

Easter 6 2023

Acts 8.5-8, 14-17; John 14.15-21

“And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth.” (John 14:16-17). In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

There was a group, in the late fourth century, known by some as the *pneumatomachians*. Translated, this means “Spirit-fighters,” a name that sounds as though it could have come straight out of Star Wars. This effect is somewhat enhanced by the fact that the other name for the *pneumatomachians* was the Macedonians. One can imagine the heavy infantry of Alexander the Great, repurposed for the conflicts of the later Roman Empire, fighting for Christ, possibly with lightsabres. It is therefore one of the great disappointments of the study of Patristics to find out that the Spirit-fighters were simply a

group of men with beards who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

In the early Christian centuries, there was extensive, and often acrimonious, debate about how best to describe the status of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit. One of the outcomes of this long-running argument was the text that we nowadays call the Nicene creed. Regarding the Son, the Nicene creed states that he is the “only-begotten Son of God” and “of one substance with the Father”. The status of the Holy Spirit, however, is left much more ambiguous. In part due to the opposition of the *pneumatomachians*, it remained too controversial to extend the language “of one substance” also to the Spirit. And so, when we stand in a few minutes’ time to declare our faith, we will affirm our belief only in “the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified.”

We find this emphasis on the centrality of the life-giving nature of the Spirit in some of our earliest Christian texts, among them the reading from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard a few minutes ago. On hearing that the people of Samaria “had received the word of God”, the apostles Peter and John come to them to ensure that they receive also the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit is, for them, the guarantee of their incorporation into the nascent church. The overflowing abundance of life that springs forth through the Spirit is a sign of their participation in the ongoing divine life of the risen Christ.

The baptism of the Samaritans had been only “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” that is, without invocation of Father or Spirit. It is one of the few things agreed on by the majority of Christian churches in the modern day that,

for a baptism to be valid, it must be a baptism in water, with the invocation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even more remarkably, this is agreed upon even by all of the Anglican churches in Oxford.

It is hard to overstate the significance of this baptism. As the apostle Paul wrote, “in the one Spirit, we were all baptised into one body” – the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). We renew our baptismal commitments every Easter, and every time we celebrate the baptism of a new believer. We keep stoups of water at the north and south doors of our church for us to sign ourselves with a reminder of our own baptisms as we enter and leave. It is through water and the Spirit that we are brought through the death of Christ into his risen life. It is no coincidence that Jesus says, “you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you” to his disciples in the context of his promise to them that they will receive the Spirit

(John 14:20). In the Spirit, we are constituted as the Church, the Body of Christ.

Aside from baptism, we have a tendency to think of the reception of the Holy Spirit as being uniquely associated with Pentecost, the birth of the Church. But in the Gospel of John, which we just heard, the evangelist is not pointing to the *familiar* tale of Pentecost we find in the book of Acts, with tongues of fire, the speaking of many languages, and “these men are not drunk, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning!” Rather, we are being pointed forward to the twentieth chapter of the same gospel.

Following the first resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene, our own patron, John describes the second appearance of the risen Christ to his disciples as they hide behind locked doors. Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me,

so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:21-22) For John, this is both the birth of the Church and the arrival of the promised “Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive.” (John 14:17) Note the elements that are present here: first, Christ reconciles his disciples to himself. He shares with them his peace: his love, his forgiveness. They are then given the Holy Spirit, the enabling power that joins them to the divine life. Although not a baptism in the form that we would recognise today, this is the uniting and binding of the disciples into the Church.

But there is a third element here as well. The disciples are not merely reconciled and inspired. They are also sent. They have a mission. And so, as we heard in our Gospel today, Jesus prays the Father, and he gives them another Counsellor, another Paraclete (John 14:16). This

word, "*paraclete*", which we have adopted into English from Greek, is hard to translate exactly. Among its various senses are counsellor, advocate, comforter, encourager, intercessor. It is these roles that the disciples, the Church – that we – are sent out to fulfil. As the Body of Christ, constituted in the Holy Spirit, we are both ministered to by the Paraclete, and are called upon to be the instruments of counsel and of comfort, of encouragement, intercession and advocacy. We are to offer comfort and counsel to the sick, the dying, and the bereaved, to encourage students preparing for exams, workers on night shifts and the tourists that visit our city, to advocate for the victims of the injustices we see in our workplaces, and to intercede for the whole world. If we love him, we will keep his commandments. These are his commandments, and so, in doing these things, we will keep them and declare our love for him as he loves us.

Jesus' promise that if we love him, the Father will send to us another Paraclete is made on the night before he died, during supper with his friends. As we prepare to commemorate once again that meal in which we receive his body and blood, let us affirm our faith in the Lord, the giver of life; exchange with one another the peace of Christ, by which we are reconciled; feast on his love made manifest for us; and so be in-spired, renewed by the Spirit, and made the Body of Christ, his hands in the world.

Amen.