek to carry out the blessed task He has given to us.

May the Holy Spirit continue His Pentecost miracle also among us, for Jesus sake. Amen.