

## Pentecost Sunday 2009

What is today on the church's calendar?

**Response:** Pentecost, the birthday of the church.

Exactly, the anniversary of the reception of the Holy Spirit by the disciples of Jesus.

Because one function of the Holy Spirit in the church's life is to allow us to unify things which have no apparent unity, I'm going to start out with some ununified background on Pentecost as a day in the church's year and, eventually, hope to weave it all into some kind of unity. Perhaps, if I'm lucky, even with one or two of the lessons.

The place to start: Pentecost is how many days after Easter?

Response: Fifty.

Why fifty?

Response: So that it's longer than Lent. (Laughter.)

Yes, the early church looked at the relation between Lent and Easter and asked, "What's more important? Our repentance or the resurrection of Christ? The Resurrection of Christ. Without it, our repentance may be admirable, but is practically useless. Consequently, the season in which we celebrate God's action needs to be longer than, to be more important than, the one in which we worry about our sin. And this says something very important: Don't make your own sin the center of your spiritual life. Make God's actions the center of your spiritual life. That's one way of putting the message those ancient churchmen were trying to get across when they made Easter Season longer than Lent. Put first things first, and the first things are the actions of God on our behalf, not our own sins. Pay attention to sin, that's why we have those forty days of Lent, but always remember that God's action and God's love are, in the longest of runs, far more important. Focus on them. The key thing is not that you occasionally mess up, but that God loves you. That's the key thing. That's the message. God loves you.

Properly understood, I could stop here and we could get on with the rest of the service. However, that would make this among the shortest sermons I've ever preached and heaven forbid that I should subject you to such a change of custom – it would be highly unepiscopalian.

So, a bit more about all this.

The early church had a different understanding of time, I think, than we do. For them, Easter Season, those fifty days beginning on Easter Sunday and ending on Pentecost Sunday, were understood as a single unit of time. Consequently, hymns and prayers beginning, "On this day Jesus rose from death . . ." were used all through the whole season, not just on Easter Day. The whole season was the **Day of Resurrection**. Occasionally, when Lucy and I do hymn selection, we'll pick a hymn for some Sunday after Easter which talks as if we're singing the hymn on

Easter Sunday. There's precedent for this in the ancient church which says, the season of Easter is a single day in the church's life. It's fifty days in your earthly life, but a single day in the church's. It is the day of resurrection, and so the celebration, the proclamation, of the resurrection is appropriate at all times during the fifty days of Easter.

In the ancient church, the day of Pentecost and the celebration of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the church's birthday were not understood as separate events, so that you have Easter over here, leap over a gap and, over here, you find Pentecost. No, Pentecost was understood as the living out of the implications of Easter. The two events of resurrection and the gift of the Spirit flowed into each other without any seam or gap. I'd rather like to spend time looking more deeply at how ancient people thought about this and contrasting it with today. How is it that the Holy Spirit is the expression in our lives of the resurrection of Jesus?

Last Sunday, when we celebrated the Ascension, I mentioned, in passing, a warning against over historicizing the celebrations of the church's year. Pentecost is a celebration pointing to an eternal fact as well as a particular event. If we lose the eternal fact aspect of Pentecost we lose the capacity to bridge the gap between the Biblical account and the present moment. If we lose the historical uniqueness aspect we abandon concrete life for a world of abstractions and principles, but not living men and women.

On the eternal fact side of the equation, there never has been a time in the whole story of the creation during which the Holy Spirit has been absent or inactive. So when we talk about the gift of the Spirit to the church we must mean something other than that she was absent and is now present. In good, proper, technical, Christian theology no person of the Trinity ever acts in isolation from the others. The Father never acts by himself, in isolation from the Son or the Spirit. The Son never acts without the Father and the Spirit. Why? Because there is only one God so there is only one actor, only one entity that acts, not three. If you assert three entities that act you are a polytheist, not a monotheist. So properly understood Christian theology has always emphasized that there is a single God who acts.

Now that one action, of course, may result from three different aspects of God, it may be the results of a multi part inner life. The Trinity may show up in a good many ways in each single act that God does. But, ultimately, there is only one entity which acts. He may act a way involving threeness. The Trinity may express itself in the actions of God, but you don't have, as you sometimes hear, a father who creates, a son who redeems and a Spirit which sanctifies. Sorry, that's devotionally adequate (barely) but technically careless theology.

You can chew on that with me during the coffee hour if you wish.

Comment: Besides, next week you'll preach on the Trinity.

Right, so prepare yourselves. The key is that anytime God acts, and God has acted since the beginning of time, the Holy Spirit is present in those actions of God.

This raises the question, what are we talking about when we talk about the gift of the

Holy Spirit to the church, if the Spirit has been constantly present and active? I think there are couple of responses to this. One simple one is that there's a huge difference between the Spirit being present and the community of the church self-consciously responding to or living out of that presence. The gift of the Holy Spirit to the church consists at least of this: In the church, we attempt to recognize the actions of God in our lives and in creation and respond to them. That recognition, and response as a result of conscious recognition on our part, is a gift from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is nothing other than Jesus as he is present to us as individuals and to the Christian community. The Spirit is not some separate thing. The Spirit is the presence of Jesus active in forming, transforming, saving us right now.

So it's no wonder that John, in his gospel says, well, it's to your benefit if I go away as this single, localized presence, because if I stick around as a single localized presence it will be difficult for me to be present to you when you, Thomas, are out evangelizing in India and you, James, are evangelizing in East Syria and someone else has gone to the Slavs and someone else to whoever is at the antipodes. In a relatively simple minded kind of way the Holy Spirit is the means of universalizing the presence of Christ in the Christian community.

Therefore, Pentecost is not so much a celebration of the Spirit's presence as such, but is the celebration of an enriched conversation with God on the part of the Christian community because we have become aware of and are responsive to that presence. To a large extent the Christian life is a seeking of openness to, a seeking of directness of conversation with, that presence of the Spirit of Christ among us.

To put it in plain and untheological language. All Christians can, I suspect most Christians should, talk with Jesus in a quite direct way. Sometimes you do this by having an actual conversation. I do do that occasionally. It isn't my basic style, so I don't do it too often, but occasionally it happens. Occasionally He talks back.

Frequently the presence of Christ shows up not in direct conversation but in an awareness of the depth of things. They are not just surfaces. To seek for meaning in that which is separate, outside, beyond ourselves is, fundamentally, a response to God. To seek for meaning in something beyond ourselves is to identify it as an independent part of the creation. That is the foundation, the beginning of an ability to love that which is beyond ourselves. If we do not recognize the difference between ourselves and the creation, if everything out there finds its meaning as an extension of us or in serving us, we will not love anything else for what it is. The objective of the Christian life is to so work in us that we love as many things as possible for what they are, not for what they can do for us. God is that which loves everything that is for what it is, not for what it can do for him. As a definition of God, that points as far into the matter's heart as I can go. God is that which loves everything that is for what it is, rather than for what it can do for him.

The Holy Spirit is the means, if you will, of our first coming to an awareness of all the otherness which surrounds us and then of being able to treat it as other in a positive,

creative and supportive way.

So that's one way of understanding the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. It enables us to engage in this conversation which ends in disinterested love for the creation. After Pentecost, our conversation with God can struggle to be self-conscious. And we are to engage in this conversation on behalf of the rest of creation. If you will listen closely when we reach the prelude to the Sanctus, you will hear a reference to exactly what I'm talking about. So I won't give it to you now, but ask you to watch for it when it comes. (NOTE TO READERS: the passage referred to is in Eucharistic Prayer D on page 373 of the Book of Common Prayer "Joining with them, and giving voice to every creature under heaven . . .")

There's another way of understanding the Holy Spirit's presence. It's hard for me to articulate it, so this may be more than usually mushy, but it's important so I'll give it a try. In the Christian life we often work in and with a world of phantoms, dreams, imagination (not in a positive sense, but in the sense of the phrase "in the imagination of our hearts" referring to our tendency to construct self-serving myths). A lot of the world we live in is not a true world, but a false one. This is the ordinary human condition. To expose this world, merely remember the number of times you've been mistaken about other people. I do that quite frequently. I misunderstand what they are. I either under or over estimate their capacities. Because I do not see them as other, I do not listen as I would need to to hear something not me. Usually this takes the form of an under estimation of another person's ability to change. So one of the functions of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church is to remind us of the infinite capacity for change in most human beings. That capacity for change is infinite because the Holy Spirit is infinite and is seeking expression in their lives – and that is the frame within which Christians ought to approach everyone, including themselves. The expression of the reality of Christ takes place in and through our lives by means of the Spirit being present in each other. Therefore, everyone has a divinely given vocation and we will underestimate them as long as we do not recognize, or at least do not search for, their vocations.

Usually when I or the church say "vocation" we're thinking of some specific task or area of tasks. (For instance, a vocation to "leadership." This involves a whole raft of different concrete tasks and so isn't a specific job, but a call to be active in an area of work.) I'm supposed to have a vocation to ordained ministry – something I keep on struggling with from year to year, but it's too late to undo it now and sometimes God graciously gives us that which we had mistakenly seized. Yet my having a vocation to ordained ministry or your having one to leadership or service or evangelism is a secondary concern. The primary concern is that you have a vocation to your life, as a unique working out of God expressing his love in the world. Your vocation to your own life is unique because no other entity in the universe can live it, only you. No other entity in the universe can show the love that you have the opportunity of expressing, only you can do that. In that sense, the vocation of the whole Christian community is to witness to and express God's love for the creation. Each Christian can do that, is called to do that, has a vocation to do that, in the unique ways that your life allows. That's the

fundamental vocation given by the Spirit to each of us. Within that broad vocation you find the little details that we call vocations: to ordination, to do the dishes after supper, to visit the sick. These are all expressions of God's love for his creation which can only be expressed through you.

So, a hefty part of the Christian life is the working out of the pattern of vocations given to each of us which allows the expression of God's love through us — this is the primary work of the Holy Spirit. So, the celebration of Pentecost is, in a way, the celebration of the gift of our life as something constantly related to God and therefore constantly expressive of God.

That's the second way in which the church receives the Holy Spirit. So we can talk about Pentecost as the birthday of the church. But be careful, Pentecost is not the birthday of the presence of the Spirit either in the creation or in the community of those seeking God, but the birthday of our responding to that which has always been at a new level of communication and of integrity.

On that note, I think I've said enough. Please stand for the creed.