

**Pentecost 00B (5/31/09 – *The Right Understanding of Pentecost*)**

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

Today we celebrate ***The Feast of Pentecost***. As you heard in the *Reading* from ACTS, on this Jewish feast day – in the Greek called *Pentecost*, which means “fiftieth” ... and in the Old Testament called the *Feast of Weeks*, celebrated 50 days after the Passover – Jesus fulfills His promise given to His disciples. He sends them the Holy Spirit.

There seems to be a lot of misunderstanding about ***Pentecost*** – and about the work of the Holy Spirit in general – even in the Church. “The Holy Spirit is really working in that church ... or that person!” – so you hear, while another church ... another person ... doesn’t. And the “proof” of that work is always something that you see and hear that is supposed to be the Holy Spirit making Himself evident ... so that you can make such a judgment. Such talk in the Church should concern you, actually, because such talk is inconsistent with the work of the Holy Spirit – at least according to Jesus.

In His long teaching session in the Upper Room on the night of His betrayal, Jesus talks a great deal about the Holy Spirit. He promises to send the Holy Spirit to His Church. But when it gets to what the Holy Spirit Himself will do, Jesus says, ***He will bear witness about ME*** [JN 15.26] ... ***He will not speak on His own authority*** [JN 16.13] ... ***He will glorify ME, for He will take what is MINE and declare it to you*** [JN 16.14]. In other words, the conversations and teachings the Holy Spirit brings into the Church will be conversations and teachings about **Christ!** What the Holy Spirit does is to call attention to **Christ** ... **not** to Himself. As anyone who has received catechesis from me has already heard – based on the *Gospel* set before us today – the Holy Spirit **always** points to Christ ... and to His once-for-all work on the Cross for our salvation. And this work of the Holy Spirit is **precisely** what we see happening on ***Pentecost*** – just as Jesus promised; and it continues to this day. So today, on the basis of our *Holy Scripture Readings*, we seek ***The Right Understanding of Pentecost***.

Now in the *Gospel* for ***Pentecost Eve*** (JOHN 14) Jesus began teaching that He would send the Holy Spirit of truth ... and promised that He Himself would come to His disciples. But **how** does Jesus do that, now that He has ascended?

When God the Son took on a human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He became Man **without** ceasing to be eternal God. He was “incarnate” ... He packed the fullness of His divinity into a human body. His presence was seen when He body was seen. When Jesus called His disciples ... walked with them ... taught them, they could see that He was with them. When the disciples were alone in a boat ... at night ... in a storm, they couldn’t see that He was with them. When Jesus was in Galilee at the time of the Feast, He was **not** at the same time in Jerusalem for the Feast. When the centurion came to Jesus from Capernaum to ask Him to heal his servant, Jesus was

**not** in Capernaum, though He healed the servant, just as the centurion believed He could.

How should we speak of this time in history when Jesus walked among men from place to place? We could call this His “earthly existence.” But that phrase is insufficient, because Jesus promises to be with His believers even **after** He ascends to heaven, body and all. So, maybe we should call it His “bodily existence on earth” – but that doesn’t quite do the job either. After all, He is present, here, today, in this gathering around His Word and Sacrament. And in/with/under the bread and wine that will be consecrated, His physical Body and Blood also will be present – though unseen.

I suppose we could settle for calling that time when Jesus gathered and taught His disciples and then mounted the holy Cross for the salvation of the world, “His earthly ministry.” Yet, that, too, is inadequate; for by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, St. Luke says in the beginning of ACTS: ***In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus BEGAN to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up*** [1.1-2a] – implying that ACTS is the **continuation** of Jesus’ ministry (His doing/teaching) on earth ... in and through His Church.

If it is difficult to describe accurately the time when Jesus took on the human nature and the human body for you, lived the perfect life for you, and died and rose to save you, with all that you can know of Christ from the Scriptures, you can understand the difficulty facing the disciples as they listened to Christ’s last words before He is arrested, judged, and crucified.

***Pentecost*** is the answer to the question of **how** Jesus ***will not leave you as orphans*** but ***will come to you*** [JN 14.18] even **after** His bodily ***Ascension***. The Holy Spirit – in His new chapter of work on earth – is the answer to that question. The world will not see Jesus, but Christians will. Wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, there Jesus Himself is at work. Wherever the Holy Spirit speaks, there Jesus speaks. Wherever the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment, there Jesus is presented as the offering for sin, the perfect righteousness for sinners, and the judgment against the devil.

Jesus **is** present in this world. He is present where the Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament. Where two or three are gathered in Jesus’ Name – around Jesus’ Word and Sacraments – there **He** is present through the working of the Holy Spirit. Wherever the forgiveness of sins is pronounced to the people of God, there the Holy Spirit brings Jesus’ promise and His authority to be heard. When you receive the Sacrament of the Altar that Jesus instituted in the Upper Room, there the Holy Spirit gives to you, through His apostolic ministry, not only bread and wine but also the very Body and Blood of Jesus. Jesus is present today in this world – indeed, in this very place – with His Body and Blood ... with His divine and human nature ...

just as much as He was to the disciples in that Upper Room.

In a real sense, He is – if anything – **more** present today than back then. For He is simultaneously present everywhere throughout the world where His Word is being proclaimed and His Sacraments are being administered according to His institution. Back then, when Jesus stayed in the mountains praying, He was not physically present in the boat. When He was in Galilee at the time that Lazarus' death, He was not in Bethany where Lazarus died. Today, since *Pentecost*, Christ is present everywhere that the Holy Spirit is at work through His Means of Grace. Really present! Body and soul present! Humanly and divinely present! Physically and spiritually present!

The world knows nothing of this presence of Christ among us – even Christians get it confused. The world may know **about** Jesus – His name is spoken regularly in the cruder gatherings of mankind ... His reputation, often distorted, is mentioned by the religious and the pagans alike. But, to the world, He is a figure from the past: to some a great prophet, to others a charlatan, to still others only a myth. But to all the world, He is, today, truly **absent** – not absolutely absent ... but absent with respect to His gracious forgiveness.

This is not the case in the Church. And the Church over history has given us reminders of the gracious, forgiving presence of Christ according to His promise. These reminders – symbols, if you will – do not **make** Jesus present among us. Rather they **remind** us of His promise to be present ... and to reveal Himself to us and not to the world. The procession that begins some of our Divine Services (like today) symbolizes the truth that Jesus promises: Where the faithful are gathered around His Word and Sacrament, there He comes to be with them. In the Gospel procession – where the Word of God is brought from the chancel to be read in the midst of the congregation – we see Jesus coming from heaven to be among us to save His people by His life, death, and resurrection ... which the Holy Gospels proclaim to you. On most Sundays, we merely stand for the reading of the Holy Gospel. This standing is not an action that says that the Gospels are somehow more inspired than the rest of the Scriptures ... but is a remnant of the Gospel procession. These symbolic acts remind you of the fact that Jesus, in this Divine Service, is really present – present in ways distinct from His presence everywhere at God's right hand ... through the Holy Spirit's work ... and according to His promise.

Jesus is present to His Church audibly ... verbally ... as the Holy Spirit of truth does His work of guiding you into all the truth – whereas before He was present to His disciples by sight. The Spirit manifests Jesus to you through the Word. Even with Christ's sacramental presence in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the way you know that He is there in these visible elements of water, bread, and wine is because of the **Word of God** ... by which the Holy Spirit accompanies them and through which He continually works – together with the visible means – to bear witness about Christ ... to show you Christ ... and to point you to Christ and His continued forgiving

presence with you.

Therefore, the answer to the question of **how** Jesus comes to us is that Christ's Church, in which He makes Himself known, is the Church of His **Word** – written and spoken in the liturgy ... pronounced in Holy Absolution ... proclaimed in the reading of Holy Scripture ... preached in the sermon ... confessed in the Creed ... prayed and chanted and sung. And so, on this *Feast of Pentecost*, you are gathered by the Holy Spirit, to find the Church where the **Word** of the Gospel is proclaimed, and where the Sacrament is administered according to His **Word**. That's how the Holy Spirit is working to show you Christ ... through the Gospel in its forms of Word and Sacrament – and in this Word you are made to “see” Christ as He comes to you. Through the Word the Holy Spirit convicts you concerning sin – especially how you falter in your faith and trust in Christ. Through the Word the Holy Spirit convicts you concerning righteousness – that you have no inherent righteousness of your own ... but are declared righteous in Christ. Through the Word the Holy Spirit convicts and convinces you concerning judgment – that the devil ... and your sin and your death ... have all been judged by Christ, Who has won for you forgiveness, life, and salvation. This is how the Holy Spirit works ... this is how Christ comes to you ... this is *The Right Understanding of Pentecost!*

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. [Amen]