

Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2005 Lectionary A

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. C. Clark Hubbard, Jr. Associate Rector

Scripture: Acts 1:(1-7) 8-14

First things, first.

Let us pray. *Come Holy Spirit, as promised by Jesus, come and empower us to be Jesus' witnesses to the ends of the earth in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Recently, one of you e-mailed me a list entitled "Why I owe my mother." Since it is Mothers' Day I thought we might take a moment to look at that list. So, here we go. My mother taught me to appreciate a job well done. If you are going to kill each other, do it outside. I just finished cleaning. My mother taught me religion: you better pray that will come out of the carpet. My mother taught me about time travel: if you don't straighten up, I'm going to knock you into the middle of next week. My mother taught me logic: because I said so, that's why. My mother taught me irony: keep crying and I'll give you something to cry about. My mother taught me about hypocrisy: If I've told you once, I've told you a million times. Don't exaggerate. My mother taught me about envy: there are millions of less fortunate children in this world who don't have wonderful parents like you. My mother taught me about anticipation: just wait till we get home. My mother taught me humor: when that lawn mower cuts off your toes, don't come running to me. My mother taught me how to become an adult: if you don't eat your vegetables, you'll never grow up. My mother taught me wisdom: when you get to be my age, you'll understand. Finally, my mother taught me justice: one day you'll have children, and I hope they turn out just like you.

All kidding aside, we owe our mothers a tremendous debt of gratitude. No, mothers, like the rest of us, are not perfect. But, without them we would be deficient in so many ways. They have birthed us, nurtured us, taught us, stood by us, encouraged us and sustained us. So, at this time I want to wish all of you mothers a very happy Mothers' Day.

Now, just as we would be deficient without our mothers, Jesus tells us this morning in our reading from the Book of Acts that there is someone else without whom we would be deficient as the church and as Christians. In fact, just as we could not have been born without our mothers, neither can we be a Christian or do the work of the church without this very special individual. Remember, it is Jesus telling us that this special individual is essential to our faith and to the proclamation of the gospel. Who then is Jesus talking about? In v. 4, He tells the apostles and the disciples, including His mother: "*not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.*" Then in v. 5, Jesus clarifies what the promise is: "*for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" The Holy Spirit is this special individual of the Trinity, who is essential to our faith and to the proclamation of the gospel.

Now, most of you might be saying to yourselves, just as Jesus' apostles might have done, "Yeah, Lord the Holy Spirit, but what I want to know is when will things get right in my life." The apostles put it this way in v. 6: "*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?*" You see in their minds if they could be a sovereign nation again, then everything would be right in their lives. In our minds, if we had enough money, good health, good relationships, good job, a national church that respected and abided by scripture, whatever you want to add to the list, then everything would be right. What has the Holy Spirit got to do with everything being right? Good question. Let's see if we can answer it.

Well, after the apostles asked Jesus whether this was the time that He would restore the kingdom of Israel, Jesus did give them an answer — sort of. He answered them by saying: “*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.*” “But, Jesus,” the apostles might have said or thought. “But, Jesus,” you or I might have said or thought. “You just told us earlier in Matthew 28:19: ‘*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [you].*’ If all authority has been given to You, Jesus, what’s with this ambiguous, fuzzy answer. Surely, You can be more specific. I mean I thought when I accepted You as my Lord and Saviour, then my bills would be paid, my marriage would work, I could give up my drug addiction or that You would heal me when I prayed to You. Now, Jesus, You are saying not yet, not yet. How about explaining yourself, Jesus? I gave my life to you and now You have the audacity to tell me that you are not going to fix it. Come on! Besides, what’s with this being “*witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” Jesus, I signed-up with You for what You could do for me.”

Well, to make matters worse while the apostles and the rest of the crew were asking Jesus when He was going to fix things, He suddenly ups and leaves. He splits. He is beamed-up into some kind of cloud. Beam me up Scotty. Then these two strangers show-up — two angels. Would they reveal when Jesus was going to fix things?

Not exactly. Instead, the angels put the onus on the disciples. Hey, “*Men of Galilee [wake-up, as they clap their hands], why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*” The Anglican theologian John Stott has made this observation about the apostles: “There was something fundamentally anomalous [irregular] about their gazing up into the sky when they had been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth. . . Their calling was to be witnesses not stargazers.” I wonder sometimes whether we too are guilty of stargazing. Would we rather read the Bible, go to church, attend some small group or class than tell people about Jesus? You didn’t expect me to put it that way did you? There’s truth to what I just said, though, isn’t there?

So, the apostles wiped the dust of false expectation out of their eyes. I suspect we have all done that. After the initial romance of being wooed by Jesus is over, after the honey moon is over, reality begins to set in and we must go back to where we came from to the same old world, to the same old life as we had before. What a let down! In the beginning there had been that very special time of first getting to know Jesus, of learning who He is, what could He could do, of talking to Him and of having Him talk to us, of coming to appreciate his love for us. And then, as quickly as He came into our lives, inspiring hope, motivating faith, it seemed as if He just disappeared. Where had the magic of His incredible presence gone? Are you with me? Can you identify with some of what I am saying?

Well, what else could the apostles and the rest of the crew do, but what Jesus had last told them to do? “*They went [back to Jerusalem] to the room upstairs where they were staying*”(v. 13), the whole bunch of them. There, as v. 14 tells us, they “*were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.*” But, for what were they praying?

Sure, Jesus had told them to wait until the Holy Spirit had come upon them. But, what would that look like? What would it feel like when the Holy Spirit came? Would He look like that dove, which descended upon Jesus at His baptism? What indeed were they to expect? I mean you and I have the benefit of hindsight, but they had no such information. The Holy Spirit might walk into the room and if they didn’t know what to look for, then they could miss Him. In a manner of speaking, this Holy Spirit thing or person would be a surprise. Remember the last time someone said they had a surprise for you. Mentally, you probably went down your ongoing wish-list. Let’s see. Lord, I’d love more money, new clothes, a new car, a new house, a more loving spouse. Was that the sort of surprise the apostles

might have expected? Of course, they wouldn't be expecting a new car — maybe a new camel.

I like the story about the kindergarten teacher who was observing her children while they were drawing. She would occasionally walk around to see each child's work. As she came to one little girl, who was diligently working, she asked what she was drawing. The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." The teacher paused and said, "But no one knows what God looks like." Without missing a beat, the girl replied, "They will in a minute." The apostles had no picture of the Holy Spirit. What indeed were they to expect when the Holy Spirit came and when could they expect Him?

Earlier in v. 5, Jesus had told the apostles that: ". . . *you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.*" How long was that? One day, two days. Jesus had been resurrected on the third day. Maybe, the Holy Spirit would come then. But, no five days passed, then six, seven, eight. If one day with God can translate to a thousand years for us, then "*not many days from now*" could be a very long time. I mean how long had the Hebrews waited for the messiah, Jesus in the first place — thousands of years? Why should it be any different with the Holy Spirit. Regardless, my guess is that as one day melted into the next, maybe, some of the old doubts began to return. Peter remembered that He denied the Lord three times. Thomas recalled how he hadn't believed in Jesus' resurrection until he saw for himself. The other nine apostles sadly reminisced how they had fled and deserted Jesus in Gethsemane. What a miserable bunch of guys! Wimps, all of them. And, they were supposed to be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth. Fat chance! Maybe, one of the items on their wish-list had been that the surprise of the Holy Spirit would give them courage kind of like the fearful lion in the Wizard of Oz.

If we were to read further into Acts, we would see that my speculation may not be too far off. They apparently had some apprehension about the fact that with the absence of the betrayer, Judas, they now only had eleven apostles. So, they succumbed to the equivocation of bureaucratic fuzziness and held an election of sorts to replace Judas, by drawing lots.

Finally, it happened, though. On the tenth day after Jesus' departure into heaven the surprise of the Holy Spirit did arrive. For the disciples, this had been the longest period of time that they had gone without Jesus' presence. As a result, not only may they have begun to experience some of the same old self-doubt, but they might also have begun to experience a painful, agonizing, life-denying deficiency in their lives. If you have had a loved one die, a mother, a father, a spouse, a child, you know how that emptiness and sorrow can begin to set-in, wracking your very being, pervading your every thought. Will the grief ever end?

Though Jesus had been resurrected, his ascension resulted Him being absent, which may have made Him seem as good as dead to the disciples. I mean He was no longer with them like He used to be. Isn't that what happens when someone dies? Jesus's teachings, his miracles, his love and care for them were beginning to fade. They were but fond memories now. But, one cannot survive on the memory of the feast one had last week. The body needs daily nourishment and so, too, does the human spirit or it will die.

Surely, the hearts and minds of the little band of Jesus followers must have become quite parched— dry, crackling like a pile of autumn leaves — a veritable tinder box, a sure-nough fire hazard. They were dying for refreshment, when suddenly the lightning bolt of the Holy Spirit's presence arrived. DSSSSH! BAM! DSSSSH! BAM! DSSSSH! BAM! The whole room exploded with fire and wind. Should they hit the deck? In-coming! But to their amazement this storm did not cause them to fear. Strangely, their hearts and minds, though excited, were at peace like that calm before the storm, yet they were in the middle of the storm. Were they to laugh or cry at the sight of flames dancing upon the heads

of their fellow believers? The joy, the joy! Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit was true. Peter began to feel strong and bold. Thomas would no longer doubt. The rest felt conviction, a certainty of what they must now do in the name of Jesus.

Perhaps, you have heard the story of the mother wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano. She took him to hear a concert by the great concert pianist Ignace Paderewski. After they were seated, the mother spotted an old friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually made his way through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE". When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and discovered that the child was missing. Suddenly, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway grand piano on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Then leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed what could have been a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience. The audience was so mesmerized that they couldn't recall what else the great master played. Only the classic "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

In a manner of speaking, that's what happened with Jesus' followers at Pentecost. What they could accomplish on their own was hardly noteworthy. They had already proven that. When the going got tough, they all had deserted Jesus. But, now, having received the power of the Holy Spirit, they, like the little boy in the arms of the master Paderewski, would give a performance beyond any expectation, beautifully proclaiming the good news in Jesus Christ even in the face of torture and death.

So, the next time you or I set out to accomplish great feats in the name of Jesus, let us remember to listen carefully. We may hear the voice of the Master, whispering in our ear, "Don't quit. Keep playing." Perhaps, we will feel His arms around us and know that His hands are there helping us turn our feeble attempts into true masterpieces. As the saying goes, God doesn't seem to call the equipped, rather, He equips the 'called.'

Without our mothers, we would be deficient. Without Jesus we would unquestionably be deficient. And, as Jesus tells us, without the Holy Spirit we would be deficient. Next, Sunday, May 15, we will once again celebrate the Day of Pentecost. When Jesus ascended into heaven God poured out the Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers with the expectation that they would do something with that power. How about you? Will you do something with the power of the Holy Spirit? Will you, as Jesus commanded, be His witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, at Wegman's, the drug store or your place of work? If we are not willing to do this, then will God be willing to give us the Holy Spirit?

Oh, before I forget, Jesus did not say God would not restore the kingdom of Israel. In His own time He has. But, just imagine what would have happened if God had restored the kingdom of Israel at the time the apostles wanted. Do you think they would have ever traveled outside the boundaries of Israel to proclaim the good news? I doubt it. Well, I suspect the same is probably true for us. If God were to fix everything in our lives all at once, would we ever travel outside our boundaries in order to proclaim the good news in Jesus. I doubt it. My point is this: in God's time, He will make things right in your life, but first things first. And, the kingdom of God comes first. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

