

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter, May 14, 2006

The Reverend Stephen C. Scarlett

On Easter morning, upon seeing the risen Christ, Mary Magdalene grabbed hold of him, as if to say, “I am not going to let you go again!” But Jesus told her not to cling to him because he had to go to the Father (John 20:17). Mary did not yet understand that the return of Jesus to the Father would result in the gift of the Holy Spirit and a greater experience of the presence of Jesus.

Today’s gospel (John 16:5f.) shares this theme. Jesus told the apostles that he would be leaving them to go to the Father. They were sad—“sorrow hath filled your heart.” But Jesus said, “It is expedient that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you.”

The Comforter is the Holy Spirit. It was expedient for Jesus to leave them and send the Spirit because the presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit would be better than his mere physical presence with them. The Holy Spirit would make the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus universal and intimate.

When Jesus was on earth, he could only be present in one place at a time. But the Holy Spirit can be present everywhere always.

This is part of the mystery of God as Trinity. The Son reveals the Father to us by becoming man in a particular place at a particular time. The Spirit then reveals the Son by being present in all places at all times (cf. Psalm 139).

The Holy Spirit also brings Jesus nearer to us. When Jesus was physically present on earth, he was close to his disciples, but his presence was still external to them. The Holy Spirit dwells within our hearts and minds. It is through the Holy Spirit that we have union with God in Christ—as we pray in the liturgy, “that he may dwell in us and we in him.”

The Holy Spirit within us also makes it possible for us to have closer relationships with each other. This is what is meant by the “Communion of the Saints.” We are united with each other through the common gift of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit leads us to love each other with a pure heart and serve each other with our gifts.

In the gospel, Jesus told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would “guide you into all truth.” We can understand this truth in two ways. First, the Holy Spirit led the church into a right understanding of the revelation of God in Christ. The Holy Spirit led the church to develop the creeds as expressions of the true faith in contrast to the various heresies.

The Holy Spirit led the church to write the gospels and the epistles and the Holy Spirit led the church to distinguish these from other writings that were false and heretical. It is rather humorous, for example, to see the stir created by the “Gospel of Judas”—as though its discovery represented some real challenge to the faith. In fact, the gospel of Judas was “lost” precisely because it was rejected by the church and the Holy Spirit. That is why it ended up in the garbage can rather than in the Bible. It is a sample of the kind of teaching the church and the Holy Spirit identified as heretical.

The second “truth” the Holy Spirit leads us into is the truth about ourselves. The Holy Spirit confronts us with the truth about our sins in order to lead us to repentance and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit enables us to see God’s purpose for our lives—how he is working in all things for good.

The Holy Spirit often speaks this truth to us through other members of the body of Christ. Someone with the gift of encouragement or wisdom may give us strength or counsel when we are in need. The Holy Spirit uses other members of the body to confront us when we are doing what is wrong. The genuine and honest relationships to which we are called in the body of Christ require that we be willing to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) even if the truth we speak is uncomfortable.

Receiving the truth that the Holy Spirit reveals to us requires that we cultivate the virtues of meekness and humility. As James says in the epistle today, “Let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” And again, “Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:17f.).

Our culture puts an exaggerated sense of importance on our personal opinions. Our tendency is to conform God’s word to our opinions and preferences. Meekness is that virtue by which we conform our opinions and preferences to the truth of God’s word. The question is not, What do I think about God? The question is, What is the truth that Christ has revealed to us through the Holy Spirit?

We seek the truth when we accept the faith into which the Holy Spirit led the church, when we give our “Amen” to the Creed and the liturgy. We seek the truth when we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Scriptures—when we conform our patterns of thought, speech and behavior to the truth revealed in God’s word. We seek the truth when we practice the prayer of silent contemplation, listening for what the Holy Spirit has to say. We seek the truth when we make ourselves accountable to the body of Christ.

Jesus is no longer present in such a way that we can touch him. He is, rather, present in the greater sense that he has taken up residency in our hearts and minds through the Holy Spirit to lead us into the truth about God and about our selves.

“Let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”