

WHITSUNDAY 2018
SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH
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Acts ii, verse 1 - When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today is the birthday of the Church, when the Spirit descended as fire and turned a tiny band of simple folk into world-shakers. I have always thought it fitting that of the three greatest feasts of the Church year, Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas, the one that is utterly ignored by the world around us is the one that most intimately concerns the Church herself. This is the great day of the Lord of the Church, God the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity.

Rogation Sunday, two weeks ago, preeminently concerns God the Father, the one from whom all comes and to whom we address most of our prayers. Last Sunday, Ascension Sunday, preeminently concerns God the Son, the Lord who came down from heaven to show us God in a way we could understand, and then returned to his Father, taking with him our glorified humanity to reign in splendor. Today is the feast of God the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, the Father of the poor, the Comforter, and Paraclete. And so next week we will come naturally to Trinity Sunday, when the progressive revelation of God's triunal nature from the previous three weeks is celebrated as the culmination of the first half of the Church and as the beginning of its second half.

Saint Paul says to the Philippians, 'I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound.' (Phil. iv.12) It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that he sends to the Church the right gifts at the right times. In the gospels we find the apostles moving with what must have been bewildering speed from the desolation of Good Friday to the glory of the dawning realization of the Resurrection. In Acts they moved from the Ascension's charge to 'wait for the promise of the Father' (Acts i.4) to the fulfilment of that promise on this day. So too the Church in her lifetime on earth, and many parishes in their smaller lives, move,

sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, through changing seasons and chances. We abound, and we are abased. We struggle through difficulties, we rejoice in triumphs. Through all these times, the Spirit blows where he listeth, bringing grace to help in time of need and saving us from deadly pride in time of plenty.

A few years ago I was in Croatia in the city of Split the ancient palace-city of Diocletian as well as the ruins of his birthplace nearby in Salona. Diocletian was the greatest persecutor of the Church in the Roman world. Beginning on February 23 in the year 303 Diocletian issued a series of edicts which led to the destruction first of Christian books and buildings, and then of Christians themselves. For nine years, until Constantine's great victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312, the blood of the martyrs poured forth. Saint Lucy, Saint Sebastian, Saint Anastasia, Saint Vincent, Saint Marcellinus, and thousands of others, from the bishop of Rome and noble ladies to little children, great and small, famous and obscure – thousands died in the great martyrdom.

Now Diocletian built a great walled camp in Spalatum, modern Split, within which he had a palace constructed as well as temples, barracks for soldiers, workshops, and a mausoleum for himself. The outer walls and many of these buildings are still standing. Diocletian's mausoleum is intact. But Diocletian's body has been removed and his mausoleum is now the Cathedral of Saint Domnius, one of the many bishops who died in the Diocletianic persecution. The persecutor's mausoleum is a church dedicated to one of his victims. The temple of Jupiter is now the baptistry, where new Christians are made. There, my friends, is the Holy Spirit at work. Persecutors come and go, but the Church and her heavenly Father endure.

And it still is so today. I had a parishioner, Anita Steinbeck Callahan, who came from eastern Germany in Mecklenburg to Atlanta in 1920. She returned to visit a sister years later, and they stood by the Lutheran church on the square of their town as a Communist parade marched by. The sister said to Mrs. Callahan, 'This church watched the Nazis march by. Now it watches these people. When they are gone, the church will still be here.' So it is. Stalin asked

dismissively how many divisions the pope had. In 1980 John Paul II visited Poland, and we saw how many divisions he had. Stalin is dead and gone, a figure of loathing in world history. But when John Paul died the world mourned. There again, you see, the Spirit at work. The world, my friends, can be very, very dark. Evil is very much at work. But the Holy Spirit is greater, and he is ever at work, turning our free follies and wickedness into good, softening the hearts with some openness, consoling those in need, raising up the downcast, protecting above all the souls of the weakest and most helpless.

In Genesis xi at the tower of Babel we find a human attempt to create a city without God. God is not mentioned by the tower-builders. He seems entirely out of their calculations. And so their works come to naught, and they are scattered and their languages confounded. This story tells us that all human works and reforms will fail if they are not rooted and grounded in God's love. It is no accident that today, on the great feast of the Holy Spirit, the penalty of Babel is symbolically reversed. Where at Babel men were confounded, so that they could not understand one another's speech, in Acts the multitude of human tongues suddenly became mutually intelligible. What sin and pride divide, God reunites. What man when he forgets God will lose, man will regain when his heart is opened to the Lord and Giver of life. In the first verse of the lesson today, note the emphasis on the unity of the disciples: 'they were **all** with **one** accord in **one** place.' And again, the mighty wind from heaven 'filled **all** the house', and 'they were **all** filled with the Holy Ghost'. Unity, unanimity, plenitude. These are the notes of the day. So too with the observers: 'they **all** were amazed' and said, 'Hear we **every man** in our own tongue'. And then again, a second time, we are told, 'They were **all** amazed'.

Human dreams of heaven on earth end in nightmare. God's work of unity, while constantly obstructed by our sins, is effective and in the end will be all in all. Pentecost has come. The Spirit of the Lord filleth all the world. Glory be to God the Holy Ghost.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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