

The 2nd Sunday of Easter, Year B

8 April, AD 2018

St Michael's Church, O'Fallon, IL

Proper: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

✠ ✠ ✠

St John says that rather than breaking Jesus' legs as he hung on the cross, because he was already dead, the soldier shoved a spear into his side, "and at once there came out blood and water" (19.34). Those are the foundation of the Church, the two Sacraments which, by the express command of Jesus, every follower of his is to participate in. Nobody can be his disciple who doesn't partake of those two Sacraments— Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Baptism—the water which flowed from the wound in Jesus' side— is how we are forgiven our sins, made members of Christ's body, and adopted as children of his Father. Holy Communion— consuming the Body and Blood of Christ— is how we are nourished, strengthened, and forgiven (again) in that mystically incorporated, divinely adopted life. At his command we're baptized into his death, says Paul (Rom 6.3), and we are fed from his body, says Jesus. Nothing is clearer in the gospels than that in order to have any part in and with Christ, we must obey these two commands. You may be wondering at this point where that leaves certain Christian groups who don't obey those commands. The short answer is, we don't know, so we don't judge. Instead we leave it to God to deal with.

Some say that Pentecost is the birthday of the Church and, since that's the day the Holy Spirit filled the apostles and everybody who responded to their preaching, that fits with what Jesus says about the need to be reborn of water and the Spirit (John 3:1-8). But others say Good Friday is the birthday of the Church. Just as Eve was created when God took a rib out of Adam's side after causing him to fall into a deep sleep, so the Church, the bride of Christ, was created out of Jesus' wounded side after he had fallen into the deep

sleep of death. An anonymous ancient preacher imagined Jesus saying to Adam, "My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in Hell. The sword that pierced Me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you" (*cf* Office of Readings, Holy Saturday). So it's probably okay to describe either Good Friday or Pentecost as the birthday of the Church, since the whole birthday thing is just an analogy. And as we know, most analogies break down at some point.

If you think of Pentecost as the birthday of the Church, then you could think of Good Friday as the day she was conceived. And if you think of Good Friday as the birthday, then you could think of Pentecost as the day of her confirmation. Just as each Christian is empowered by the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation, ordained to carry out our particular ministries, the apostles and the whole Church were empowered on the day of Pentecost to begin the whole ministry of the Church. So either way you look at it, by the fiftieth day after Easter, the Church was ready for action.

At various points during his earthly ministry, Jesus instituted, and taught about, certain things that are basic to our life in him, so that come Pentecost, everything would be in place and she could start functioning fully, just like a ship on the day of her commissioning. On that day, all her systems are fully operational, and the crew is trained and in place— all that's left is to set sail. Similarly, Jesus made all the preparations for his Church to begin her work so that when the appointed day came, all she had to do was to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and get on with it.

Early on Jesus taught about the necessity of Baptism in his conversation with Nicodemus, in which he said that no one can enter the kingdom of heaven without first having been born anew/again of water and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:3-5). And he ties that to his crucifixion when he says, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (3.14-15). You really need to read the whole of St John's gospel in order to see clearly how this

water of rebirth is the same water that poured out of Jesus on the cross.

Then on Maundy Thursday night, he instituted the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament of his Body and Blood. That's the heavenly meal that he gives to whomever has been born anew of water and the Spirit, even though his Body was not to be sacrificed nor his Blood shed on the cross until the next morning. He's setting the apostles up for it before it happens, so that when the Holy Spirit confirms them, filling them with understanding on the day of Pentecost, they will see how all these teachings and institutions and commands fit together; and they will begin on that day to put them all into practice.

Then on Easter Day in the evening, when the risen Lord first comes to the disciples, he puts in place one more thing which is vital to the life of the Church— he ordains them. First he says, “Peace be with you.” (That, btw, is the proper thing to say when we greet each other during the passing of the peace— not “good morning,” or “how are you,” or “Gee, you haven't been in church for a long time!”, but “Peace be with you”— because that's how the risen Christ greeted his disciples.) Then he shows them the nail wounds in his hands and his side to assure them that it's really him, risen from the dead on the third day. And since Thomas missed it, Jesus had to do it again a week later. Then he says to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” The word send is translated from the Greek *apostolon*, which is why these eleven men are known from that moment on as apostles, those who are sent. But sent with what, or for what? “And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

You've heard me say over and over that the greatest use of God's almighty power is to forgive sins, and so it is. It was for this very thing that he sent his Son into the world. “This is a true saying,” Paul says, “and worthy of all men to be believed, that Christ Jesus

came into the world to save sinners” (1Tim 3:15). “Hear also what St John saith, ‘If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the perfect offering for our sins’” (1Jn 2:1-2). In ordaining the apostles, Jesus gave them the power to forgive and to withhold forgiveness in his Name, and on the day of Pentecost he set them to work doing it. After hearing St Peter preach on that day, all those who believed what he had said asked what they should do, how they should respond. He said, “Repent, and be baptized... for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.38).

Sometime before the crucifixion, the scribes overheard Jesus say to a paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” “This is blasphemy,” they said to themselves, “only God can forgive sins,” to which Jesus replied, “Exactly. And just to make sure you know that I have that power to forgive sins—” then he turned to the paralytic and said, “Get up and walk,” and he did (Mk 21-12; Lk 5.17-26). Some folks in the modern Church have a problem with priests and bishops forgiving sins. You're all on the receiving end of it just about every Sunday when we've confessed our sins. And after hearing a private confession the priest says, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who has left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent... by his authority committed to me, I absolve you from all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (BCP 448). “How can anyone but God forgive sins?” the modern skeptics say, “How can ordinary ministers have the power to forgive, even though they do it in the Name of the Lord? The best they can do is to pray that God will forgive them.” The answer to that is that it's the power of the resurrection. God who created the heavens and the earth out of absolutely nothing, who took flesh of the Virgin Mary and was born as one of us, who rose from the dead, who causes people to be reborn by water and the Holy Spirit, who gives us his very flesh and blood to eat, and who promises to raise us from the dead at the last day, why can't he do this too? Speaking of himself in a parable, Jesus says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (Mt 20:15). And that's

exactly what he did when he breathed on the apostles and said to them, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven.” He didn’t say, “If you pray for me to forgive them, I will,” he said, “If *you* forgive... they are forgiven.” It’s just like how he didn’t say, “This bread *represents* my body... This cup *represents* my blood.” He said, “This *is* my body... This *is* my blood.” It’s the power of God working through his Church, through the people he has chosen, and through things he created, to reconcile all people to himself. We don’t know the mechanics of how it works; but if Jesus says it happens, then it happens. And who are we to doubt?

He came into the world, as Paul says, to save sinners. Those he redeems through baptism, he incorporates into his mystical Body—not an association of initiated members like the Lions Club, but a body that has his Blood flowing through it. Just as two people become one flesh through the sacrament of marriage, so we who are baptized are members, parts, organs, cells of one body, with Christ as its head. We are extensions of his hands and feet, his eyes, ears and mouth. But to become part of this body we have to be remade in his image, the first step of which is to repent and be forgiven. Everything the risen Lord has given his Church has this one overarching purpose—the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because it’s the only way back to the Father. To abandon our selfish wills and to seek to know and to follow his will is what it’s all about.

Our return to God is contingent on our turning away from sin. It’s the one key to his eternal kingdom. It’s why Jesus came. It’s why he died and rose again. It’s why he gave us the sacraments as the means of grace that transform us into heavenly beings. He sent his apostles to oversee this work, giving them the power of forgiveness in his Name. And they passed on that power to their successors, the bishops, who share it with their priests, for the good order of the Church, to keep all her members focussed on the crucified and risen Lord, so that, as St John says, “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” *In the Name of...*

a.m.d.g.

Ian C. Wetmore+