

A Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension Day  
Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020, at Saint John's Church in Savannah

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*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. Amen.* 1 Peter 4:11.

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This is the Sunday after Ascension and before Pentecost, between Christ's being taken up into heaven, and the Spirit's coming down from heaven. It is sometimes called Expectation Sunday – and expectancy is right word for it: for Christ had died, had risen, had ascended into heaven, and St. Peter says *the end is at hand* – meaning not so much the “end of the world”, the world terminated, as “the end for which the world was made” – the world attaining its goal. In Christ mankind indeed has been rescued from sin and death, and is now taken up into glory at the Father's right hand, mankind has attained its end in God. Our hope has become sure and certain in him. All that remains is for Christ to come again in glory, to manifest his triumph universally, and set all wrongs to right. That *End*, St. Peter says, *is at hand* – not only in Christ's future return in glory<sup>i</sup>, but also before Christ's coming again, in the witness of the Spirit to Christ. In the Spirit's witness to Christ that end, that realized hope, is drawing near, invading and transforming our lives in the world – that is what fills us with expectancy today.

Though Jesus leaves the world for the Father, his witness does not fail: for at the last supper, he made this promise to his disciples, in virtue of his own finished work: *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: 27 And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.* It was expectation of that promise that moved the disciples *with one accord in prayer and supplication* in the ten days between his Ascension and Pentecost – asking for the sending of the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, to bear witness to him with the apostles. The witness of the Spirit is the witness of the Father to the Son made through the apostles and the apostolic church – for there can be no other witness, than the Son's, who is the full and final revelation of God to man, the Word made flesh. All other witness simply proclaims, interprets, and applies the witness of Jesus. And these two witnesses, divine and human, work together in a complementary fashion – the Spirit's inward witness in the heart and mind at work in and through the outward audible and visible witness of the Church. As Augustine puts it, when the apostles speak in words, the Spirit speaks in hearts<sup>ii</sup> - by inward persuasions confirming the truth of their testimony to him. He works in the apostles and the apostolic community, to confirm and strengthen their faith in Christ – and he works through their

witness to convict others of the truth of their testimony, thus awakening and sustaining their faith in Christ also.

In the witness of the Spirit and the apostles to the hope we have in Christ, is the faith and life of the church generated and sustained – in a world which rejects it. Without their witness, there is no faith, there is no church, and there is no hope. In a world that is unfriendly of this witness, what are the works and practices by which believers may exercise and sustain this hope and their mission of witness? In today's epistle lesson, St. Peter sets out some practices as priorities for us.

The first priority of the church expecting the End is prayer, hearts ever turned to God, in expectant prayer – calling on the God who has drawn near to us in his Son and Spirit, for the hallowing of his name, the coming of his kingdom, and the doing of his will. Such prayer requires the sustained engagement of intellect and will – as Peter says, you have to be *sober, and watch unto prayer* - you can't do this if you are drunk, hung-over, or half-asleep –muddled by the cares and pleasures of the world. At a time when we cannot gather with one accord in one place – it's all the more important for individuals and families to be praying together every day at home. It doesn't have to be elaborate – take your Bible and Prayer Book, read a chapter from the New Testament, say together the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and a collect or two. So you will engage your mind and will in expectation of the End that is drawing near.

Now we can't pray with and for one another if there is ill will dividing us – so Peter says: *above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.* Envy, hatred, and malice are quick to accuse, judge, and shame – but *Charity covers a multitude of sins* – it overlooks a brother's sin, and if it can't be overlooked, it forgives it, readily, cheerfully, and repeatedly. It endures wrong without stirring up strife and making a bad situation worse – and if a relationship has broken down as a result of a brother's wrong-doing, it speaks the truth in love to the brother, and seeks reconciliation with him. Peter says we must have charity among ourselves *above all things* – because such the willingness and ability of Christians to love one another in this way is a necessity for the survival of the Christian community in a hostile world . Right now, Americans are sharply divided about how to manage the risks of Covid-19 – and there is a good deal of criticism and bad temper on display from all quarters. It's an opportunity for Christians to bear witness to Christ – if we can model loving tolerance for divergent views and practices, with humility and patience. Charity covers sins – it is also expressed, Peter says, in *ungrudging hospitality*. In a world that is often hostile to Christian faith, Christians need to welcome and support one another with open hearts, but also with open hands and open houses. *As every man hath received the gift, says St. Peter, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace*

*of God.* All Christians have received gifts, both spiritual and material, and they are as diverse as the church's members are many – the thing to remember is that they are *gifts*, they don't belong to us, they have been given to us in trust, to be used for the benefit of all, in the service of God, and for his glory, not our own. *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. Amen.* If we have gifts for sharing in hospitality, for speaking, for serving – if we consider who gave them to us, and for what purpose – then we will use them in such a way that it is God who speaks in our speech, God who acts in our service – and the glory will go to him. When that happens, the community of believers, that has been generated and sustained by the witness of the Spirit and of the apostles, itself becomes a community of witness – a community in whose prayer, charity, hospitality, stewardship, God speaks, and God acts, proclaiming and confirming the witness of his Son.

And that really is what the Church is – and if we are anything at all, that's what we *are* – though no doubt we are not very good at it, and there is lots of room for improvement. But there is something here for us to pray for, with expectancy, claiming the promised gifts of the Spirit, seeking the witness he bears to Christ – and you we have the promise of answered prayer by those who ask in the name of Jesus. *Come Holy Ghost, fill the hearts of thy faithful people, and enkindle in them the fire of thy love. Amen.*

*In the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost,  
it is fitting to pray with one accord for the promise of the Holy Ghost.*

## *Veni creator spiritus.*

Come down, Creator Spirit, find  
*A harbour in thy people's mind;*  
With grace celestial consecrate  
*The heart of clay thou didst create.*

Thy very name is Comforter,  
*The highest gift the skies confer*  
The flow of life, the fire, the love  
*The unction poured from God above.*

Thou finger stretched from heaven's throne  
*Whose touch is sevenfold benison;*  
Thou promise of the Father, rich  
*In sudden dower of golden speech;*

Infuse our soul with kind desire,  
*Our senses light with shining fire;*  
Confirm with lasting hardihood  
*The cowardice of flesh and blood.*

Bring peaceful hours, and banish far  
*All enmities that augur war.*  
With such a guide to go before  
*No hurtful thing can harm us more.*

Make through thyself the Father known,  
*Reveal the person of the Son,*  
And grant a constant faith, to see  
*Their Spirit equally in thee. Amen.*

(transl. Austin Farrer)

ESV <sup>7</sup> The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. <sup>8</sup> Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup> Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. <sup>10</sup> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: <sup>11</sup> whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who

serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The ancient collect:

Almighty and everlasting God, grant that our wills may ever be devoted unto thee, and that we may serve thy majesty with pure hearts.

1 Peter 4:7-11

<sup>7</sup> But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. <sup>8</sup> And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. <sup>9</sup> Use hospitality one to another without grudging. <sup>10</sup> As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. <sup>11</sup> 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. Amen.

John 15:26-16:4

At the last supper, Jesus said unto his disciples: <sup>26</sup> But 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: <sup>27</sup> And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. **16** These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. <sup>2</sup> They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. <sup>3</sup> And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. <sup>4</sup> But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them. And these things I said not unto you at the beginning, because I was with you.

The Holy Eucharist is offered to the praise and glory of Almighty God, through Jesus Christ, our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord;

for the witness of his Spirit in our hearts as the witness of the Apostles resounds in our ears; and for the witness we also bear by our life together as a church, in the charity that covers a multitude of sins in forgiveness, in ungrudging hospitality, in generous service, *that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ*

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• <sup>i</sup> as the angels said after his ascension: *this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven*

<sup>ii</sup> quoted in F. D. Bruner, *John*, p. 912