

+ The readings for this fourth Sunday after Easter, like those appointed for this last Sunday, turn our attention toward the Ascension of Christ and the approaching feast of Pentecost. This is a time of both departure and arrival, of both loss and gain. It is a “what now,” or “what next” kind of moment. The church in its earliest stage of development—that is, the small company of disciples who were witnesses to the Resurrected Jesus—had to wrestle with a world turned upside-down. On one day, they had been eager and willing participants in the work of restoring the kingdom to Israel, in the company of a respected, if controversial, worker of miracles, this charismatic Rabbi from Galilee whose authority in speech and in deed so moved their hearts and the hearts of those who felt forgotten, down-trodden, and oppressed. The next day, and for days afterward, they had cowered in fearful seclusion as their hero was brutally tortured and killed. Now, even in the joy of that morning which had dawned in Christ's rising from the tomb, it has become clear that all is not going to proceed as was expected. The Revolution for which they probably thought themselves to be laboring is, apparently, not a thing. In fact, the whole fabric of their thinking about the Mission of Jesus—involving Roman power, legitimate and illegitimate authority in Israel, both religious and political—has suddenly frayed and faded. Instead, they now begin to understand, haltingly at first, that the Mission of Jesus is something *much* greater.

Now the gospel reading for today, which comes, like last week's, from John 16, records a sermon that Jesus delivered to his disciples shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. Yet when Christ speaks here of his “going away to the Father,” it is clear that He is speaking not of His death, but of His coming Ascension, and the disciples would have understood this, looking back on it from a distance. It's reasonable to suppose that the Risen Lord said similar things to them in the forty days after Easter. In this time between Resurrection and Ascension, those who have trusted in Christ are being exposed to the full breadth of His significance. It was probably not a uniformly comfortable experience. The old categories in which they understood both Jesus and themselves are done away, and in their place comes something so universal in scope that it is, understandably, somewhat terrifying in its open-endedness and indefinite largesse. Terrifying, that is, in comparison to what was previously comforting in its limited aim and possibility—get rid of the Roman overlords, restore peace, justice, and prosperity to the Jewish people.

Instead, Christ tells them, *I go my way to him that sent Me*. You will be my witnesses—everywhere. Baptize and make disciples, proclaiming forgiveness of sins in My Name. *I will send you the Comforter*, i.e., the Holy Spirit, to strengthen and encourage you, *and He will guide you into all truth. He shall glorify Me, for He shall receive of Mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are Mine*. We have here, in simple and shocking form, the dogmas of the Incarnation, the Blessed Trinity, and the total significance of those realities as they are applied to the communion of the Saints, i.e, the Church. *All things that the Father hath are Mine*. I, the crucified and Risen Jesus, am the Son of the Father. The creator of the world, the invisible architect of Reality as you experience it, from the mountain to the microbe, is united to the person of this Man. And He sends to us and in us that which will take of His—that is, of God's own possessions—and will show it to those who believe in Him. This showing will guide us into all truth. It is a showing that becomes a sharing. It is an invitation into the very life of God.

This is all very well, but what does it mean? What next? What now? What is this supposed to look like? These are all variants on the question which we, as the first disciples did,

must ask ourselves: In the light of the Resurrection, how do we go about living in the world? If we are willing to give up our old dreams and aspirations, the goals of our old hopes and strivings, what is to take their place? What will “all truth” look like?

The short and practical answer way of answering this question is to consider: when you receive a gift, make sure that you understand what it is for. That is the way both to avoid misuse, and to use it to its fullest potential. The abiding presence of the Comforter in the church of God is both a gift and a Giver. And, a side-note, because I can't help myself. The Authorized Version translates as “Comforter,” a Greek title of the Holy Spirit, *Parakletos*. This word itself has the more exact and unwieldy meaning, “He who has been summoned to appear alongside of us in aid or assistance,” thus *Comforter* in English, rather than that. But the translators of the Authorized Version were not anticipating certain other developments in our language. Over time, *comfort* and *to comfort*, as well as *comfortable* have acquired a sense of something like “the raising to an appropriate level or the preservation of one's emotional sense of satisfaction and security,” not unlike what my wife or I might do for Jimmy at 3 am, in the throes of some unpleasant dream. When we hear the Spirit described as *Comforter*, then, we might be tempted to think of this Gift or this Giver as, essentially, a kind of Divine plush-toy. The Spirit is that which makes us feel better when things go bad. Conversely, if we aren't feeling too good, it must be that we aren't having enough faith, or that God's Spirit isn't present. Bad theology. *To Comfort* meant, originally, *to make brave or strong*. Brave and strong, that is, to endure and to bear up. It means precisely that which enables us to live and to act when the emotions are taxed, when the flesh cries out in pain, and when sorrow has filled the heart. The Holy Spirit is not absent in our distress, but rather that distress is itself the place to grant us, and manifest in us Divine Courage, the Heart of God which is the common possession of the Father and the Son.

This courage, then, is to be employed in and through the Church for the Divine work, our participation in the life of God Himself. So, what is it *not* for? That might be a good place to start. A psychologist recently offered this piece of advice for young people struggling to figure out how to live well: *Stop doing what you know isn't helping*. In a similar way, St. James has a list of “preliminary eliminations” for the Christian community, which we read earlier: *Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore—and I love this part—lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word—that is, Christ Himself in Us through the Spirit—which is able to save your souls*. “Filthiness and Superfluity of Naughtiness” is really great English, though it sounds a little amusing now. Once we move past the antique phrasing, the point remains: If we expect God as Guest and Giver in our lives, we have to make room for Him. We must prepare the House of our Souls for His arrival. For most if not all of us, this means a deep Spring cleaning, and probably a rummage sale, or more likely a trip to the dump. It means the elimination of habits, patterns of speech, and behaviors—among which St. James specially identifies anger. The Spirit of God does not comfort the Angry, Talkative, and Vile man; this explains a lot about our culture today.

With this much out of the way, what then can we expect, if the Spirit will lead us into all truth? *When He is come*, Jesus tells us, *he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment*. This is what it will mean to receive of the Spirit, and to be strengthened to participate in the Mission of the Father and the Son.

First, *to reprove the world of sin*. This is not equivalent to condemnation, nor to judgment, which comes later. *To reprove the world of sin*, Jesus says, *because they do not believe in Me*. The logical connection between these two may not be immediately apparent to us. The Spirit demonstrates the reality of human error by a contrast. By filling the Church, that is, by forming Christ in her, through the Holy Spirit God sets up a banner. In the Church and through the Spirit, God manifests the truth of Christ, the truth of Life itself. When the Church truly and faithfully receives the gift of the Spirit, the world comes to a realization about the difference between belief and unbelief; if this logic is pursued to conclusion, what the world ought to sense is the equation of sin with that unbelief. That the world does not come to this realization is a failure of the Church, not of the Spirit which she ought to receive and to reflect.

*Of righteousness*, Jesus continues, *because I go to the Father, and ye see me no more*. This is simply the other side of the coin. If the Spirit dwelling in the Church convicts the world of sin, all the more ought her life and communion to demonstrate the righteousness of the One who formed her in His image. The Church has been, is, and must continue to be a living witness to the truth of the gospel which she preaches.

*Of judgment*, Our Lord concludes, *because the prince of this world—that is, Satan, is no more*. “*Is no more*,” according to the Authorized Version, but *hath been judged*, in the original Greek. The Holy Spirit in the Church demonstrates the futility of those false gospels—gospels of hatred, of murder, of rebellion against God—that have so often possessed the minds and hearts of men.

These three things together, then, comprise the mission of God in and through the Church, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is not a short order. No wonder the Spirit is called the Comforter, if we understand this in the older sense. We will need the courage, the fortitude supplied by the Spirit if we are to participate in this mission. Because, frankly, if we're doing it right, it might not be so comfortable—in the modern sense. On the one hand, the world, and the prince of this world, will resist the reproof of the Spirit. In addition, the virtues that we need, the opposites of wrath, of empty talk, and of vile perversity—these are peacefulness, wisdom, and purity, in short: the activity of God's Love in us—these are themselves holy and supernatural gifts, attitudes and habits that are often at odds with the bent and broken inclinations of our hearts. If we have emptied ourselves of a “superfluity of naughtiness,” we stand in need of a different kind of overflow, and the source of that superfluity comes only from above.

We pray, then, today and always, that God will order our unruly wills and affections, according to the pattern of Jesus Christ. For He is that good and perfect gift, that Bread from Heaven, and that wine of the Kingdom, which has come down for us from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither any shadow of turning. + Amen.