

## **A Sermon for Pentecost or Whitsunday, June 3, 2006**

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Today Christ, who rose from the dead on Easter and ascended into heaven, sent the gift of the Spirit to his church as he promised. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, we receive all the benefits of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, we experience the presence of God in our lives. The Holy Spirit changes us. We are different because we have the Holy Spirit.

Observe St. Peter. On Maundy Thursday he denied three times that he knew Jesus. Between Easter and Pentecost, he lay low in the upper room, fearful that those who killed Jesus would soon be after him. On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon him. He went out into the street and preached a sermon to the crowd. Peter accused the crowd of complicity in Jesus' death and called the people to repent. Peter was different because he had the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-42).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the defining feature of the Christian life. Not all understand this. If you were to ask the average person what makes one a Christian you would most likely receive a doctrinal or behavioral answer: To be a Christian is to believe certain things or to behave in certain ways. These answers are inadequate.

To be a Christian is, essentially, to live in communion with God the Father through his Son by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Right doctrine is the right understanding of that experience. Right behavior is the consequence of that experience. But the defining characteristic of Christian faith is the gift of the Spirit. We are different. We experience life in a new way because we have the Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament has right doctrine. The Old Testament had a lofty behavioral code, including the command to love God and neighbor. But the Old Testament did not have the regenerating gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, Jeremiah prophesied, " Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (31:31).

And Ezekiel prophesied, "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (36:26-7)

And John the Baptist said, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11).

The sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was the tongues of fire. The sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit for us is the water of baptism. We pray in baptism, "Give thy Holy Spirit to this person

that he may be born again” (BCP 276, par. 2). The evidence of the gift of the Spirit is what the Bible calls “fruit.” We can see the Holy Spirit by what the Spirit produces in our lives.

Now, some people erroneously think that the Holy Spirit ought to produce in us a state of continual bliss; that we should float through life with a sort of other-worldly, ethereal glow about us. In fact, one principal thing the Holy Spirit produces in our lives is turmoil.

The Holy Spirit comes into our lives to make us holy. This means that the Holy Spirit intends to conquer every desire and thought that is contrary to God’s will. St. Paul describes this conflict when he says, “The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh and these two are contrary one to the other” (Galatians 5:17).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is the means by which God changes us from who we are into the new person God wants us to be. The Christian life is, essentially, a life of prayer in which we seek God’s grace so as to further this transformation.

As we pray to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, we experience a variety of feelings. There are times of unease when our desires conflict with the Spirit. There are times of peace when a good confession or God’s providence leads to a new experience of grace. There are times when the feeling of God’s presence is withdrawn in order to test our faith and see what is in our hearts. There are times of great joy in the communion of the saints. There are times when we experience the tension between the lures of the world and the promises of the kingdom. These experiences all result from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And they all mirror the life of Christ. The Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tested. He faced opposition from the world. He experienced great peace in prayer as we can see, for example, in the Transfiguration. He enjoyed eating and drinking with his disciples. He cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me.” The Holy Spirit unites us with Christ and makes our lives an extension of his life.

There is, of course, one thing that Jesus experienced that we have not yet experienced. We have not yet been raised from the dead. The Holy Spirit puts within us this resurrection hope. The Holy Spirit within us is the guarantee that God will raise us from the dead to live in new bodies in the same manner that Jesus was raised on Easter.

Now we experience the Holy Spirit in the struggle to become like Christ. Then we will experience the Holy Spirit in a final act of transformation into his image. As Romans says, “We... who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (8:23).