

## EASTER 4 (2024)

More years ago than I care to recall, when I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I was chosen to be the chaplain of a school club.

Maybe, it was the first inkling that God had a call on my life for the sacred ministry. It's hard to say. "God works in mysterious ways. His wonders to perform," as the hymn reminds us.

More significantly was the prayer I chose to open my first meeting. It was today's Collect. In it we ask that we may love the thing God commands and desire what God promises.

What we seek is for our interiors to be re-ordered. It is that we might be conformed into the image of Christ . . . become little 'Christs', if you please.

There is another way of looking at this petition as well. Under the Old Covenant given at Sinai, God's Law was engraved on tables of stone. But, under the New, it is written on the fleshy tables of the heart. That is what we pray will happen to us.

Instead of slavishly following a list of rules out of grim duty, we pray that we may obey out of a glad heart and from love.

What or Who brings this change of heart about? ///

The One sent on Pentecost . . . the One spoken of in today's Gospel as the Comforter or Advocate.

Have you ever ridden on a sailboat? If you have, you know how dependent you are on that invisible force that passes through the boat's sails.

Once I was with members of this church, Jere and Pat McConnell, in New York City.

While we were there, Mr. Jere's nephew Paul took us out on a sailboat.

It was a perfect evening in September. We circled the Statue of Liberty – this was pre-911—and then headed north up the Hudson River as far as the George Washington Bridge, and then turned back.

When we did, the wind, which had been thrusting us along at a rapid clip, went away. Eventually the trolling motor had to be engaged – something anathema to boating purists – so we could get back to our hotel.

Well, again, that is the way it is with God's Spirit. He is the wind under our sails. No Spirit. No progress. No loving the thing God loves.

I was in Food Lion yesterday. As I waited at the till, I picked up a little inspirational book. Opening it at random, my eyes fell on a quote by Willaim Penn:

**“The adventure of the Christian life begins when we dare to do what we would never tackle without Christ.”**

Without looking further, I closed the book and began to think about those words.

It is the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Christ in us – that enables us to dare and do things beyond our temperament and natural endowments.

Think about Jesus’ followers prior to Pentecost. In fear, they stayed sequestered.

But, when the Day of Pentecost came. Those locked doors were flung open, and they went out. That day Peter preached perhaps the most

effective sermon ever given. Around 3000 came to faith and were baptized that day.

What brought about this change? What unleashed this power? /// The Holy Spirit.

Last Sunday, we turned from the Easter event to the road leading to Pentecost.

Today's Gospel records a small section of the conversation that took place following the Last Supper.

During this conversation, Jesus tells them that He will be parted from them. "I go to Him who sent me," He tells them.

You can imagine how heavy their hearts must have been. Imagine a doctor coming out and telling members of a patient's family: Your family member's condition is terminal.

No matter how gently he delivers the news, there is nothing good about it. Some of you have been there. You know what I am talking about.

But that is exactly what Jesus does when He delivers the message that He is going away. He turns a negative into a positive. Listen to what He says in verses 6 and 7:

**“Because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away.**

Before we go on. Let me interject a life application.

You may have found yourself in a situation where it appeared God was inflicting pain or at least allowing it. You did not understand what was going on.

Maybe you lost a job or were passed over for a promotion. You were devastated. Your sky caved in. But, as time went on, you came to see that what had happened was actually to your advantage. You got a better job, or a better promotion.

The old Bible commentator Matthew Henry writes helpfully:

**Our Lord Jesus is always for that which is most expedient for us, whether we think so or no. He deals not with us according to the folly of our own choice, but graciously over-rules it, and gives us the medicine we are loth to take, because he knows it is good for us.**

If you look back on your own life, you might find examples of what Matthew Henry is talking about: God working for good behind the scenes. God taking even the worst the world, which has set its face against God and His Christ, and turning it around for good.

Of course, there will be times on this side of the great divide when don't understand why God allowed this or that to happen.

In such situations, we have to say, with John Henry Newman's hymn: "The night is dark, and I am far from home. Lead, thou me on."

But back to Jesus and the disciples. How was His physical departure going to turn to their advantage?

If you think about it, it is not too hard to see. If Jesus had continued with them as he had been with them for the past three years, moving about Palestine, healing and teaching, that would have been nice for them *in a way* . . . but terrible for everyone else!

Had this happened, the rescue mission for which Jesus came into the world would have been aborted.



No cross and the sin of the world would not have been dealt with.

Without the resurrection, there would have been no assurance that the old account had been settled once and for all, that the gate to heaven had been opened.

If Jesus had not gone to the Father, there would have been no gift of the Holy Spirit.

To flesh out that thought further, earthly rulers of that day, after having successfully completed a military campaign, would often upon their return bestow gifts on their people.

This is what Jesus did on the day of Pentecost. The difference was His gifts were not captured bounty, things like silver and gold, but Himself.

The Comforter universalizes Jesus' presence. No longer is He *just* in Capernaum or

*just* in Nazareth or *just* in Jerusalem, but wherever His believing people are . . . wherever *you* are.

No matter how dark the hour, Jesus by the power of the Spirit is there. Never forget it!

But with presence also came **power**.

I mentioned earlier how Jesus' fearful band was transformed into an unstoppable force on Pentecost and how Peter's sermon that day turned many hearts to the Lord.

What happened verifies and confirms Jesus' words in today's Gospel, "When He [the Comforter] is come, he will reprove [convict] the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment."

Jesus' words are still being verified today. Whenever, wherever Jesus is announced some people get it. Some see their sickness and turn

and are healed. The call of the Gospel, moreover, transcends cultures.

Yet another aspect of the Comforter's work is illumination: **“He will guide you into all truth,”** says Jesus in today's passage.

And that is what happened after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

The Spirit guided the minds and hands of those who gave us our New Testament. And He continues His work of illumination today.

The Bible is a cutting and convincing book. It is because it is a Spirit-inspired book. The same Spirit which inspired it brings this ancient text to life when it is read.

So, it really was expedient for Jesus to go away physically for a season. Because He did, we get the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not some vague theological concept, but a Divine Person in our midst.

He brings forward the things that happened in the past and which are spoken of in Gospels into the present. We, for example, stand looking up at Christ on the cross, making that sacrifice once offered, at every celebration of the Holy Communion. We enter into that mystery.

More than that, He is with us in good times and bad. Because of Him, we are never alone. /// He prompts and enables us to dare and do things we thought outside our reach.

And, returning to this morning's Collect, He make us love what God loves. He turns 'miserable offenders' into little Christs.

In response, all we can say is: To God be the glory, great things He has done and continues to do in our lives and in the life of the world.