

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Sunday after Ascension Day¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the third Verse of the thirty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“The Lord is exalted; for he dwelleth on high: he hath filled Zion with judgment and righteousness. And wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation: the fear of the Lord is his treasure. Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off. Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; he will save us.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.

“These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Gospel: “When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me....”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

On Thursday, which was Ascension Day itself, I said this in my sermon:

“We have been led to think of the Ascension as Christ’s coronation. This is not the emphasis of the Scriptures, because the New Testament clearly reserves that significance to the day in which He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, when the Father will put every enemy under His feet. These Scriptures we have read are concerned, rather, with the continuation of Christ’s own *charismatic* (χάρις) ministry through his Church, to spread the Gospel to all nations in the working out of salvation among all peoples of the earth.”

As we look at today’s Collect and Scripture readings we must notice that same emphasis. For reasons hidden and mysterious, in the wisdom of God, the Ascension of the Son is mainly about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Recall the Gospel of John, and the words we heard from it on the Fourth Sunday after Easter: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”⁷ And we meditated that Sunday on the ministry of the Holy Spirit through the Church to convince the fallen world concerning Christ.

The Rev’d Robert Hart²⁰
May 20, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle and Gospel at Mass on the Sunday after Ascension Day, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 33:5-6, 17, 20-22 (KJV).

⁴ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. John 15:26—16:4a (KJV).

⁶ St. John 15:26 (KJV).

⁷ St. John 16:5 (KJV).

⁸ St. John 8:42-43 (KJV).

⁹ Examples: St. John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18.

¹⁰ St. John 1:14a (KJV).

¹¹ Ephesians 1:23 (KJV).

¹² The Gospel According to John is about the dual and heavily-related (inter-dependent) themes of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which should help us understand why John 14:6 cannot be controversial for true believers.

¹³ St. John 1:14a (KJV).

¹⁴ Acts 2:32-33 (KJV).

¹⁵ St. John 20:21 (KJV).

¹⁶ Isaiah 27:6 (KJV).

¹⁷ St. John 15:5 (KJV).

¹⁸ I Peter 4:10-11 (KJV).

¹⁹ Zechariah. 4:6 (KJV).

²⁰ Rector, St. Benedict’s Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.

We treat the Holy Spirit like a stranger, and we assume that we must go about the mission that Christ gave His Apostolic Church by our own cleverness, and by our own means, **and within our own limitations**. No wonder our labors are lost, and we produce results that are blasted and dried up. If you want the ground to bring forth fruit you must pray for rain. If you want the Church to grow so that “Israel may blossom and bud and fill the face of the world with fruit,”¹⁶ you must gather as the disciples did in Ascensiontide, and pray for the mighty outpouring once again of God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, “without me ye can do nothing.”¹⁷ For this reason He has sent the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth. Look at the words of St. Peter from today’s Epistle: “As every man hath received the gift [χάρισμα, *charisma*], even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever.”¹⁸

How can we heed these words without gifts of knowledge and of utterance beyond the limitations of our own wisdom? How can we grow in grace unto holiness and develop virtues unless the Fruit of the Holy Spirit grows within our lives, as spoken of in the fifth chapter of Galatians? How could our Sacraments work effectually, or our message go forth, without the charismatic gifts of laborers spoken of in the fourth chapter of Ephesians? How could men receive Holy Orders without the gifts that Paul writes of in both Epistles to Timothy, gifts that were given by the laying on of his Apostolic hands?

My Ascensiontide message to my fellow Continuing Anglicans is simple: As you pray, learn dependence on the Holy Spirit. Stop trusting the arm of flesh which will fail you. Our warfare is not carnal, but spiritual: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.”¹⁹

It is of great importance that we understand the Procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father exactly as our Lord Jesus speaks of it here. We must consider it in the context of the same Gospel of John where we find Jesus teaching clearly about His own divinity: “Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.”⁸

Here the Lord speaks of two things. First He tells us who He is, and uses the Greek word translated “proceeded forth” (ἐξέρχομαι, *exerchomai*), and then speaks of His Incarnation and coming into the world with the word translated “sent” (ἀποστέλλω, *apostellō*). Indeed, He could have said, “I AM eternally begotten of the Father, and I AM the Apostle of the Father.” It would mean, in His case, the same thing as the words He did say. For the fact that the Son proceeded forth from the Father is more often spoken of, in this same Gospel according to John, with the word “begotten” (μονογενής, *monogenēs*).⁹ But on this occasion, He says that He “proceeded forth.”

The Lord is not speaking here redundantly. When Jesus spoke of His having “proceeded forth” from the Father and His being “sent” by the Father, I hope you see very clearly that He speaks of two distinct things: (1) Who He is as God the Son or Word, and (2) His mission in the world as the Father’s Apostle.

Now when we look at the Gospel for today, and how Jesus speaks about the other Comforter (παράκλητος, *paraklētos*) by telling His disciples that the Holy Spirit proceeds (ἐκπορεύομαι, *ekporeuomai*) from the Father and that He, the Son, will “send him” (πέμπω, *pempō*), the idea is the same as when Jesus spoke of Himself, His own proceeding from the Father and also His being sent into the world.

The Greek words used are not the same. What is the same is the distinction between two things that He tells us, first about Himself and then, here after the Supper, when He echoes the same distinction, speaking about the Holy Spirit. In both cases we see a divine Person who proceeds from the Father's very Being. We can say truly of both of these Persons, the Son and the Spirit, that each is "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God." Indeed, we can say truly of both the Son and the Spirit that each is "Being of one substance with the Father." And in both cases, we see a divine Person Who is sent into the world.

In the case of Jesus, "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us"¹⁰ by taking human nature into the Godhead, our created nature into his uncreated Person, being conceived by the Holy Ghost, of the Virgin Mary. In the case of the Holy Spirit, by His presence with us the Word continues to dwell among us in "the church which His Body, the fullness of him which filleth all in all."¹¹

For even though the Persons of the Trinity are distinct, they are also inseparable. Where the Spirit is present, the Son cannot be absent. Where the Son is present, the Father must be present also. Where God is, He is there in His fullness (this is the meaning of "Divine Simplicity"). Indeed, the whole Gospel of John is about the Trinity and the Incarnation.¹² It opens with two verses which name God as three Persons and then concentrates on the Word (*λόγος*, *Logos*), especially as we come to the Holy of Holies in all Scripture: "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."¹³ Jesus is the Apostle of the Father, and it was expedient that He go away so that His own Apostles could establish the Church by the supernatural and charismatic ministry of *God with us*.

This Sunday in Ascensiontide is here to point us to next Sunday, Whitsunday or the Feast of Pentecost. Every passage of Scripture appointed for Holy Communion during Ascensiontide emphasizes the coming of the Holy Spirit. Today's Collect

directs our attention to Christ's exaltation back into the hidden dimension of Heaven that surrounds us, that is separate from the world where sin and death have their allotted time; and it tells of His exaltation only to turn our attention to our dependence on the Holy Spirit. Next week, we will read about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and see that Saint Peter tells us this about the resurrected and glorified Christ: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear."¹⁴

Remember what the Lord told the Apostles after His Resurrection: "As my Father hath sent (ἀποστέλλω, *apostellō*) me, even so send (πέμπω, *pempō*) I you."¹⁵ The Apostles are sent by the Son as He is sent by the Father, and He sends them just as He sends the Holy Spirit to them. When you say "I believe the Apostolic Church", you are saying a mouthful about the men who have succeeded the Apostles into the College of the Apostles; a mouthful about the mission of the whole Church; a mouthful about dependence on the Holy Spirit that the Church must acknowledge, and then trust in; a mouthful about the presence in and among us of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, as the Church derives its very being and life from God. For it is not only the Apostles, and not only the bishops, who have Apostolic Succession, but it is *the whole Church that is Apostolic*, by the gifts of God that come through them.

We must *depend* on the Holy Spirit. This means two things: We must not rely on the flesh as if our warfare was carnal; and it means we can have faith in the presence, power and gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as His direction if we will only learn to hear His voice. Ah, but how can we learn to hear His voice until we learn that He is speaking and giving direction that we are all too often too deaf to hear?