

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today, the Day of Pentecost, is the day set aside in the calendar of the church year to remember the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples and followers of Jesus after his Ascension. We observe it fifty days after Easter Day, and ten days after Ascension Day – the Day of Pentecost thus closes out the Great Fifty Days of Easter. The color red in our altar hangings and vestments symbolizes both the blood of the martyrs and the gift of the Holy Spirit – many Episcopalians, in particular, have a special love for the day where everyone is encouraged to likewise dress in red as a marking of this day.

It seemed, then, appropriate to begin my comments here with our Easter Acclamation: Alleluia! Christ is risen! _____ I don't know about you, but I need the encouragement of that proclamation after a week like the one we've been through. Another week, another school shooting – unrest and death in Gaza – children going hungry each night in Fairfax county -- it's just too much. The temptation to despair, or even simply turn away, is ever-present. If anyone needed further proof that the world is broken by sin and evil, the events of this week provided a bold underline. I cannot solve it, I can only continue to proclaim the simple truth embodied in our Easter faith: that in a world characterized by death and pain, God breaks through and brings beauty from ashes, morning from night, and life out of death. The message of Easter is what we, as the Church, must continue to proclaim when people continue to choose to spread terror, fear, and division: “Even at the grave, we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

Jesus appeared to his followers after his resurrection, and prepared them for the coming of this moment: In today's Gospel reading he promises them the coming of the Advocate – the Holy Spirit – and indeed explains that the Holy Spirit could not come upon them until he had gone away. He promises them “power from on high” – and even as Jesus life of mission began at the River Jordan with the Spirit descending upon him, the followers of Jesus received their marching orders and the energy to go out and spread the message of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit descending upon them. But left with this promise, and the yawning gap in leadership left when he ascended

to the Father's right hand, the disciples might be forgiven for scratching their heads and wondering, "okay, now what?"

I think it is important to notice here that Jesus followers, rather than becoming despondent, chose to gather together – in the space between Jesus' ascension and the coming of the promised "Advocate" – they met together in that room to pray. In a moment likely characterized by confusion, uncertainty, and perhaps even sorrow – they came together and lifted their voices in prayer. And so when the Holy Spirit "came upon" them, it did so upon them collectively – not as an individual experience but a corporate one.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael, often describes our church as "the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement." He was asked at one point to illustrate what he meant by the Jesus movement, and his answer was to describe the Gospel procession – just like the one we've just seen here a moment ago – when the Deacon brings the Gospel book into the middle of the assembly of believers. We turn to look toward it. "In that Gospel moment," Bishop Michael said, "the Church has become the Jesus movement, with life reoriented around the teachings of Jesus and around his very Spirit."

The Day of Pentecost is often characterized as the day the Church itself was born – it's birthday, so to speak. It does feel a bit like a celebration, a new beginning, a starting point for this group of Jesus followers as they find their new purpose – a new mission. His followers gathered and waited and prayed – but with the Spirit's manifestation they find that simply gathering and praying was no longer enough. It was not enough for them to be a group of people who loved and cared for each other, within the four walls of that upper room. The doors of that room opened not only to let the Spirit in, but to allow the followers of Jesus out. They were to be a people energized to take the Word of God to the ends of the earth – and so, on the Day of Pentecost, the Jesus Movement itself was born. More than a group of folks praying a certain way. More than an organized religion, but a people on-the-move.

Madeleine L'Engle describes the Holy Spirit as something like that extra bit of creativity or drive that pushes us, particularly when we perform beyond what we thought was our limits. "Any artist, great or small, knows moments

when something more than he takes over, and he moves into a kind of ‘overdrive,’ where he works as he ordinarily cannot work,” she writes. “When he is through, there is a sense of exhaustion, exhilaration, and joy. All our best work comes in this fashion, and it is humbling and exciting.”

A couple of seminarians I know visited St. Alban’s last Sunday, and at coffee hour they both described this place as having a “great vibe” they could sense from the moment they arrived. That metaphor stuck with me this week – and I think it’s true. But I think it’s also much more than that. In a world where violence threatens the security and safety of our children, the people of this parish church have those among them working to keep our children safer. In a world where children daily go hungry among the richest zip codes in the nation, people of this parish work enthusiastically and energetically to provide the nourishment of a regular meal. In a world characterized by political division, in which fissures split directly through families, and in which people have stopped even talking to those with whom they disagree – this parish church continues to hold each other in love, even when we see different solutions to the problems we face. We proclaim that Christ is risen, not only in our words, but also in our deeds.

The very fact that you are here today suggests that the work of the Holy Spirit in this place has impacted your life as well. I know it has impacted mine. I’m glad for the leadership of Fr. Jeff and his outward-looking vision for this church, and that he continues to challenge us to find new ways in which we can proclaim Christ risen in our local community. As Fr. Jeff returns from the refreshment of his sabbatical, and as we turn our eyes toward the future and possibilities and even perhaps a new kitchen with which to further that mission, I’m excited to see what is next for St. Alban’s.

Bishop Ted said recently in a sermon that the Church of Jesus Christ is a cruciform one – cross shaped – and that it was not born on Pentecost, but on the Cross, where Jesus gave his life for each of us, for me, for you and you and you. He said: The Day of Pentecost is the day when it received its marching orders. “We become the body of Christ not simply because we believe the right things or say the right things or even do the right things – we become the body of Christ when the Holy Spirit dwells in us so that the Father and Jesus make our home with us, and we model a new way of being community.”

“Harmony is not the same as unison and many notes can make a beautiful and surprising sound...Archbishop Justin, preaching at Pentecost a few years ago, said this: ‘We divide again and again over our disagreements, rather than setting a pattern for the world by disagreeing in love, and settling our disputes in the unity of the Spirit...His work is unity, and the clearest sign of the presence of the spirit is the integrating chaos of His power, bringing vision, dreams and calling that enabled scattered people to have diversity without enmity.’”

People of St. Alban’s: Alleluia! Christ is risen!