

A Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension Day (Memorial Day weekend)
Sunday 24th May 2009, at Saint John's Church in Savannah

From the EPISTLE OF SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS 4.7

Seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God.

This Sunday finds us on the cusp between two of the major festivals of the Christian year: the feast of the Lord's Ascension into heaven, this Thursday past, and next Sunday's feast of Whitsunday or Pentecost, the feast of the Spirit's coming on the Church, and the first publishing of the gospel. So this Sunday we give thanks for the Lord's going up in glory, and we pray for the Spirit's coming down to comfort us. For his ascension marks not only the end of his visible appearances upon earth and the completion of his mission; it also demonstrates the completeness and fullness of what he accomplished, the return of man to God.

In Christ, the human nature which he has assumed from Mary, has not only been rescued from sin and death, thus recovering all that was lost under divine judgment; it also gains what it never possessed before, it advances into heaven, into communion and fellowship with the Father in glory. Nothing else remains to be done, his triumph is complete: it only remains for it be made universally manifest. As Saint Peter remarks in today's lesson, "the end of all things is at hand". And so the angels tell the apostles, who are gazing at the sky, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

It is important that we grasp the paradox here: on the one hand, as the ascension indicates, all things are accomplished in Christ: in him, man's return to God is complete; indeed, in him, we are already in heaven. On the other hand, however, all things have yet to be accomplished *in us*. We are still in the world, still being reconciled to the Father, we have yet to complete our return to God in Christ. So in this interim between Christ's ascension and his coming again in glory, he has sent us the Spirit, as the spoils of his total victory, and in anticipation of the coming kingdom.

Precisely because Christ has come to rest at the right hand of the Father, he stirs into motion

both the Spirit and to the Apostles, who are sent into the world to bear witness to the finished work of Christ, until he comes again. The witness of the Spirit to Christ, and of the Apostles to Christ: this the indispensable foundation of our faith, the indispensable means by which we make our own all that Christ has accomplished for us in his precious death, his mighty resurrection, and his glorious ascension. He gives us what Christ has accomplished – the full return of man to God - and makes us capable of receiving it, living it, and in turn ourselves bearing witness to it.

That is why Jesus so frequently calls him the “Paraclete” or “Comforter”: because without his comfort, his strengthening aid, his encouragement, his counsel, we should not dare to believe what Jesus has accomplished, we should not dare to bear witness to him in our lips or in our lives. Indeed his comforting work is always needed. For the world that persecuted and killed the apostles, because they knew not the Father nor the Son, finds many ways to intimidate, demoralize, and oppress Christians still, not least with the anxieties, stresses, and feelings of failure that hard times, illness, or a troubled marriage can cause in us. Our weak fire is ever in need of being stirred up by his strengthening and comforting gift.

The gospel lesson this Sunday therefore reminds us of two aspects of the Church’s life, and the spiritual life of Christians: on the one hand, it is utterly dependent upon the testimony of the Spirit of truth, whereby we are comforted and encouraged; on the other hand, there must always be a certain tension between the Church and the world of unbelief.

Today’s epistle lesson there is a superb sketch of the Church’s life precisely in those terms, as witness to the fullness of man’s return to God in Christ, and as tacit critique of worldliness. It begins, “The end of all things is at hand. Be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.” On the one hand, keep your heads amidst the intoxicating riches and pleasures of this world, for the world passes away, and its pleasures and riches with it; and, on the other hand, keep your focus on the unfolding purpose of God, through the common prayers of the Church, because Christ’s coming again is ever at hand.

“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves; for charity shall cover the multitude

of sins.” Here again is a tacit critique of worldliness. The Church true to its calling does not live by the world’s rules, by fault-finding and back-biting, by grievance and revenge, by delight in other’s failings; it lives rather by the law of charity, the law of love that passes over in silence the faults of others.

In that spirit of charity, Saint Peter continues, “Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” The world thinks it possesses an absolute right to the goods in its possession; but Christians know better; they know that all goods, material and spiritual, personal and financial, are the gifts of God, which we hold in trust, for the purpose of serving and supporting one another in the unity of Christ’s body.

Saint Peter sums up his entire counsel in terms of everything we say or do: “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth”. In clearheaded prayer, in fervent charity, hospitality, in service and witness, we find one overriding purpose to our common life and mission: “that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever”.

In our witness to Christ and in our worship of God, the whole world, indeed the whole creation, attains its true end, and finds its true happiness. Today let us with our Lord commend our spirits into the Father’s hands, that in the completeness of his return to the Father, and the perfection of his sacrifice, we too may be fulfilled with his grace and heavenly benediction. Amen.

The Reverend Gavin G. Dunbar