

Sermon

The presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit

Year B 2021, Pentecost 13, John 6.56-69



In the movie, 'The Way', a father heads overseas to recover the body of his estranged son who died while travelling the 'El Camino de Santiago', and decides to take the pilgrimage himself.

At the end of the way, he signs his official certificate of completion, in the name of his son. In an echo of the pilgrimage of God the Father himself, in the life, death and resurrection of God the Son. The Passover of God. To reconcile this estranged world to himself. By bearing in himself, on the cross, the estrangement, of a world of sin.

At the Pilgrim Mass, held each day in celebration of the completion of the Way, held in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, eight men, robed in red, pulling long ropes through pulleys attached to the dome of the cathedral, swing the world's largest censer, smoking, with incense, across an arc of 65 meters, more than 20 metres into the air. A symbol of Christian prayer, for the Holy Spirit to make Jesus present at the Eucharist. 'Let my prayer rise before you as incense, and the lifting up of my hands as a sacrifice.' The psalmist says.

Not only by remembrance, but only as this passes over into *prayer*, does Jesus make himself present, in the bread and in the wine, according to his promise. And with him, the kingdom of God. The power of the future.

Forgotten by the Western church, within the Greek church, the liturgy calls on the Holy Spirit to make Christ present. Not as a human action, but as a divine action, Christ is present, in the liturgical life of the Church. A presence, and an action, of God himself, in the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead. The power of the future.

The power of the future is the power of the Spirit to change this mortal life into immortal life. This mortal body into an immortal body. The resurrection of Jesus, is the foretaste, of the resurrection of the world. Of you and I. When you and I, too, will enter into eternal life. When you and I will be changed, transfigured, by our participation in God's eternity. In our worship, Jesus is here, in glorified, transfigured, resurrected life. A life which he shares with us, here in worship, in bread and wine.

Eternal life is not yet. In Jesus Christ, in his resurrection, it is now. In Christian worship. His immortality. His glory. His kingdom. His future. Is here. As together, you and I are lifted up, outside of ourselves, into Jesus Christ, as we remember his mortal life and death, as we pray for the Holy Spirit to make him present, in the bread and wine, in fulfilment of his promise, which he made at the Last Supper.

Indeed, Jesus is present, throughout the whole celebration, from beginning to end. The whole worship service is the action of Jesus Christ, by the power of His Spirit. Christ's *actual* presence throughout, is the basis of Christ's *real* presence, in the bread and wine. As by the Spirit we are lifted up, out of ourselves, into Jesus Christ. As, by him, we enter the kingdom of God himself.

Living outside ourselves, in Christ, our Eucharistic lives already now anticipate our future destiny. Point beyond us, to the kingdom of God. Become marked with the dignity, of our destiny as children of God. Our future that is this earthly life, transfigured by God's eternity, by God's Spirit.

This bestows an unfathomable dignity, casts a glorious light, reaches into our earthly life, with the dignity of our true nature, as children of God. For that is what we are.

In the glory of his exaltation, his ascension 'into heaven', Jesus now reigns, with the reign of God himself, with the authority of God himself, in the worldwide Christian church, as Lord and Head of the church. An eternal life, and a kingdom, that he now shares with his. Who are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, in Eucharistic worship. An anticipation of his future reign, in the world, too, at his return. The world continues. The darkness remains. But already now, there is a light that shines, into the world, in the face of Jesus Christ. A light that shines in the darkness. The light that the darkness did not overcome it. The light, and the life of the world.

It is this light that shines from heaven, here in the liturgical life of the Christian church. The lamp that shines, upon the lampstand, giving light to all in the house. The light of life, the light of the world, he is with us, to the end of the age, in fulfilment of his promise. As together we take the journey, out of the world, into heaven.

Along the way, by the Spirit, we lift up our hearts to God. We thank God for Jesus' obedience to his own mission that he received from God the Father, which he sealed with his death, as we allow ourselves to be taken up into this mission, and his sacrifice, for the sins of the world, as we offer our thanks to God, for our lives, and for the gifts of his creation. As the Spirit draws us into the fulfilment of Jesus' own life and death, his eternal sonship before the Father, so we are drawn into the fulfilment of our own life on earth, our own human nature, our dignity, our destiny, as children of God. In our thanksgiving to God that by Jewish custom always went along with the breaking of bread and the blessing of the cup. For the gifts of creation, and for the gift of the calling received from God – as a living sacrifice, in service of God, and the future of his kingdom.

By such a life of submission to God, we are 'transformed', more and more into the likeness of Christ, as the crucified Christ was transformed, by the power of the Spirit. Into the image, not of this world of sin, but of that new life toward which we are moving as we await the 'changing' of this mortal life, into a life with no death, in the power of God's Spirit.

'It's the end of the world as we know it. And I feel fine.' Said REM.

The transforming work of the Spirit in Eucharistic worship relates not only to the elements, but takes us up into it as well, as an anticipation of the future. The express prayer for the Holy Spirit rings out in various parts of the liturgy because by ourselves, without the Spirit, we do not know how to give thanks, or to pray as we ought, or to love one another as we should, and we certainly cannot transform ourselves, in order to dedicate our lives as thank offerings to God any more than we can cause Christ to be present in the bread and the wine. Only God's Spirit can effect the transforming of this life and only by such transforming can we, by and with bread and wine, be drawn into the movement of the life of Jesus Christ. This happens in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which is at one and the same time remembrance, Christ's presence as a gift for us, and participation in his offering, and all of it as thanksgiving to God in the power of the Spirit. And all of this, in the form of a sign. That in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as in baptism, in his mission and resurrection, the new creation of the world, has begun.

I conclude this morning with the words of Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius of Litakia, in Greece:

Without the Holy Spirit:

God is far away,
Christ stays in the past,
the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church is simply an organisation,
authority simply a matter of propaganda,
liturgy no more than an evocation,
Christian living a slave morality.

But with the Holy Spirit:

the cosmos is resurrected
and groans with the birth-pangs of the Kingdom,
the risen Christ is present,
the Gospel is the power of life,
the Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
authority is a liberating service,

mission is a Pentecost,
the liturgy is both memorial and anticipation,
human action is deified.