



Waiting Expectantly

1 St. Peter 4:7-11 & St. John 15:26-16:4

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May 4 2008 – Ascension 1

This past Thursday we celebrated the Feast of Our Lord's Ascension – one of the greatest festivals of the Christian year. It's really sad that we don't do more with it, because it really is just as important as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter when we look at the great events in the life and ministry of Jesus. It really ought to be *our* great festival here in this parish. We bear the name of Christ, who is the true, incarnate, and Living Word of God.

Without the Ascension, Whitsunday has no meaning, because the coming of the Holy Spirit was the fulfilment of the promise made by Christ at his Ascension: "I'm leaving you, but I will send one to help you." On Friday of this week one of you came by the house and left some flowers, but because we weren't able to receive them in person and didn't know who they came from – at least for a few hours – there was, for that short time, a certain ambiguity about the gift. They were appreciated and welcome, but not knowing the source made it difficult to know what to do.

Just so with the gift of the Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit that makes the Church the Church, it's the Holy Spirit that works in us to renew our hearts and minds and turn them to Christ. It's the Holy Spirit that actively works in us to stamp out sin and set us apart for God. It's the Holy Spirit that bears witness of the divine origin of the Gospel message itself. The Spirit is a great gift. But that gift would never have come had Christ himself not Ascended, and without Christ's promise to and commissioning of his followers at his Ascension, we wouldn't know what to do with that great gift.

The Ascension promise gives us hope. It tells us that Christ is not leaving us alone to do his work. He isn't leaving to establish a merely heavenly Kingdom. He's going to his heavenly throne, but he's doing so, so that he can rule over his spiritual kingdom here on earth. But lest

we become complacent, the Ascension promise also reminds us to get busy building our Lord's Kingdom. He's coming back and he's coming back soon. We have lots of work to do!

And so here on this Sunday that sits between the Ascension and Whitsunday, we remember not only the promise of the Spirit that will be fulfilled a week from today, but we also remember the promise Jesus made of his sure, certain, and soon return to come back for his Bride, the Church. As we sit here in this season of waiting, the Lessons remind us of what it is Christ calls and prepares his people to do here in the world as representatives of his heavenly Kingdom. Look with me, if you will, at our Epistle Lesson from St. Peter's First Epistle:

The end of all things is at hand; therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers. (1 Peter 4:7)

I don't know about you, but I find it really interesting that the Apostle Peter tells us this first. "The end is near, so keep sane and keep sober." First, this is a caution. Don't freak out just because the end is near. Don't run around like you hair's on fire, screaming that the end is coming tonight, tomorrow, or next week. St. Peter also wants us to keep things in the proper perspective. He's telling us that the end is near, that Christ will return soon, *because he wants us to understand that this gives urgency to our mission*. Think about it. If there's no deadline, there's not much incentive to get the work done. He's saying, "The end is near. No don't go running off in a crazed frenzy. We have work to do." It's just like the two angels we read about in the Ascension Gospel: Jesus ascended into heaven, and while the disciples just kept standing around staring up into space – I would bet for a pretty long time – two angels suddenly appeared with them and basically said, "Hey, why are you guys standing around staring into the sky? Don't you realize he's gonna come back. You have work to do!"

There are a lot of preachers and teachers who seem to have missed the point of this. St. Peter's point isn't the precise timing of Jesus return, it's that he's going to return so we need to get busy doing what he told us to do. But a lot of preachers, instead of getting busy doing what Jesus told us to do, get fixated on the "time is at hand part." For two thousand years we've had men missing the whole point, misreading

books like Daniel and Revelation, trying to fit the current events of their day into what's already come and gone in the past, and ultimately getting Christians side-tracked from the real business of the Kingdom. These off-base preachers get Christians all fired up, but not about our Gospel call – they get them all fired up about the end of the world that they think is going to happen tomorrow. But then it doesn't happen tomorrow. Think of all the wasted energy that could have been put into just being the Church. That's why Peter says, "Stay sane. Stay sober!" Look at the next verses:

Above all hold unfailing your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. (1 Peter 4:8-9)

People who are looking for one Lord need to draw closer together, encouraging one another, as the writer of Hebrews says,

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

I find this really interesting. If it were up to me, I'd be saying, "The end is at hand. Get busy sharing the Gospel with the world out there." But Peter says, "The end is at hand. Get busy loving one another. Show each other what grace is all about. Don't be afraid to give of yourself to help others." But you see, before we can go out into the world, the Church needs to be what it is called to be in and of herself. I think this is what St. John gets at in his First Epistle: "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

If you think about it, it makes perfect sense, especially after what St. James told us last week about being doers, not just hearers. It's love and light that gather in the outcasts. It's love and light that keeps the flock from straying away. It's love and light that feeds the sheep and tends the lambs. It's love and light that are important to the Good Shepherd. If you think about this from the perspective of our Epistle last week, when our Good Shepherd returns he won't come looking for his Church based on our right belief.

No, he'll come looking for us and will find us by seeing the evidence of our faith and belief worked out in practise. He'll be saying well done, good and faithful servant based on our having shown hospitality, based on how we've treated each other, and based on the love we've shown. A master doesn't reward his servant for knowing what he was supposed to do in the master's absence. He rewards the servant for actually having done it. It's just so for us when our Lord and master returns. And that leads us into the rest of the Epistle:

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:10-11)

As we await our Lord's soon return we really do need to see ourselves as servants – more specifically as stewards of what God has given to us. But we're not just stewards in respect to God, were also stewards in respect to each other. As Christians we all make up the Body of Christ and God gives each of us gifts and abilities to use to build up that body. And not just to build it up, but to make it active so that it can do the work that God wants it to do.

This has got to be the number one reason why the Church is so often ineffective. I'm glad this isn't the typical Church, but neither is it perfect. In the "typical" Church 10% of the people do 90% of the work. It's also usually true that 10% of the people give 90% of the financial support. Here's something to ponder: What would happen if 10% of your body did 90% of the work. You wouldn't survive. Thankfully God is gracious. Thankfully God has built his body in such a way that it doesn't die if only 10% of it is working. But at the same time, the Body of Christ is crippled if the person gifted to be an ear is also forced by necessity to also be an eye and a finger, because the people gifted to be eyes and fingers aren't doing what they're supposed to do. St. Peter's telling us here, if God has gifted you – and he's gifted all of us generously – don't hold out. He's gifted

you for a reason. Not using your gifts to build up the church is just as much a sin as anything else. We need to ask ourselves if we're willing to give back to God for his service some of our time, talents, and treasure. All those things came from him in the first place. If we're not willing to give a portion of them back to God, then we've got a big problem – not just personally, but the entire body – because were missing what God expects us to be using to fulfil his Great Commission.

If we've got it all sorted out what we're supposed to be doing internally as the Church, Christ's Great Commission follows naturally. The waiting Church is called to be a witnessing Church. Look at our lesson from St. John's Gospel:

But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27)

When the Counsellor comes. In the Greek the word is *parakletos*. It literally means, the one who "comes alongside." This is the Holy Spirit, who was sent into the world once Christ had Ascended to heaven. He is the Spirit of Truth. The disciples had been with Jesus through everything, and most importantly, they were eyewitnesses to his death, resurrection, and ascension. They were called to go out and share what they had seen as witnesses, but Jesus says that the Spirit will "come alongside" as a witness too. And the Spirit did exactly that. The most profound instance was on Whitsunday itself. Pastor Bill will be preaching on this next week, but we all know the story. St. Peter got up to preach. He talked about what Christ had done in his life, death, and resurrection. He talked as an eyewitness, but it was when the Spirit came that the real work was done of changing hearts. There was a great sound like wind, tongues of flame came down and rested on their heads, and the believers there started speaking in other languages. Peter gave the message, but the Spirit backed it up with the authority of God. The Spirit gave the signs and wonders to prove the divine source of the message. And we see this throughout the New Testament. You always see the Spirit providing miracles to accompany

the Gospel message of the apostles. The Spirit served as a witness to convince men and women of the truth of the Gospel.

The New Testament period was a special time with a special need. Those early disciples were sharing a message to a world that had never heard it before and had no historical witness. They had the Old Testament, but the inspired books of the New Testament weren't written yet, and so the Spirit manifested in ways and to an extent that it never has since. And this is why it's so important that the inner life of the people of God be right, as we see St. Peter saying in our Epistle. We still do sometimes see the Spirit work those amazing miracles, but today the greatest miracle of all – and the greatest of all witnesses to the world – is the regenerated and renewed heart of the believer. We have the authoritative Word of God written to share with the world, and to back up its truth, the Spirit renews our sinners' hearts and puts in them a love for God that should show the world the power of the Gospel. If the fruit of the Spirit are missing from our lives, half of our message is missing – we become hypocrites.

And as we go out with our message, Jesus also give us a warning and an encouraging word here:

I have said all this to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them. (John 15:26-16:4)

Jesus promised the Spirit would come alongside. The disciples might not have understood why they needed a divine helper, so Jesus warns them, telling them that there will come a time – not very far off – when they'd not only be thrown out of the synagogues, but that Jewish and Roman leaders alike would put them to death. In his death and resurrection, Jesus had won the victory over Satan. Yet in his fury Satan, like some kind of Hitleresque madman out for world domination and learning that his chances have just been shot, goes on a wild rampage of fury just before he's finally caught and dealt with.

We see just this happening in the early years of the Church. The Jewish nation rejected the truth of God for a lie. They rejected God's Messiah and turned on his people with a fury that can only be described as demonic. They not only threw the Christians out of the synagogues, but rounded them up and brutally put them to death. Saul of Tarsus was just one such persecuting Jew. But even after the Jewish nation was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Roman Empire rose up against the next generation of Christians in much the same way, until God brought about his judgment on them as well, ushering in his Kingdom.

The blood of the martyrs became a witness of the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We've been spared the great tribulation that those early Christians experienced, but it's still not always easy to confess Christ in every aspect of our lives. We can expect to be ridiculed for giving witness to him by what we are, by what Christ has done in us, and by what we do for him. But Jesus tells us here not to lose faith because our success comes slowly. He predicted this from the beginning. Jesus tells us that we run into opposition because the people around us don't know him. And when that happens, what we need to do is to show those people Jesus. They need to see Jesus *in us*. They need to hear about Jesus *from us*. And that means being consistent followers of Christ. The need to see the Spirit bearing witness – backing up our message – through our own changed lives.

Today as we gather at our Lord's Table, we need to remember that here Our Lord gives us a foretaste of the marriage feast that waits for us in heaven. Those faithful martyrs of the Early Church built their hopes and future on and around the confident expectation of their Lord's soon return. But we today still have the same hope. If anything I think we have even more reason to be hopeful, confident, and eager, remembering the final message of our exalted groom, "Behold, I come quickly!"

For two thousand years the Church through all the ages has been kept conscious of her status as the bride of Christ and has hopefully looked forward to his return. What's kept her hopeful is that each Sunday the faithful are able to gather here at his Table and remember to

whom we belong. He says to us here, "Take and eat this, my body. Take and drink, this my blood. Do this in memory of me until I come again." Each Sunday we see and hear him again – we hear him remind us of his soon coming in glory, and as we hear him, we trust in his promise and wait expectantly for the hour of his return. We are his people.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we you for sending your Son to redeem us from our sins. We thank you not only for his coming, for his death, and for his resurrection, but also for his glorious Ascension, through which we have the promise of his soon return. We thank you for giving us the gift of your Holy Spirit as we await his return. As we wait, Father, let us put your gifts to use. Let us not be a complacent people, but instead let us be a people that puts your gifts to use: loving one another and showing your love to those around us in the world, that we may build your Kingdom in anticipation of your Son's soon return. We ask this in and through his name. Amen.