

Thursday marked the fortieth day after Easter, and the ascension of our Lord into heaven. For ten days, the apostles are without the visible presence of their Lord, and they have not yet been given the fullness of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit wasn't doing anything before Pentecost. He was there at creation, brooding over the face of the deep. He was at work in God's people as well. The Old Testament prophets often write that the Spirit of the Lord came upon them, and thus they spoke and wrote. He filled Elizabeth and Zechariah, leading them to utter their words of praise to God. Even John the Baptist as an unborn child in his mother's womb is filled with the Spirit, bearing clear witness to the fact that yes, even the little children believe in the Lord Jesus. He is at work through the entirety of our Lord's ministry, His incarnation, baptism, and temptation. He worked through the Lord to bring about faith.

But what the apostles await, what will be given on Pentecost, is what Jesus promises in today's Gospel. Jesus had promised to send the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father and who would bear witness about Christ. He will bring to the apostles' remembrance all that Jesus had said to them, embolden them in their witness to what they had seen and heard. For four Sundays now, and yet again next week, we hear from the same section of John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete, which is translated variously as Comforter, Helper, Advocate, or Counselor. Here you see the reason the Holy Spirit is called the Comforter, the Helper. He does not just bring Jesus' words to remembrance, but He is the giver of divine aid and consolation. He does not just give knowledge of facts, but creates faith that believes and is comforted by what the Word of God says. He is given to aid the apostles in their witness, to give them wisdom, understanding, courage, and miraculous abilities, all which we see in the Book of Acts.

But this Sunday in between Ascension and Pentecost has us consider that we are in a similar spot as the apostles. We are not without the Spirit. You are Christians. God has put His Spirit within you, you have been converted, brought to repentance and faith, given the new and living heart of flesh in place of the dead stone. And we are the beneficiaries of the fullness of the Spirit's work through the apostles. We possess, we read, we are brought to faith and strengthened through the words of their pens which were guided and preserved by the Spirit. Their witness continues to be proclaimed though their tongues have long been silenced. The Spirit continues to be at work in His Church as He continues to call, gather, enlighten, sanctify, and preserve His Christians through and in it.

But Jesus speaks of what the life of His Church will look like in this world while we wait for His return, for the fullness of all His promises to come to fruition with His coming in glory. Like the apostles, the Church will, by the power of the Spirit, bear witness to Christ, announcing His victory over sin, death, and the devil. But those are not enemies who go quietly. D-Day was the beginning of the end, but Hitler and his gang held on tenaciously for almost a whole year, taking as many down with them on either side as they could. Much more the devil. The victory is guaranteed. Christ is risen from the dead. But Satan is determined to bring as many with him into eternal perdition as he can. So where Christ's Gospel is proclaimed, where the Spirit calls to faith through the church's witness, men shut their ears. That is how it has always been. The people from whom Christ came according to the flesh drove Him and His messengers out of their synagogues. Over the last centuries, lands that were once the stronghold of Christendom have driven Christ and His preachers from nearly all aspects of life. In Europe they have forgotten that they have forgotten.

And we are forgetting here. That the Church no longer holds the place in life and the state that it once did has been quite evident in this pandemic. The heroes, those who will rescue us from the evils of death and suffering, whom we are to turn to and praise are physicians, nurses, and the almighty government. None of these are bad in themselves. They are all good gifts of God. But when they or anything are what we fear, love, and trust in above all things, then they have become an idol. The idol of government is a very real danger today. Once set up and bowed down to, this idol will tolerate no other gods, no rival to its authority, and so in many places Christians haven't just been driven from the public sphere, but from their own houses of worship. That is how life is for the Church in this world. There are rare times of reprieve. But for the most part, there is a real cost to being a Christian. Where you are not mainstream, but the oddball, and even entering your own church will earn you the title of misanthropist.

How does the Christian respond to this? Do we clamor about our First Amendment rights? Do we pine for the gold old days of bygone Americana? Do we retreat from the world, take up what's been advocated as The Benedict Option,

hole ourselves up while society self-destructs so that we can rebuild from the shambles? Do we go along with it, staying away, accommodating the desires of the world? I do wonder how many Christians' lives have gone relatively unaffected by the close of churches, they don't even notice, don't miss it, it has made no significant impact on their lives.

Today's Epistle gives us the answer. It says: "**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.**" The rejection by the world is no strange thing. Christ Himself "**came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him**" (Jn 1:11). Jesus says shortly before today's Gospel: "**If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you**" (Jn 15:18-19). So it comes as no surprise. Our Lord has told us this is how it will be.

So how does the Church, how do you, live in midst of a world that hates you? Again, Peter writes: "**be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.**" It is what last week taught us: prayer. Christians pray in their sufferings, temptations, and these prayers are offered in accordance with those things for which we ought to pray. Our Lord leads and directs us, and we say with Mary, "**Behold, I am the servant of the Lord.**" In those moments of agony and distress, we pray with our Lord in agony in the Garden, we do no wrong to plead for deliverance, yet all things are commended to the will of God for us, which is always good. Thus, the Lord teaches us to pray, "**Thy will be done.**" We ask Him that in all that we endure, He would break and hinder every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, strengthen and keep us firm in His Word and faith. That is often accomplished far more effectively through persecution.

Peter continues: "**Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.**" As the world hates, we love. This is not the love of butterflies in the stomach, nor the love that is only given when it is earned. It is the holy feeling of good will. It is what flows from the faith that receives the forgiveness of sins. So people to whom you are not related are dearly loved by you. And so some of you have offered to assist those in need during this pandemic, whom you do not know, have never even met. And you all approach the altar to joined to Christ and one another in the Holy Communion, you show that you are at peace with one another, bearing no ill will, no grudge, but freely forgive. That too is our attitude towards those who hate and persecute us. We don't just pray for our enemies, we love them. We speak the truth and care for all. The story is told of one pastor in the early church who invited the Roman soldiers who came to arrest him to first sit down and eat. And so he lovingly served and preached to those who began his journey to martyrdom.

Finally, Peter admonishes us: "**As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.**" This is simply saying that as a Christian you recognize that everything you have and are is given by God. Such recognition frees from selfishness, and moves us to serve one another with whatever we have and are. This is what is shown forth in the offering, which is far more than just putting money in the collection plate. That is but a small token, a little picture of what we are doing at that time. We offer ourselves for service to others and God's kingdom, with no expectation of reward or return, because it is all God's. I once heard the explanation of tithing, giving 10% of income to God, as this: you're not losing 10% of what's yours, God is letting you keep 90% of what is His.

As we wait for the Lord's return and endure the scorn of a world that is passing away, we pray, love, and share. All these are contrary to what the world suggests. Oh the world talks about spirituality, belief in some higher power who keeps track of what we do, but otherwise has no real involvement in our lives. The world has its own version of love as well, to which we are constantly told to assent. And oh how we hear that everyone should pay their fair share...under government compulsion. But Peter teaches us God's definitions of these things. And it is by faith, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, that you understand. It is by His power and working that you do. And thus, in your prayers, your love toward others, your selfless giving, "**in everything, God [is] glorified through Jesus Christ.**"