

**One Accord...One Place**

**Whitsunday (Pentecost)**

(From the Gospel *St. John xiv. 15 ff.*)

**15** [*Jesus said unto his disciples*] *If ye love me, keep my commandments. 16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; 17 Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. 18 I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. 19 Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. 20 At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. 21 He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. 22 Judas saith unto him, not Iscariot, Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world? 23 Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. 24 He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me. 25 These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you. 26 But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. 27 Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. 28 Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come again unto you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe. 30 Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me. 31 But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do.*

Pentecost is a day of great importance to the Church, because it marks the arrival in our midst of the One who causes the Church to be distinguished from every other gathering of men.

People form groups for a variety of reasons. They band themselves together because of shared interests and affinities. They enjoy that sense of belonging associated with the possession of an identity that others also claim, whether it be nationhood, or ethnicity, or a host of other factors that tend to divide people neatly into classes, types, and categories.

But the Church defies these stereotypes. Its ranks cross all bounds. Its members are of *every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation* (Rev. 5:9). They are of all economic classes and educational backgrounds. And although they enjoy unity of belief and doctrine and practice, their oneness is not founded even in their common agreement of those beliefs and their assent to them. No, it is a unity *in the Spirit*.

The birth of the Church placed an unbridgeable divide between those within the family of the redeemed and those outside it. This is clearly seen in Jesus' words to the eleven disciples in today's Gospel. These are very important words, that should serve to produce in us that very valid sense of excitement when we approach this wonderful day in the Church calendar:

*16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; 17 Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.*

The gift that Christ promises is restricted to the Church. Unlike the graces of God that are generally available to all men (Matt. 5:45), God has withheld the Holy Ghost as the cherished possession of His own.

Further, the Spirit's presence, His working, and any other evidences of His reality are completely beyond the perception of the world. Try as they might, they cannot detect Him, neither by logic, nor experiment, nor investigation, nor by the five senses. This creates a great paradox. It's as if the Church is a world in itself, whose members can readily view not only their own operations but also everything else outside, through a window very much like a one-way mirror. That which is transpiring within the world of the Spirit inside cannot be understood, however, nor comprehended, nor even seen, by those struggling to look inside.

This places the believer in a marvelous position indeed, one which St. Paul neatly sums up elsewhere:

*1 Cor. 2:12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God...14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. 16 For "who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*

This is precisely the reason that within the Church, status, if one must use the word, cannot possibly be determined by educational background, or intellect, or level of mystical achievement, or any other measure of attainment. That person who is truly *spiritual* is one who is possessed by the Holy Spirit. This propels the poor, unlearned, unschooled believer to a place far higher than any place of dignity or honor which men can possibly confer upon other men, merely and only because he owns *the Spirit*.

There is another lesson about the Holy Spirit's operation drawn from today's Pentecost Gospel, and it refers to two words that are prevalent in it: *love*, and *commandments*. Jesus links *love* with obedience to His *commandments*, and to His spiritual indwelling within the believer:

*-21: He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.*

*-23: If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.*

What then is the commandment of Christ? We need not look far (Jn. 13: 34, 35; see also 1 Jn. 3:11 ff.):

*A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*

This commandment is an expansion of the Summary of the Law that is an integral part of our weekly worship services. Upon its successful fulfillment by us is hinged both God's love (*he that*

*loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him...*) and the reception of the Holy Spirit (*... and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him*).

There is a sort of circular logic here. We are commanded to love, but we cannot do so without the Spirit's help and activation (Gal. 5: 22: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love...*). The Apostle John, who penned today's Gospel, comments again on the same theme in his first General Epistle (3:23. 24):

*23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*

In the next chapter, he writes: *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God...(4:7)*. In other words, the ability to *love* and to obey His *commandments* are predicated upon our possession of His *Spirit*, which will only happen when we have fulfilled His *commandment to love*. We can only conclude that God marvelously provides *to us* the very thing that He requires *of us*!

Possession of God's Spirit is our only acceptable claim to membership in God's family. St. John, in that same Epistle, makes the following emphatic statement: *We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (4:13)*. Returning to today's Gospel:

*I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.*

Now, I might tell you that I have own a Brazilian rubber plantation, but you would consider it an improbable claim, unless you had very hard evidence that it was substantiated. Or, to even prove myself a genuine citizen of the United States, I must produce valid papers and evidence to that effect. I might make great boasts about myself as talented, or compassionate, or master of everything, or any other grand sounding declaration, but unless I could back them up with a demonstration that they were real, you would rightly dismiss them.

But within the world of the Church, it is far more complex and subtle. This is a spiritual Kingdom, and possession of the Holy Spirit is the only acceptable sign of citizenship. Yet the Spirit of God is invisible. How is He to be detected? The answer, of course, is by *love*, but it is not any old garden variety sort of love. It is a love that has to bear a divine stamp, one that is so clear, distinct, and unique, that its Source is unimpeachable.

What does it look like? How does it work? We know, of course, that it is described in detail in such passages as 1 Cor. 13. But today, I want to focus on those three words quoted earlier from John 13: *love one another*. What kind of a Church is it, therefore, that claims Pentecostal power, but is divided into a thousand parts? Look at excerpts from two other Whitsuntide texts:

From today's Epistle (BCP p. 180): *When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (Acts 2:1)*

From today's Second Epistle (p. 183): *For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...*

Love within the Church, in other words, manifests itself chiefly in oneness. And since love is the principal evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, whose existence within the Church is the only factor truly differentiating it from everything else human that surrounds it, a compromised oneness, or its total absence, can only say something quite clear about the state of the Church.

Gifts, we often say, don't come with a price. They should be freely given, with no strings attached. Surely and certainly the Holy Spirit is the Church's greatest gift. Jesus promised to give it. It came from His own hand, and that of the Father! But this great gift of which the Church is steward and guardian does indeed come with a price. The giving of this particular gift to us God has a right --if we must use such a word-- to attach very real and strict qualifications to. Treated well and carefully and lovingly, the very greatest results can be expected, and the Gospel will indeed be preached to the ends of the world, and eternal glory will follow. But handled shabbily, and carelessly, and commonly, and crassly, we can only anticipate His withdrawal. Why should it be otherwise?

I believe it is to such a task that a repentant church must turn to in this hour. It is no use saying that the church has always been divided. We can do nothing about the past. Nor should we allow minimal standards to be the rule by which we will assess our own success or failure. We can only be responsible for our own times, and will surely be judged on the basis of what we do with them. It is never too late to set a precedent.

But are we ready for such a very hard labor of love? Can we tear ourselves away from our distractions to place it as "Job One"? Do we realize how, even unconsciously, we shrink from so great a task, and move on to far easier and more manageable realms, even "the fulfillment of the Great Commission" (Matt. 28:18-20).

To speak in figurative terms: duties we assume that conveniently take us outdoors, away from home, and remove us from family issues which face us inward to the embarrassing task of righting wrongs with those loved ones who should be our priority, leave undone a work for which we will surely be held accountable.

*When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.*

God help the Church to find this same place again in our day, and to remain there!

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*