

Sunday After Ascension Day (21 May 2023)

“...leave us not comfortless; but send to us thine Holy Ghost to comfort us, and exalt us unto the same place whither our Saviour Christ is gone before...”

+In the Name...

And just like that, He is gone! We fasted, we prayed, we gave up our Starbucks, our Pinot Noir, our Voodoo Doughnuts, and our Salt & Straw Ice Cream. We collected our coins (and paper money!) for our ACW boxes, we attended extra services, read religious literature, and did works of supererogation. I could say we waited for Him for 40 days, but if you add in the Sundays, which are not included in the 40 day of Lent tally, and the two and a half weeks of “esima Sundays”, where we start using violet even though it was not yet Lent, but the Sundays took on a decidedly more muted tone than the preceding Sundays of Epiphanytide, we were getting ready for nearly 70 days.

Well over two months! I do not know about your social calendar, but I have never had a guest in my home who was important enough to merit that much preparation time before his arrival! And then in less time than it took to prepare our lives for His arrival, He disappeared. Quietly and unassumingly, at least compared to both His Birth and His Resurrection. Although that may have more to do with what days we choose to celebrate than the Church Kalendar.

But gone He is, at least in that physical sense. Imagine being one of His apostles who was privileged enough to see and touch Him. But then that must have made His [second] departure all the more heart-wrenching. “Don’t go!” they must have wanted to yell. “We need you here!” Yet He did have to go. If you think we hear the, “Christ-was-just-a-good-teacher-but -I-do-not-think-He-was-divine” argument now, imagine the traction it would have gained had He stayed. Or would it? Would He have never aged? Would He have had to die

again? We cannot write history in the subjunctive, so I should not waste sermon time puzzling over it now. Christ had to ascend to the Father to show His equality with Him. I do not want to get ahead of myself because we have just two weeks until Trinity Sunday, but the foreshadowing here of the next two Sundays, Pentecost and Trinity, is terrific!

Let's start with the Collect: Abp. Thomas Cranmer, author of the first English prayer book, reminds us of Our Lord's Ascension into Heaven, in case we missed it, I suppose. Cranmer was usually known for his poetry, but in this particular instance he changed the Latin from, "leave us not orphans" to "leave us not comfortless". Aside from the archaic use of comfortless, meaning without someone to strengthen and protect us, to call us orphans sounds much more forlorn. Likely that would have better described the interior disposition of the apostles: were they just feeling like they were

without their right-hand man, or were they feeling completely alone in the world? I suggest the latter.

Perhaps Abp. Cranmer knew something that the apostles did not: Our Lady would be assumed into Heaven, so they would have a spiritual mother on earth, and we would all have her praying for us in Heaven. So we are not orphans in that sense. More likely though, we are not orphans because the Church, the Bride of Christ, is the Spiritual Mother. The Church celebrates her birthday on Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost came to the Apostles in the Upper Room. The Holy Ghost therefore satisfies both prongs of leaving us neither comfortless nor as orphans.

This fits together nicely with the Gospel appointed for today. St. John tells us that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father but testifies of the Son, pointing both towards Pentecost next week but also setting us up for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. But this

strengthening is not just because the disciples no longer have Jesus there in their midst, but because things are not going to go well for them with the theological elites. They would not be welcome in the synagogues. This is transferrable to our own spiritual journey. Some 30 years ago this Parish acknowledged that the Mother Church was no longer teaching the faith once delivered unto the Saints, and made the painful decision to cut ties with that Communion. I was not yet Anglican, but some of you remember it or went through similar experiences in other parishes. It has been a bumpy road, but we are still here, standing for the faith, dare I say, a voice crying in the metropolitical wilderness! But the comparison does not stop there: Anglicanism is the established Church in England, and once was in certain states of this country. But even beyond that, Mainline Protestantism was the *de facto* Established Church in this country for generations. Those days are long gone. Some neighbors did not wish

to attend our recent concert because it was in a church, Roman parishes which held masses for peace during the riots were heckled and told to go back indoors and keep their religion to themselves, and both the academy and the statehouse are constantly telling Christians to keep their religious beliefs to themselves and not voice them in public. Wrong! Separation of church and state is the State not telling the Church what to do, not that Christians should not have a voice in the public square. Now, who in this Church really believes it will get better, at least in the near term? John gives us the reason: “And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me.” We will need the strengthening the Holy Ghost offers.

But if you thought we would look like a character out of a Rambo movie, blazing our way through, we have our Epistle to remind us of “that most excellent gift of charity”. One question might be whether St. Peter is instructing us to be charitable toward one another or those

outside the Church. As you may have guessed, the answer is “both”. I have preached before about showing charity toward those who used to be members of this Parish, but what about those still here? Sometimes it is hard to remember we are on the same team, a family even. A priest friend in Chicago has told me for years that the problem with traditional Anglicans is that we circle the wagons, and then we shoot in. Sadly, I have seen that in parishes I have served. While the meaning may be the same, in practice there is a world of difference between, “Oh Father, I had never thought of doing it that way”, and “NO, WE DON’T DO THAT HERE!!!” Can you imagine if we took the Epistle seriously and spoke as “oracles of God”? Imagine if we (and I include myself here), if we did not say anything without considering whether it glorified Jesus Christ? Society would be unrecognizable!

That is my prayer for this parish, in this in-between time:
between “losing” Our Blessed Lord, but not yet having gained the
Holy Ghost, that as we go forward, we strive to make this morning’s
epistle a reality, “that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus
Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

+In the Name...