

Now That You Are Here

In teaching a class of elderly ladies the Book of Acts, I mentioned the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and one of the ladies adjusted her hearing aid – and enquired with a loud voice – “Penny who?” I remembered myself as a boy – when old Mr. Hartpence was trying to teach us the catechism in Sunday School – and we came to the part about the “Holy Spirit” and I said I didn’t understand it, and he replied, “and who’s asking you to understand it? Just repeat it after me!”

As a matter of fact – when we question ourselves about the meaning of the Holy Spirit in our faith – a lot of us stumble too – and realize we just repeat it after the older generation and “who’s asking us to understand it?” Well, this morning, I am.

I want you to understand what is meant by the Holy Spirit – for when we talk about him – we are getting away from the obvious in Christianity (clergymen have sometimes been defined as bores who belabor the obvious until 12 o’clock, and sometimes until 12:15). But when we talk of the Holy Spirit – we are getting away from the view of Christianity as nothing more than a plain man’s guide to good conduct – we are getting closer to the nature of reality. Arthur Machen used to complain that the clergy “pass their time in preaching, not the eternal mysteries, but a two penny morality.”

Well – to talk about the Holy Spirit – is not to belabor the obvious – or to tell you to “be good, be good, be good, be good,” – which isn’t worth 2 pennies anyway – but it is to approach the eternal mysteries – tell you to beware, to be aware of the Loving God within you and among you. God Himself within us, God Himself among us. Mysterium tremendum – out of which morality flows like water from an artesian well. Without some God in you, there can’t be any good in you. You see – Christianity goes deeper than a simple morality – goes down to the very nature of reality from which it flows. As William Blake said, “if morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Saviour.”

But Christianity is not just obvious morality – else the world would have been saved by Socrates long before Jesus of Nazareth; Christianity is first of all a mystery of faith – that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God – that his resurrected Spirit is abroad in the world, never to be entombed again (except possibly in City Churches!) – no, not even there can you bury him completely – his resurrected Spirit is forever abroad – in us and among us – with a grace capable

of resurrecting us also, even us, to new life – if we but respond to His challenge: at least that’s precisely what happened to the Christians at Pentecost with the giving of the Spirit. And this is what we mean when we say in the Apostle’s Creed – “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Holy is the word for God. “Ghost is an old Elizabethan word meaning ‘Spirit’” – and “Spirit” is another Greek word meaning “person” – so, “I believe in the Holy Ghost” means: “I sense (I am aware of), I am constantly confronted by, counseled by, comforted by, encouraged by, challenged by the personal presence of God himself, as Holy Companion, whose spirit is so like the spirit of Christ, as he is revealed in the Gospel, that I know – I’m sure – He is the same – the Christ himself. So – “Penny who?” was not so bad a question after all. For we are talking about a person – the personal presence of God in Christ Jesus – whoever we are – wherever we are – forever and ever.

A simple “love-thy-neighbor” morality? More than that! A mystery that plumbs the depths of religious reality – the companioning presence of a God like Christ – in us and among us – that is the meaning of the Holy Spirit.

2. Now let me recapitulate – back up – and say it all over again in a 2nd slightly different way.

Late in the 1800’s, Henry Ward Beecher was walking down Fulton Street in Brooklyn – on a cold winter’s evening – and ran smack into a little drama of the big city – a child too young to be selling newspapers had let the wind overturn his stand, the papers flying like wild birds down the street – his change scattering in the gutter. The child was too cold, incapable of recovering things. He was just standing and crying when Beecher came up, a big smiling man, put his arm around the little fellow and asked, “What’s the matter, boy?” Looking up into that strong, kind face – the boy answered, “Nothing is the matter, nothing is the matter,” he said, “Now that you are here.” And together, the two of them, man and boy, put things aright. “Now that you are here” – don’t you know exactly how that boy felt? But I don’t want you just to “repeat after me” – I do want you to understand it. Try understanding it like this. For example, haven’t you ever been sick, very sick, in bad pain, with your spirit so cold, and feeling so incapable of recovery, capable of nothing but crying – when suddenly a door opens – and there, standing beside you, is a good physician, a doctor you’ve known and loved a long time, into whose kind and capable hands you have more than once trusted your life absolutely – and when he says to you, “tell me what’s the matter,” – you feel like replying, “Nothing is the matter –

nothing at all – now that you are here.” For you have the feeling that together – the two of you – can put things aright. Why, the therapy starts right there.

Or, again, have you never been anguished over a hard decision, or grieved by a great loss, or disappointed at the collapse of a cherished dream, or stranded far from home and felt frozen, immobile, incapable of any constructive action, of carrying on, when suddenly – there beside you is a beloved companion – maybe it’s your husband, your wife, your father, your mother, your child, your physician, your minister, your old friend – it makes no difference who, except that you love them and trust them and know they love you – and when they put an arm of strength about you, and in concern say, “tell me what’s the matter?”, you want to say, “Nothing, nothing is the matter. Now that you are here. For just the sight of you, just the sound of your voice, you whom I trust, you are strength to my weakness, hope to my despair, faith to my doubt, new life to my dying will.”

Tell me now, have you ever experienced this? This being in a situation with which you cannot cope – cannot until confronted by a beloved, trusted companion – whose very presence – comforts you back to life again, counsels you back to life again, challenges you – back to life again, so that you are more alive than you’ve ever been?

If so, then I do not have to explain the Holy Spirit to you – this knowledge already exists for you, is real for you; I have only to translate it into Christian terms, and say to you this is the way the Christian feels about the presence of God in Christ.

For the Holy Spirit is nothing less than God come close, God come close to help in situations with which we – all by ourselves – cannot cope – with sin and suffering. He is the companioning Christ – the beloved physician, the good shepherd, the friend of sinners – come close, come so close – that the sick, the strayed, the lost, the dying, incapable of any further action, worn out with trying, striving, only to lose, weary -- God, how weary! Spirits numb, can go no further – suddenly know that a door – long shut by stubborn reason, by willful pride, by embarrassed evil – opens in the soul – opens, and there stands the God-like Christ, the Christ-like God, with a strong, kind face – a strong, kind voice – saying, “lo, I am with you” – “I am with you” – “with you” – “tell me what’s the matter?” And the soul answers back, timidly at first, hardly daring to believe, then stronger, stronger – “Nothing. Nothing is the matter now – now that you are with me – now that you are here. For together, the two of us, God and man, can put

things aright.” Many before us have known this companioning presence of God in and among us called the Holy Spirit – the Beyond within.

1666, a Carmelite monastery in Paris, the world still in flower – the world is always in flower; flower is man’s natural habitat – but an ex-soldier, the monastery cook, named Brother Lawrence, so practicing the Presence of God in his kitchen, that those seeking spiritual help came to the cook’s back door – neglecting the abbot up front.

Or down to 1521, a dark hour for the Reformation, Martin Luther, a fugitive taking crayon, and writing on the floor and walls of his room, “Christ lives, Christ lives!”, and going out to battle “still this ancient foe.”

Or 1871, David Livingstone, Scottish missionary and explorer in Africa, banishing fear and loneliness because he too felt that Christ was with him, “I walk through the jungles of Africa and the Lord is by my side.”

Or April 9, 1945, the Nazi’s SS Black Guards hung Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer – but he is unafraid – “there is only one stronger reality,” he said, “the presence of the crucified.”

Sentimentalism? Fantasy? Pasteur in his paralysis – Milton in his blindness – Beethoven in his deafness – Helen Keller – waxing sentimental? – engaging in fantasy? – when one and all they felt the companioning presence of the living Christ – comforting, counseling, challenging them back to life. This experience is nothing short of the indwelling presence of God – that Jesus in the Gospel of John called the Parakletos, “the Comforter,” and promised to his disciples – to us – to you and to me, if we believe.

3. If we have it, we have a peace the world cannot give, as Jesus said, and cannot take away.

The implications of the word “parakletos” in John are many, but its three major uses are those we have mentioned: the divine companion as comforter, as counselor and as challenger.

In the New Testament, His is the comfort which keeps a man from falling, keeps him on his feet, with a strength beyond his own, letting him go beyond the breaking point of pain without breaking.

His is the counsel – for our defense before God’s justice, and for our daily guidance as his teaching comes home to us.

And His is the challenge – to noble living and inspired thinking – the challenge to live in community – so grateful to our God that, at last, we are good to one another, forgetting the

fictions that underlie our factions, and living together in the community of love as Christ intends – without the fears that make us hate, that make us mean, practicing the sympathy of unselfish sharing, finding life by losing it and a peace at last that the world cannot give or take away.

A pipe dream? This comfort? This counsel? This challenge to community?

Yes – until we do have God in and among us – the Holy Spirit – the personal presence of the Lord Christ – as our Companion.

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