SERMON PREACHED BY

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FOR

ST. ALBAN’S CHURCH, NEWTOWN SQUARE, PA

AT THE TIME OF PENTECOST

# SUNDAY 31 MAY 2020

Acts 2:1-11 John 20:19-27

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The One God. Amen.

“… Cretans and Arabs, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

“Receive the Holy Spirit”

While I was Dean of St. George’s College, a continuing education center in Jerusalem for laity and clergy from around the world, I would give a lecture on every course about the Church and Churches in Jerusalem. In that lecture I always used today’s Pentecost Epistle from the Acts of the Apostles to speak about the Jerusalem Church. I would also always tell a story of a little old woman who every Sunday used to sit in the second row on the aisle at the 9:30 Arabic speaking Anglican service at St. George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem. Her name was Mary Habiby.

One Sunday morning one of the course members at the College went up to Mary and asked her, “When did you become a Christian?” The course member assumed that she had been a convert from Islam because the vast majority of Palestinians today are Muslim. At first Mary frowned, but then a big smile lit up her face when she said, "I have been a Christian since the first Day of Pentecost” -- a claim that very few of us can make.

But Mary did not stop there. She went on to say, of all those who were in Jerusalem on that Day of Pentecost, Elamites, Parthians, Medes, Cretans, all those who were in Jerusalem that day, only the Arabs, the Palestinians, have remained faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. It is therefore from that background that we come to celebrate today the birthday of the Church here at St. Alban’s, Newtown Square.

Today marks what many call the birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. For it is today in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that we read of a phenomenal experience, one that shocked all those who witnessed it. An act, the meaning of which, to this very day, most of us in the church have yet to comprehend fully, and what it continues to mean for those of us who are Christians.

For the Church, the period between Ascension and Pentecost is a time of special waiting. Waiting for something significant to happen, something almost mind-boggling. The coming of the Holy Spirit. We invoke the Spirit on all sorts of things, as well as on ourselves. We speak of doing things in the power of the Spirit, yet what the Spirit is, and what the Spirit accomplishes, is a great mystery. This mystery is so deep that it forces us to look at the areas of conflict around the world that confront us at this very moment. We know that Arabs were very much a part of the Pentecost experience. Today the Palestinian Church is still very much a part of our thinking as we witness the continued political turmoil in the very land where the church was born.

In the city of Jerusalem, the Holy City, dear to all three Abrahamic faiths, people from around the world gathered on that day of Pentecost. They were told by Jesus not to leave, but to wait. The authors of the New Testament expected Jesus’ imminent return to inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth. The followers of Jesus expected the Son of Man to return on clouds of glory, ready to meet Jesus at the sound of the trumpet. They waited for the hour when every tear would be wiped away. They waited for the trumpet to sound. And yet, the Lord did not return. Instead, in today’s John’s Gospel, Jesus said “Receive the Holy Spirit”.

The small Christian Community in Jerusalem is still a Pentecost experience to this very day with all the different churches represented in that land. They are part of the heritage of the land.

So, what about today’s Pentecost Feast? What about the Holy Spirit? How do we explain it? Theologians and Church Councils have argued for years about the creed which speaks about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In so many ways today we need a revival of that Spirit. Sometimes as Christians we are guilty of so much arrogance, laxity, complacency, that we ignore the Spirit in our own midst, we forget Jesus words, “Receive the Holy Spirit”. The Spirit presents us with situations that demand our cries for freedom, justice, peace and integrity.

As we witnessed the events last week in Minneapolis, we are reminded of the horror, the sin of racism. But in John’s Gospel for today and in the Pentecost experience, there is no place for division between people. For all of us, whether we are black, brown, white, yellow or olive color, we are created in the image of God. Whether we are rich or poor we are all created in the same image of God.

The Holy Spirit unites the kingdoms of this world. The Holy Spirit does not allow languages, customs, cultures or sexuality to divide us. Indeed this very understanding of diversity and unity is something which should be dear to the hearts of all Episcopalians.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is one of wholeness, not division. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is one of inclusiveness, not exclusiveness. The Holy Spirit came and descended upon the Apostles - the rush of winds with tongues of fire. Thus what was created is what South Africa’s Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu always calls “God’s rainbow people”. Our challenge is to ensure that justice and peace will prevail in the name of Jesus for all people and not just for a select few.

The other thing we learn on this Pentecost Sunday is that God’s power often lies where the world would see weakness. We know that out of some of the most desperate situations in our great Anglican Communion, where poverty and violence is rife, out of this situation has come a strong faith and a powerful witness to Jesus. Indeed in places where there are often times the most difficult circumstances, the Church is growing the most rapidly.

Sometimes the Spirit takes us through the valleys of pandemics, suffering, opposition and struggle. But Calvary was as much a sign of power as Pentecost. We should never ignore the Holy Spirit. A spiritless Church is worse than powerless – for indeed the spiritless Church is dead. We need to allow the Spirit room in our lives to make us more Christ-like, and room in our Churches to bring life.

Pray with me that the Holy Spirit will enable this wonderful parish, St. Alban’s, to truly be the arms, hands, feet, eyes, and ears of Jesus in a world torn by racism, strife, pandemics and conflict. Today the Holy Spirit presents us with situations which demand our cries for freedom, justice, peace and integrity. Today Jesus challenges each of us, his disciples, Jesus’ disciples here at St. Alban’s, to “Receive the Holy Spirit”.

“…………Cretans and Arabs, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God”. At first Mary frowned, but then a big smile lit up her face when she proudly said, “I have been a Christian since the first Day of Pentecost”.

In the Name of God. Amen