



HOLY PENTECOST

June 4

THE GOSPEL READING

John 7:37-52; 8:12

[The Promise of Pentecost]

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the scripture said that the Christ is descended from David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" So there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

The officers then went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this man!" The Pharisees answered them, "Are you led astray, you also? Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed." Nikodemos, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and you will see that no prophet is to rise from Galilee." Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."



GREEK ORTHODOX
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THE SERMON

The Gospel passage is historically set in the period before the Lord's arrest and trial. It takes place on the last day of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated since the Old Testament times in remembrance of the tents (tabernacles) in which the people of Israel dwelt in the desert. The Feast involved the traditional use of lights and water, and both elements are present in the Lord's words. He is the Light of the World and the source of the water of life.

The passage is also closely associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which the disciples received on Pentecost, fifty days after the Resurrection, and ten days after the Ascension of the Lord. He declares that "rivers of living water" will flow and spring forth from the ones who believe in Him. As Saint John Chrysostom remarks, the reference to rivers of water is meant to convey the abundance and unlimited supply of the Holy Spirit: "the grace of the Spirit, when it has entered into the mind and has been established, springs up more than any fountain, fails not, becomes not empty."

After Christ's Ascension, the remaining Apostles and disciples return to Jerusalem, patiently waiting for the Holy Spirit. Pentecost means fifty, referring to fifty days after Passover, and it was another of the major feasts of the Jewish people. In the Old Testament, the Law was given on Mount Sinai on Pentecost. Now, fifty days after the Lord's Resurrection, Christ's promise is fulfilled, and the Spirit suddenly comes. The fire burned the top of Mount Sinai two thousand years before Christ's birth when God met Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. Now Christ Himself sends the Holy Spirit to come as tongues of fire over the disciples, to inscribe the commandment of love in their hearts.

In the Nicene Creed, we confess the Holy Spirit to be the Lord, the Creator of Life, "Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke through the prophets." Filled with the Spirit, the disciples begin speaking in other tongues and dialects, and with the Holy Spirit now with them, the hard work of the Apostles in the world begins. The mission of the Church in the world begins by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what the Church calls us to celebrate with the Feast of Pentecost. According to tradition, the Church is considered to have been established at Pentecost. Fifty days after the Resurrection, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, as was promised by Christ.

The Apostles, a group of mostly fishermen, made wise by the Holy Spirit, now go out into the world with divine authority and proclaim the truth of the Gospel, the truth of Christ. As the central hymn (the Apolytikion) for the Feast of Pentecost exclaims, "Blessed are You, O Christ our God. You sent down the Holy Spirit into the fishermen, and You gave them knowledge and wisdom in everything; and through them, as in a net You caught the whole world. O Lord who loves humanity, glory to You!"

Pentecost is undoubtedly an event taking place in history. It also sets out the fundamental features of the Church's theology and mission, which continue to be relevant to us today. For example, Pentecost provides the Church with its basic structure and organization. The Head of the Church is Christ. The Church, in its worldly dimensions, is headed by the Apostles. Our link to the Apostles stems from what is called apostolic succession.

With the sacrament of the laying on of hands, which we continue to do in ordinations even today, an unbroken connection is established between the Apostles and us. Through apostolic succession, the mission of the Church in a given location is overseen by the Bishop. The Bishop is the successor of the Apostles. In our tradition, when we celebrate the Divine Liturgy and other services, the Bishop stands in the place of Christ. Within our parishes and communities, we often meet a Priest, not a Bishop. Practically speaking, the Priest is called to administer the sacraments on behalf of a Bishop. All sacraments conducted by the Priest are tied to the Bishop's authority and status within the apostolic succession. Every time we go to Church, every time we attend a sacrament, we experience Pentecost. We live the mission of the Church as it was set out by Christ Himself. Just like Christ led his disciples in establishing the Eucharist during the Mystical Supper, the Bishop conducts the Divine Liturgy with the presbyters, deacons, and all the people of God in our churches today.

At the same time, the notion of community remains an integral part of the Church. The hierarchical structure of the Church is dependent on a community of faithful. The models for leadership and worship in the Church are premised on community. Christians live and pray in communities, together with others. The most important sacrament in the Church, the Divine Liturgy, takes place within the community. All the liturgical prayers, the common chalice we are called to drink from, reinforce this collective perspective. For its part, Christ-like leadership, which entails sacrifice in service to others, presupposes community. In the Church, Bishops, Priests, and lay leaders are called to serve the people of God, the community of believers. The pastoral and spiritual needs of the community of believers always come first.

Pentecost also informs the way we worship God, theologically speaking. In our services and prayers, we refer to God in three Persons (hypostases): the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this way, we articulate the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Coming to terms with the doctrine of the Trinity in purely rational terms can be challenging. It may be helpful to recall that the Holy Trinity stems from God's revelation, starting with the Father in the Old Testament, moving to the Incarnation of the Son, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In this manner, Pentecost completes the process of revelation, and sets the standard for our worship and theology. God was revealed in Trinity, in One and Three. There is, therefore, in God Himself a powerful dimension of diversity and community. Both hierarchical and communitarian perspectives are sustained and nourished in the Church through theology.

The Lord calls us to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit for our growth and for the benefit of others. The Holy Spirit is God in our midst, in us. He accompanies us and strengthens us. This means something different for each of us because God respects our freedom and individuality. Each of our paths to Christ is different and also the same because we are all in this together, as a community of believers. We are being led to the same destination, together.

This is the mystery of our faith. Our paths may be different, yet they are the same. We receive the Holy Spirit when we are initiated into the Church with our baptism. We are called to nurture ourselves with the gifts of the Spirit while we journey back to God in the completion of our lives here on earth.

Opening ourselves to discover our own unique path is a process that takes place together with others, within the community of believers. It does not take place with us alone. In finding our place in the world and in the Church, Pentecost sets out the gifts of the Holy Spirit for each and every one of us. These gifts are faith, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and humility. The fruition of these gifts is dependent on the magnitude of our desire, effort, and sincerity. These gifts serve a vital purpose because they keep us connected to Christ and the Apostles. Maintaining an unwavering link to the early Church is of great importance for the Greek Orthodox Church. Let us celebrate the Feast of Pentecost with an openness to learn more about our faith and its vast theological treasures. Let us give ourselves to God. Let us trust in His Wisdom for the salvation of our souls.