

"Holy City"

Text on Pentecost Sunday , May 30, 2004

Readings: Acts 2: 1-18; Revelation 21 & 22 (sel)

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When at the Pentecost outpouring of Spirit, Peter hears that cynical accusation— They're all drunk! —he instantly, ardently, powerfully charges the nay-sayers with a radically different interpretation. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel. Can you feel the moment of it? The disciples have spent weeks in Jerusalem since Jesus' Easter resurrection, attending to his parting command: "Wait in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high!" They have waited. They have prayed and prayed. Now it bursts forth. Peter has no Teleprompter to give him choice words on this august occasion. He has not memorized Joel in preparation for this day. No, as he sees and hears what is happening before him, the beloved, wild, intoxicating words of the prophet leap to mind like devoted servants having long waited to be sent to work the Master's bidding. How extraordinary!

But here's a question. In that moment when some part of the crowd is about to dismiss the Pentecost event as nothing new so they can get back to talking about yesterday's games, why does it matter to connect the event unfolding on ears and eyes to old words from a book of sacred scripture? Why is that exactly the thing to say when cynicism and doubt rise for the kill? Here is why.

If Joel's ancient assurance of God's power way back then is the same as this, happening here, now—then time itself has lost its power. Time, that awesome scythe, has not cut us off from Joel or the ancient people or God. If all people from all time who have looked on the one moon and died by its wan light are one in a sad communion, here, waiting under one Word across the ages, we are a communion of life gathered before a mystery and power stronger than death. In an instant, preacher Peter draws the hopes and fears of all the generations and lays them, an offering of glad praise, before God! No, these are not drunk, but this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel! Nothing has passed in vain. Nothing was lost. God calls up the whole host of his creation even now! The exclamation that declares The longed-for future is now! unites all time, what was and is and forevermore shall be, in the present, the Presence of God. The gates of heaven open like a grain chute, and the powers of God pour down in abundance.

That's Pentecost. Not the birthday of the church, as we've said

here before. No, rather a demonstration of what happens when God's Word comes to birth in an assembly, and a church is born. A celebration and a warning! Unless Pentecost is happening—where no church building is needed, and no liturgy either—no Body of Christ is breathing, but only the body in a tomb. Holy Spirit is the breath that quickens old religion; teaches us to abandon like grave cloths old customs whose meaning decayed long ago; reconnects the bones of the living and the dead; unites people across cities and oceans in the new mind of Christ. This is Pentecost.

And this is Memorial Day. A very poignant one, too, for this week marks the last great decennial for D-DAY. Five million veterans still live who served in the Second World War, but 1100 of them lie down for the last time each day! Ten years hence, how small that number will be. The nation will never stand at quite so awed and silent attention as we do this week to remember the sacrifices made in that war. And, we cannot help but note, there has not been a war like it since. Perhaps there never will be.

I was reading the current Time Magazine story about D-DAY—the unimaginable heat of violence, smashing and blasting, the appalling destruction of life, the impossibility of not risking everything against that enemy, a bloody maw of hatreds ready as fire to consume every human who would not mirror its image. If literal interpreters must have their Revelation answer to the pages of history, there is the Beast. And there, too, it seemed to me, the new Jerusalem must have appeared to some soldiers and citizens that summer. As I was reading, exploring within my own emotions a territory I have never witnessed, my imagination supposed the quiet that must have filtered down through some summer Sunday of 1944 in France, or Buffalo, and how through sorrows deeper than any well of weeping, some soldiers, some citizens, surely heard these last words of Revelation over the carnage—“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first earth had passed away. And I saw the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... God himself will be with them. See, I am making all things new.”

Did such a vision bless ears that could hear in a lull from battle, before V-E day? If anyone so hearing spoke his blessed vision to others, did the others say, Ah, you're drunk! Can't you see the dust clouds of the enemy's approaching army? But no, says the Spirit. He is not drunk. By this shard of peace' light, he sees what was spoken through the seer John, a new heaven and a new earth. And everything, everything is one.

To live and speak the vision and language of Christian hope demands a courage the world does not teach and does not support. With one or more of our feet planted firmly in the daily world of cause

and effect, you and I are always exposed to and often inclined to the view that spiritual and beautiful visions are, at best, flights of generous emotion, given more to some than to others; and at worst, useless or dangerous intoxications which keep weak souls from dealing with reality. That's the voice inside us jeering, They're drunk! But I would like you to consider that this worldly-wise voice of cynicism and doubt, who chatters away in all of us, is the voice of fear itself. The voice of the ego. The voice of self-perpetuation. It is a voice that cannot afford to hear anything new, lest it lose its footing as "reality." This is why it chatters so incessantly in our mind, judging, evaluating, taking stands, shutting off the strange word with contempt and satisfaction.

But the voice of Christ within you sounds not like this. The voice who knows your true name, O Christian, calls you. And you respond. "Open my eyes that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me..." You see that, far from avoiding reality, the vision of the Seer sees all—sees the awesome power of evil under which excruciating wheel thousands of thousands are crushed; sees the terror of time like a storm before which souls unprepared spend all their lives in flight, never stopping, never seeing heaven and earth in which they abide. The Seer—be he John, or a soldier or a citizen shriven for a Sunday service in time of war, or you—sees that what shall be already is. The Seer sings this, even to a crowd of doubters. She sings it because she must, because she has really seen this—not read it in a book. You see, casting a vision from the future now is not different from Peter's passionate preaching, which connected the vision from the past to the present. It's all Pentecost.

I was at Attica prison recently. A soft-spoken man who rarely speaks spoke. He spoke of the violence engraved on his youth; how seeing—his words, without self-pity or sensation—"my first beheading when I was ten" had deranged his emotions; how he had been shown time and again that to be a man—again, his words—was to be a vicious, angry animal. But then he said so much more. "I have learned, year by year, that the good always, always, always wins over the evil. If I see what is good in someone, I call up the good in him. If I see what is evil in him, I call up the evil. The power of the mind is amazing. What you see is what you get." The Seer is even in prison.

Something new comes on the horizon. Today we think back with sober and respectful memory on war sacrifices made long ago. We see still how black was the day, how awesome the enemy. But also we see that no war since has made sense like that one. President after president lays his honors on the graves of that war; not a few of them have taken the nation to war again, always seeking for words to set the wanting glory of their exploits on a level with those of 1941 and 1945.

But war after war, we see that war has not met its ends. Indeed, our nation has failed at war spectacularly for five decades, while violence spreads like a virus. Are these the last days of war? Oh, the cynical and the doubting voice sits with arms crossed: Ah, he's filled with new wine! But is that the voice of Christ himself? What if God does not call one generation merely to repeat the high hopes and dashed disasters of every previous? What if the power of God is to reveal a new city, a new justice, a New Being? Can it be that the discovery of power to exterminate all humanity with bombs is now being used by God Holy Spirit to mangle the machinery of every form of war? What if that is what history will finally conclude when it looks on the perfect sacrifice of millions in the Second World War—that in fits and starts, the world began to see that war is over. Done, a useless tool.

How far we are as a nation from affirming that. But what about you? Has Christ spoken this word in you? Can you suppress the power of God's Word within? This much you have surely seen: whoever sees and speaks her vision, that one more than any other serves the Word who is coming to earth, coming to the throne. For we do not declare our vision of the new Jerusalem out of mere eagerness to be the first to say it. No, the vision arises from experience. We have seen it and felt it within. We say it before others have glimpsed it. War is over. War is over. War is over. Behold, I am making all things new. This is Pentecost. This is memorial to the day of sacrifice. In communion and justice with all the nations across all lands and time, this is revelation.

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