

Sixth Sunday after Easter May 21, 2017

Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21

The theme of today's readings is the proclamation of the Divine Presence of the Holy Spirit. The origin of this promise can be traced to the Old Testament Books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In the days of the prophets, God had promised to make a new covenant with His people. He promised to put His law within His chosen people, writing it on their hearts, that He may be their God and they may be His people. He promised to put a new human spirit within His people, to remove their hearts of stone and to give them a heart of flesh. The gospel of today tells us of the concern of Jesus for his church. Jesus is about to leave the world and return to his Father as he promises to send them the Holy Spirit. He tells them that he will not leave them orphaned but his spirit will be with the church till the end of time. The first reading begins with the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem and yet speaks of the spread of the church to the surrounding places. Deacon Philip preaches successfully in Samaria and the Apostles are called to lay their hands on them so that the community receives the Spirit. In the second reading Peter says that Christ suffered for our sins once for all, the righteous person for the unrighteous, in order to bring all people to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but he was made alive in the spirit.

Today's First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles was an historical recount of the event surrounding the giving of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans. Because of the persecution, although the gospel was spreading, believers were scattered. So the Deacon Philip was on a mission to Samaritans which is the first crossing of the threshold into non-Jewish world. Accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah, many of the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit in their lives through the laying of the hands of Peter and John. This was the unique way in which the Samaritan converts were incorporated into the Church. They imposed their hands on the people, a symbol which they understood as a conveying of power. This symbol is used in the church even today at baptism, confirmation and ordination. This very special event can be viewed as the Samaritan Pentecost. The first Pentecost is documented in the Book of Acts when the disciples received the Holy Spirit. A third Pentecost took place when the Gentiles heard the good news and received the Holy Spirit. Similarly in the world, the Spirit comes to all who search for him and filled with the Holy Spirit, these members of the Church no longer need to feel alone. The church now has an Advocate to guide them, to counsel them, and to grant them wisdom and strength in their difficult times.

In the second reading Peter stresses the essential dimension of Christian Commitment and highlighting the cost of living virtuously. It is addressed to Christian converts who were suffering for their beliefs as a minority group in the pagan society. The advice on how to relate to a disbelieving culture still has its relevance. We have a responsibility to bring God in Christ to our world today, a world which is more often hostile to Christ and his values. Peter calls on them to use mildly the words of defense and at the same time to protest as a witness. They are to be prepared to defend their commitment to Christ, and your faith in him before anyone who demands. He asks on them to speak positively on behalf of someone in need, for God chooses to allow his word to be spoken by those whose hearts are open to receive the out pouring in love of his Spirit. He tells them to protest, meaning to testify or give witness for another. Our giving witness by the way we live and by the values we hold, we can speak favorably for Jesus' quality of life. This has to be done with gentleness and respect, radiating joy in our lives. Christ the righteous is an example of suffering and through suffering he brings all to God. He adds that sometimes we may suffer but it is far better to suffer for doing right than for doing wrong.

Today's Gospel picks up where last Sunday left off. The context once again is the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his coming suffering and death but also for his Resurrection and Ascension. But he promises them that even afterwards he will remain with them but in a very different way from now. He tells them clearly that he is the way, truth and life. He explains that if they truly love him, they will keep his commandments. We note here Jesus stresses on the important word, namely "My Commandments." Jesus is not speaking of the traditional, Ten Commandments or the other legal norms practiced by the Jews. The disciples are aware that they are still valid, but Jesus goes beyond them as he had explained to them in the Sermon on the Mount. He had told categorically that he was not here to do away with the Jewish law or the teaching of the prophets but rather to fulfill their inner potential. Jesus wants the disciples to understand that his commandments are on a different level and we ought to keep them in fidelity. To put in very simple terms, his commandment is to love: to love God with all our heart and our soul, our mind and our strength and to love others as we love ourselves. Already in the Sermon on the Mount he tells the disciples that they have to love their enemies too and pray for those who persecute them. Jesus showed this love in practice as he died on the cross praying for his enemies and forgiving all. Today this love includes to reach out to those marginalized, suffering, persecuted and all those in need. His

commandments invite all to be agents of healing and reconciliation in a broken and divided world.

Jesus calls the disciples to observe his commandment. Here he stresses on the word Love, a word commonly used and yet is a difficult one to put it into practice. Jesus says in the discourse that if we love him we will keep his commands and fulfill his wishes. To John there is only one test of love that is obedience. It was by his obedience that Jesus showed his love of God and it is by our obedience we must show our love to Jesus. We see in the world varying expressions of love such as the love between parents and children, between husband and wife, between friends and even between different nations. To Jesus, real love is not an easy thing. It is shown by obedience. This obedient, trusting love leads to two things: first it leads to ultimate safety and second it leads to a fuller and total revelation. Jesus shows his love to us and he does not permit us to struggle with the Christian life all by ourselves. He would send us another helper, advocate or a comforter. He sends us an Advocate who can plead for us with the Father.

Jesus explains to the disciples that God's love causes him to promise to give us "another" Advocate. He uses the word another since he himself is an Advocate and the other Advocate will come and continue the work of Jesus. The word Advocate is understood as an intercessor, defender, and a witness for the accused, a best friend and a comforter in distress. In general, the word refers to a person who comes to stand by us and protect and gives us support. The Advocate and who comes will be a counselor, a monitor, and a comforter. Jesus tells them that when the Advocate comes, whom he will send from the Father, he is the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on behalf of Jesus. He would abide with the disciples to the end of time his gifts and graces would encourage their hearts. The expressions used here and elsewhere, plainly denote a person, and the office itself includes all the Divine perfections. The gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon the Disciples of Christ, and not on the world. This is the favor God gives to his chosen people. As the source of holiness and happiness, the Holy Spirit will abide with every believer forever.

The purpose of sending the Advocate or the Holy Spirit is to teach us everything, and to remind us of all that Jesus had said to the Apostles. Jesus again tells that the Holy Spirit was sent to testify on behalf of Jesus and the purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit was to prove the world wrong about sin, and speak on righteousness and judgment: about sin, because some did not believe in Jesus; about righteousness because Jesus was going to the Father and the Apostles

would no longer see Him; about judgment, because the ruler of the world had been condemned. Jesus was with the disciples for a short time and had many other things to tell them. But they could not bear it while He was in the world. The Spirit of truth was sent so he could guide the disciples of Jesus into all the truth; for he spoke whatever he heard, and he declared to the things that were to come. He glorified Jesus, because he took what belonged to Jesus and declared it to us. When we speak of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth, we acknowledge his special role as an Advocate. As the Spirit of Truth he guides the Church in all truth. When it is said that the Holy Spirit abides with us and in us, it means that he will be with both, with the Church and in every Christian. He will make everyone the dwelling place of God, a new Temple.

Christ promises that he would continue his care of his disciples. He tells them that he will not leave them orphans, or fatherless, for though he will be leaving them, he won't leave them in isolation. He communicates to them that he will come speedily to them after his resurrection. He promises them that he will come daily to them through his Spirit and thus manifest his love, and place into them the abundance of his grace. Certainly he will remain with them till the end of time. Only those persons that see Christ with an eye of faith shall see him forever: the world sees him no more till his second coming; but his disciples have communion with him during his absence. He tells them that these mysteries will be fully revealed in heaven. It is certainly a further act of grace and he asks them to be aware of it and receive comfort from it. The surest evidence of our love to Christ is obedience to the laws of Christ. There are spiritual tokens of Christ and his love given to all believers. Where sincere love to Christ is in the heart, there will be obedience. Love will be a commanding, constraining principle; and where love is, duty follows from a principle of gratitude. God will not only love obedient believers, but he will take pleasure in loving them and remaining with them. He will surely be part and parcel of their life along with the Son and the Spirit. These privileges are confined to those whose love Jesus and keep his commandments and receive the Holy Spirit's new-creating grace.

The Holy Spirit, the best gift in love that God can give, stands beside us, comforts us when we ask, helps us in difficult times and speaks on our behalf when we are in struggle. Although people with no religious faith comfort one another, our fellowship with the spirit is deeper and more awesome. That does not mean transforming speeches or great visions. The Holy Spirit is most often more quiet and simple and more available than people can believe. We must remember that

all spiritual life, all holiness comes from the Father through Jesus by the action of the Holy Spirit. From time to time if we have the sensitivity to perceive it, we are aware of what is happening as we truly share the spirit with one another. The spirit is present in our common kindness, loving concern for one another and is ready to give us the full inspiration of his presence. We will experience the presence of the spirit whenever we love God enough to keep his commands.

The Words of Jesus in the conclusion of today's Gospel Reading are: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." Through this declaration, we learn the condition that is required in order to share in the life of God. To partake in the life of God, we must also share in the love and obedience of Jesus that was manifested towards His Father during His earthly life. We must share in the love that Jesus manifested towards other human beings. Such is obeying His commandments. The good disciple is much more than someone who, out of a dogged sense of duty, just avoids personal sin and tries to stay in the "state of grace". When we truly become loving persons to both friend and enemy, to family and strangers, we know that the Spirit of Jesus is living within and transforming us. Then, in the words of Jesus, we can see and, because we can see, we are fully alive.

Perhaps we have heard the fable of a domesticated eagle. Once a tribal who lived in a forest found an egg of an eagle, took it home and hatched it along with other chicken eggs. The eaglet started growing along with other chickens in the farm. It started eating mud, pecking and hopping here and there like the other chicks. But it never learnt to fly like an eagle. One day as it was scratching the ground for food it saw an eagle majestically flying high in the sky. The eaglet started looking at it and admiring its grandeur when other chicks came to the eaglet and said, look that one is the eagle, the king of birds. You and I are chickens and we cannot fly like that eagle. Leave him and alone and come let us go search for our food. The poor eaglet then on thought it was a chicken and lived like a chicken and never learnt to fly.

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