Sunday after Ascension Day

Choral Communion

Holy Trinity Utrecht and Live-Stream 10:30am 24 May 2020 AD

1 Peter 4:7-10 John 15:26f

*When the Helper comes…he will bear witness about me.  
And you also will bear witness.*

We are now in an *in-between time* – waiting in the Netherlands for the restraints to our freedom to be lifted once this corona virus is under control. Yesterday Daniëlle and I were visiting her family, and it was difficult for grandchildren to restrain themselves – but we have to wait – for those with a better understanding of this virus to guide actions safely. We need to wait for authority from above, that we may be truly free of this virus. Only then will the expressions of our love for one another help and not hurt.

It is same for every one of us when it comes to love – we must wait for guidance from above.

This morning in the Church we remember another *in-between time* – between the Ascension of Jesus and Pentecost. The Ascension is when Jesus, after his Resurrection, went up bodily into heaven before the eyes of the Apostles [one of our windows]. Pentecost, was when the Spirit was first poured out.

The ascension of Jesus is the completion of all his works on earth – his birth, his life of teaching and miracles, his passion and death, and his resurrection. The Ascension of Jesus to be seated at the right hand of the Father – is a picture of his earthly work completed, and that he might begin His rule over the earth from heaven.

But that rule began on earth, in earth, at Pentecost. It happens one person at a time. As the Spirit is poured on us through faith and baptism.

When two people love each other, they begin to think about what the other is thinking. As we come to love Jesus, His grace lifts our thoughts and moves our hearts to care about eternal things – righteousness, holiness, Truth, Wisdom, Love. Because we are joined to Jesus by the Spirit, our ascension becomes the most natural thing possible.

St. Augustine from the 4th century describes it in his autobiography (the Confessions). He says:

*A body inclines by its own weight towards the place that is fitting for it.*

*Weight does not always tend towards the lowest place, but the one which*

*suits it best, for though a stone falls, a flame rises. If oil is poured into water*

*it rises to the surface, but it water is poured on to oil, it sinks below the oil…*

*In my case, love is the weight by which I act…I am drawn by love. By your*

*Gift,* [*the Holy Spirit*]*, we are set aflame and borne aloft…It is your fire, your*

*good fire [within us], that sets us aflame and carries us upward.* [xiii, 9]

The love from God *in us* makes us ascend – lifts us upwards. We are simply to allow ourselves to be captured by that love – like a seagull or an eagle carried upwards in an updraft. Strangely, the truth is, we often are actively fighting against love’s impulses to ascend, to go up.

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St. Peter, in our Epistle reading, makes some suggestions about how we can be lifted heavenward by love. He says, *The end of all things is at hand. Be therefore self-controlled for the sake of your prayers.*

The *end of all things,* the final end towards which all things are moving – God – *is at hand –* God is very close to us – God could not be closer than in our hearts. This is true especially because of our faith and baptism into Jesus Christ, through which the Holy Spirit has been poured out on us*.* [Rom 5:5].

*Be therefore self-controlled,* says St Peter, *and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.*

To be *sober-minded* is to live our lives, in a disciplined way, so that our prayer life is guarded and protected and nurtured. Because it is in prayer that we ascend to God. If we over-eat or under-eat, if we don’t get enough sleep, if we are too distracted by many activities, we are not able to pray. Sin also affects our ability to pray – if we are ashamed of something we’ve done, we may try to hide ourselves from God and stop praying. Maybe it is something we are ashamed of or maybe it is the reassertion of our self-will, our pride, fighting against God, that draws us away. *Be therefore self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.* Being serious about our prayer life is about being serious to follow Jesus in all things. But it doesn’t mean lacking joy, it is discovering the true joy that only God can give.

Peter goes on to say, *Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*  This is to actively show kindness to our neighbour and allow God’s love, in the form of mercy, forgiveness, to flow through us. When we love our neighbour, we ascend.

Finally, the Apostle says, *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.*  As we use our gifts, we ascend.

Think again of that image of the seagull or the eagle, soaring and being lifted on the air currents that are rising. It is getting its lift naturally, it doesn’t have to create the wind. But it *does* have to cooperate and direct its wings, so that it rises on that wind. These birds are very conscious of how to work with the wind to go up.

Likewise we, when we are filled with the Love of God, with his Holy Spirit, we don’t create the love, that comes from above. But we participate, we cooperate with that grace, that love – by following as it directs us. Love is poured out in us, and we direct it aright, now this way, now that, and we ascend in heart and mind to the heights of heaven – and others will want to join us in our soaring. We become instruments of God’s love, and witnesses to Christ, in uncomplicated – forbearing, being hospitable, simple acts of kindness – these are ways of using our gifts as we are inspired by Jesus.

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The time between the Ascension of Jesus and Pentecost, for the disciples, was a time between promise and fulfilment, between hope of Power from on high, and its consummation, between uncertainty about what they were called to and a great clarity of mission – Peter began preaching right away!

As we have to wait during this crisis for authority from above to be released to greater freedom, so in our mission as Christians we are to wait until we have inspiration from above.

In moments when we feel powerless, easily annoyed, bitter, uninspired, lacking imagination, our hearts cool, not knowing how we might be ministers of Jesus – in other words, when we have fallen out of Love – let us remember always this example of the disciples. Following our Lord’s command, they took time apart in prayer and waited – 10 days! they set themselves apart praying and watching. Pray that God would re-inspire us! Many us have had at some point in our lives a dream or a vision, the smallest indication, confirmation, affirmation of His love for us and that He has a plan for us – it makes all the difference to receive that response from the other side! We can wait in prayer and we should expect it!

* We have a Mission Committee that has been working to develop some initial ideas about how God may be directing us in our mission in future. This work is being looked at by the Council and we hope to have an Away Day together, when we can gather, to clarify this vision. And hopefully later this year we can gather as a chaplaincy to discern where God is calling our churches to direct our mission in Utrecht, Zwolle and Groningen.
* But on a personal level, we are called by Jesus, to be continually looking to Him to develop our mission as individuals. Guarding our prayer life, following the promptings of love, listening and acting.

This morning we have some taken time out – a day of rest, to gather with other Christians – many of you at home and some here in church, in His Name. We are being encouraged as we recall what Jesus has done for us and his promise to fill us with his Spirit. We are singing songs of praise and thanksgiving (very softly here, more loudly at home we hope!). Perhaps some of us feel like we are utterly spent, with no more love to give.

Jesus is always ready to replenish us, he is ready even now. He invites us to receive his anointing from above, even the gift of His Body and Blood – whether spiritually at home or sacramentally here – to assure us that we are forgiven, to strengthen us, to renew our faith, restore our hope, and most of all, to kindle the flames of holy love in our hearts.

Let us wait now for that updraft, that wind of the Spirit to lift us, so that we might ascend even now to dwell with Jesus in the heavenly places and bring others with us.

Amen +