



Pentecost
Sunday 12 June 2011

The Feast of Pentecost

A sermon by Rt Revd Mark Sisk, Bishop of New York

Readings: Acts 2.1-18; John 7.37-39

It is a very great pleasure and honor to be with you today. I am deeply grateful to your Vicar Nick Holtam for his gracious invitation to celebrate and preach this Pentecost Day. The opportunity to baptize, to confirm, and to receive is, to me, very special and added joy. Congratulations to all of you, and welcome to friends and family who may have joined us for this wonderful moment in your life in Christ.

I want to begin by bringing you greetings from my colleagues in episcopal ministry in New York: Bishops Catharine Roskam and Drew Smith, as well as all the priests, deacons and people of the Diocese of New York.

This morning marks a transition, a turning of the page, the beginning of a new chapter. The transition in the life of those about to be baptized, confirmed and received, participates in, and is a reflection of the larger transition that is taking place within the Church year.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. Today marks the close of the Great 50 Days of Easter: Easter, that season, which we celebrate with the greatest solemnity we can muster, the wonderful saving act that God has done in Jesus. The Feast of Pentecost marks something else as well. It marks the beginning of the rest of the year, which, in a sense represents the rest of our lives. In that same spirit it would be fair to say that the whole of the Easter Season prepares us for today: for the living of our lives in the light of Jesus' resurrection.

To get a clear picture of where we are just now, and to contemplate that which awaits us, I think it is important to pause for a moment and look back over these past 50 days to glimpse in broad strokes the journey we have made. To begin with it is crucially important to remember that the meaning of Jesus' resurrection was not obvious to that first generation of disciples, any more than its implications are obvious to us. The stunning realization of what God had done in Jesus, takes as much getting used to now as it did then, for them as it does for us. It is that process of getting used to, of absorbing, the startling message of the resurrection that our Gospel readings have traced over the Sundays of Easter. The first several of those Sundays provided us with excited almost breathless accounts of the disciples' encounter with the resurrected Jesus. Then followed several weeks during which we heard readings that emphasized the promises that awaited us in the new life that is ours in the risen Christ. We were introduced to the challenges and joys of living as people who know this stunning new freedom.

But, what does all this mean, really? What does it mean for us to live with the knowledge that death does not have the last word? In order to understand more deeply the astonishing claims that our lessons have been making, it might be helpful to reflect for a moment on the more typical human experience at the time of the death of a loved one. The initial reaction is of course startled grief. A typical grief response, a response that is familiar to anyone who has ever gone to what we in America call a "wake," that is to say a gathering of friends and family at a time of death, is that people deal with their grief by sharing stories about the deceased. Often those initial stories have a tendency to exaggerate the qualities of the dear departed one. It is only later that a more measured picture of the deceased emerges.

Over time, those left behind, adjust: life carries on. The aching absence somehow becomes absorbed into the familiar round of daily life. Slowly the sharpness of the loss begins to dull. To be certain, as time goes by, when the occasion presents itself, those memories will be readily shared with others. However, eventually those memories become more and more localized, as it were. That is to say, a smaller and smaller number of people share them, or are even interested in them.

Take for example the Battle of Britain, now more than 70 years ago. Doubtless, for those who remember it: it was traumatic. But I suspect that few people here this morning do remember it, and those of us who cannot, will not ever be able to connect deeply with the emotions of those who do.

How different all this is from the response to Jesus' death. To be certain, the disciples' first response to Jesus' death was deep, profound grief. They gathered in the upper room to console each other. However, quickly, and totally unexpectedly, their grief was turned to joy: they had encountered the resurrected Jesus. Amazingly, wonderfully, unbelievably, Jesus had, by God's grace, defeated death. And then the process of sharing memories began in earnest. It was the sharing of those memories that was the beginning of the formation of the Gospels. But here a further change from the typical grief process began to emerge. Instead of the memory of Jesus gradually fading, and becoming softened and integrated into the familiar routine of their daily lives, they found just the opposite happening. They found those memories becoming more and more sharp and pronounced. And what's more: Rather than simply integrating those blessed memories into their lives, they discovered the opposite happening. They found themselves needing to make their lives correspond to their memories of Jesus, not the other way round. In a word, those first disciples began to realize that the memory of Jesus, His life, and teaching, His actions and His promise, was becoming the controlling force in their lives. The memory of the Jesus seemed to have its own power – a power that drew their daily lives toward Him with a vivid and life giving power of its own.

Now their burning question became: What do we do? How do we live in the light of this new awareness that was engulfing them? The story of Jesus' Ascension added a further departure from the typical experience of grief. The message of the Ascension was that the story of what God had done in Jesus was not for them alone. It was a message that God intended to be spread abroad, to be shared with all who would hear it. The disciples had been told, just as we have been told, that we are not simply to sit amongst our own circle of friends and reminisce about the good old days with Jesus, as though those old days lived only in our memories. Far from it. What has been made crystal clear is that the recollection of God's action in Jesus is not a memory that will pass slowly into oblivion. Rather the memory of Jesus is a living and vital force, shaping and forming us for life in the world in which we find ourselves. Not only that; we have been commissioned by God to share that message far and wide.

As challenging as that message might sound to us, to those first disciples it must have seemed completely overwhelming: remember how insular their existence was. They were Jews, the children of Israel, therefore, basically, all other people were gentile outsiders, even, in some sense, enemies. How were they ever to carry out the charge that had been given them? They simply could not do it. They knew with certainty that they could not do it on their own. They needed assistance. We need assistance. And so, in our prayer this morning, we have asked God to send, ... the light of Your Holy Spirit: grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things That is the assistance we need: nothing less than God's own Holy Spirit, lifting us, strengthening us, encouraging us on, in the life and in the work that we have been given to do.

We make a profound error if we imagine, even for a moment, that the worship that we offer, the nurture that we give and receive, and that the service and witness that we offer to those in need, comes out of the riches of our own character or virtue. That is not at all the case. The promise of

the gift of God's Holy Spirit which is ours this Day of Pentecost, is nothing less than the promise that, come what may, we will never be abandoned by God. God will always be at our side strengthening us for the journey that is before us.

Therefore, we can rest assured that we, each and all of us, are members of a living community of infinitely unfolding Promise. A community that is empowered and equipped by God Himself to offer worship, to give and receive the nourishing love of God, and the courage to bear witness, even in the face of relentless hostility, the abiding Love of God for all people everywhere.

Those who are to be baptized, or confirmed or received today are about commit, or recommit themselves, to this all embracing message. They are about to declare that they are ready to share, far and wide, the Good news that all people everywhere, are held in the arms of God's abiding Love. Let us join them in that commitment so that that privilege, that joy, may be ours as well, today, tomorrow, and unto the ages of ages. AMEN.