

23rd May 2021 – Day of Pentecost – Hugh’s Sermon

In the name of Our Creator, the Son Our Saviour
and the Triune Spirit Who is With Us Always.

Notes.

Perhaps nothing breathes more strongly than the promise and presence of the Spirit in John’s so-called ‘farewell discourse’ of Jesus (John chapters 14-17), portions of which have occupied our attention during the last several Sundays of Easter.

Now it is Pentecost. Pentecost stands as the culmination of Easter’s reflection on the promise of the resurrection and as a transition to the season of Trinity.

So the lesson for today invites reflection on the assurance of the resurrection promises, now explored and made real in the varied dimensions of Christian life and mission. That ‘abundant life’ is the promise of the unfolding love of God, shown in the glory that is for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ and in the abiding presence of the Spirit, who confirms that promise in our hearts and sends our communities into the world to bear witness to that good news.

We hear that promise and witness in the opening verses of today’s lesson. Jesus says ‘when the advocate comes...’ (26). As we have noted in previous Sundays, though within the narrative of John’s gospel, Jesus speaks these words of comfort to his disciples just prior to his passion as he seeks to console their sense of abandonment and fear, these words are also [2 words missing] for a community who now lives in the sure and certain truth of the resurrection. As heirs of Pentecost this community now has indeed received that promised Spirit. Now our communities of hearers, just as those first disciples, are comforted, encouraged, and sent with Jesus words of promise.

One in Promise and Mission.

The opening words of this reading for Pentecost underscore the presence and the unity of the Trinity. Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit, the Advocate (parakletos); he claims that the mission and sending of the Spirit occurs by his authority; and he assures us that this Spirit can be trusted as true on at least two counts – the Spirit comes from the Father, and the Spirit exercises its mission chiefly not in bearing witness to self, but in testifying to the good news already made known in the resurrection of the Son (15:26). A similar assertion of this oneness of the promise and mission of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit concludes the reading for the day. ‘All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I have said that [the Spirit] will take what is mine and declare it to you’ (16:15). So if the Spirit’s identity and mission is centred in bearing witness and making present for us the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise and mission as risen and glorified Lord, then the Spirit’s identity is also centred in modelling and empowering that same witness in the community of Jesus’ disciples. Witness to the unfolding love of the Father in sending of the Son belongs to the essence of the Trinity. Jesus’ disciple communities are gathered witnesses to the promise made real in the ‘word made flesh’: ‘You are my witnesses, too, because you have been with me from the beginning’. (15:27).

Jesus’ words of promise, mediated through the witness of the evangelist, intend to make effective for us, too, the experience and the reality of the mission of salvation and life that God has in store through the Son for all those who believe (cf. 3:16-17). The Spirit is the sign and the guarantee of that life (6:63) now that the promised glory of the Son has been revealed on the cross (1:15f.; 7:39). From the beginning to the end of John’s gospel, and certainly in the words of this lesson, we hear again of that oneness in relationship along with that oneness of purpose that has marked God’s sending of the Son and the completion of the Son’s mission of love on behalf of those who have been handed over and chosen to belong to the Son. In Pentecost we celebrate that oneness in sending and mission, and we celebrate too that we as believers, not only are the objects of that love and mission, but that we are called, empowered, and sent to join that mission of the Trinity.

The Witness of the Spirit

The witness of the Spirit has a two-fold focus. First focus is in the Spirit’s witness on behalf of Jesus. That witness about Jesus has at least two aspects. It is a witness that the mission of the Father and the Son has indeed been completed. The cross was not some travesty or failure of God’s intent. From creation nothing has happened apart from the Word (1:1-2). The Word became flesh and dwelled among us (1:14). It was necessary that the Son be ‘lifted up’ on the cross so as to confirm the depth of the Father’s love for the world (3:14-17). At the point of being lifted up, Jesus the Son declares the fulfillment of that mission: ‘it is finished’ (19:30).

A second aspect of this witness is that the Spirit gives power to the community of believers not to identify themselves as abandoned or forsaken, but rather as empowered and sent to bear witness to the world that in events of the Son of God's love has indeed been made real and present for all the world.

In a second focus we see that the witness of the Spirit is not arbitrary or isolated, but belongs integrally to the presence and role of the mission of the Trinity (16:13). The Spirit speaks only that which belongs to the oneness of the identity and mission of the Father and the Son. That witness of the Spirit is characterised by Jesus in our lesson as having three specific matters of content: to 'convince all the world bout sin', about 'righteousness', and about 'judgement' (16:8, is a much better translation here than the NRSV's 'prove the world wrong'; the Spirit's role is one of witness or testimony to that which has been made known in the sending and mission of the Son).

Each of these three items is further explained in the subsequent three verses (9-11). It is noteworthy that Jesus says 'sin' has to do with the matter of belief. The Spirit teaches us that sin is at its heart is not a matter of actions or morality, but has to do with whether and how we will receive and believe in the Son as the one whom God has sent into the world. John the Baptist testifies to the arrival of the Son with the words 'Here is the Lamb of God who *takes away the sin of the world*'. Later John says, 'This is the judgement, that they did not believe in the one whom God sent (3:18). Sin stands exposed precisely at the opportune moment of decision between faith and unbelief. Jesus says that it is always for us the moment of that decision (Greek *kairos*; see 7:6). The Spirit's role is to bring Christ present for us and so to face us with that point of decision and faith.

Secondly, Jesus says, the Spirit convinces us about 'righteousness', which has to do with Jesus returning to the Father. That Jesus is at the point of returning to the Father, is the signal that the role of Jesus in his sending and mission has been completed. Righteousness has to do with Jesus' testimony that all that the Father has given him to do has been accomplished in his death and resurrection. The glory of the Son has been truly seen. God's righteousness has been made known in God's love and sending of the Son. Now the Spirit will be present to continue to convince the disciple community that this is true.

Thirdly, the Spirit convinces us about judgement, and that judgement is precisely that in the actions of the Trinity the ruler of this world has been condemned. If there is then any judgement, that judgement has to do with all that would not believe what God is about in the Son is to show God's love and to bring that abundant life to those whom the Son has chosen and for whom he has given his life as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. 'For God sent the Son into the world, not for the purpose of standing in judgement over the world, but in order that through him the world might be saved' (3:17).

Now that issue of judgement has been met. Salvation has indeed come in the fulfillment of the Son's mission. Now the Spirit has come to make good on that promise and to continue to convince those who hear the witness of the Son that this is indeed good news and true. Such conviction is also the invitation to join in that witness which is indeed for the world to hear – to become agents of that same convincing for those 'other sheep' for whom Jesus also died and was raised, to the end that all may be one, even as the Father, Son and Spirit are one in purpose and mission.