

ODE TO THE UNKNOWN GOD

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Acts 2:1-8, 11b-12

The heart of Christianity is rooted in three great events. Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Each of these events was marked by a gift. A wonderfully lavish, amazingly gracious gift from God to the children of God.

Christmas was God's gift of love...when out of compassion and concern for the well-being of the world, God gave His son.

Easter was God's gift of eternal life...when death was dealt a mortal blow and believers were given the hope of life after death.

Pentecost was God's gift to spiritual power...when Christians were given the possibility of rising above the average -- of being more than ordinary people -- by virtue of an inner dynamic which could make them conquerors and kings.

Unfortunately, the first two of these three events have been materialized and secularized to near extinction. The baby Jesus has given way to jolly old Saint Nick at Christmas time. An abnormal concern with living up to the new look has supplanted the need for experiencing the new life which Christ's resurrection promises at Easter time.

And it is my contention that this materializing of Christmas and secularizing of Easter is a direct result of our not actualizing the third great event which is Pentecost. For while Christmas was the birthday of love incarnate, and Easter was the birthday of life eternal after death, Pentecost was the birthday of life abundant in the here and now.

It was at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit came to take up residence in the lives of all believers. But because we have failed to give proper emphasis to the deeper meaning of this third great event in Christian history, the first two events have lost their meaning.

Now this neglect is not a new development. If we need to become comforted, we can find some solace in the knowledge that even before the church was hardly out of the cradle, early Christians were singing an Ode To The Unknown God.

On one of his missionary journeys, Paul stopped to see the church at Ephesus. We read about this in Acts 19:1-2. But instead of finding a strong, virile fellowship, he found a small floundering flock which had lost its reason for being. In seeking an answer to their spiritual dilemma, Paul said,

“Did you (or did you not) receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

Their answer provides the first verse to the Ode To The Unknown God. For they said:

“We have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

Now, the ignorance of the person and presence of the Holy Spirit which they expressed in the first century is no less prevalent in the twentieth century. There are thousands of churches and hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Christians who are demonstrating by their obvious lack of spiritual power that they, too, have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.

In fact, this insensibility or, if you wish, insensitivity to the presence of the Holy Spirit may be the greatest loss which has even befallen the church. For while we have made Him a tenant of our creeds and have wrapped Him up in high-sounding ecclesiastical phrases, we have failed to know Him through personal experience. As a result, where there should be power in our lives, there is weakness. Where there should be boldness in our witness, there is timidity. And where there should be victory in our warfare, there is defeat.

But thank God there is hope. The blessed experience of Pentecost is available to us today. Pentecost didn't just come and go. Pentecost came and stayed. To be sure, you find it marked on Christian calendars as the fiftieth day after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But even so, the dynamic force which that day unleashed is still with us in all of its transforming potentiality.

In a very real sense today, or any day, is the day of Pentecost. For, you see, with the blessed Holy Spirit there is no yesterday or tomorrow, there is only an eternal now. For Him, there is no elsewhere, for He inhabits an eternal here. His center is everywhere. His boundaries are nowhere. And so, it is impossible to flee from His presence.

But what we can do, and in many cases have done quite successfully, is to close our eyes to His glory. We have been afraid of becoming fanatics and have pulled down the shades of our lives in an effort to cut off the heat, and in so doing we have also shut out the light. As a result we walk, and sometimes stumble, in spiritual darkness.

And that's a tragedy! For if there ever was a day when we needed to see where we're going, it is this day in which we live. The choices before us are difficult. The alternatives are many and confusing. The dilemma of indecision is ever-present and cannot be resolved by cowardice. This continuing crisis will only be resolved by courage. By the spiritual will to lift up the shades and pull down the barriers which keep us from

“walking in the light as He is in the light“ (John 1:7),

and thus from knowing the thrill and throb of that dynamic power God gave to us at Pentecost in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Now I don't want to just preach another sermon which deals with the Holy Spirit in vague and abstract generalities. Instead, I want you to turn in your bibles to the story of the first Pentecost and let's see in there are not some specifics we can learn. You will find it in the second chapter of Acts wherein we are told that on the day of Pentecost, the disciples, numbering about 120, were gathered together in the upper room.

They were there in obedience to the command of Christ to tarry in Jerusalem until they had received power from on high. In Acts, Chapter 2, Verse 2 we are told,

“Suddenly there came a sound from heaven as a mighty rushing wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance.”

Now all of this sounds terribly strange to our modern ears, doesn't it? And therein lies the real danger. For, because of its strangeness, we must guard against the temptation to stumble over the inconsequential and miss the truly important.

There are those who have done that, you know. They have magnified the irrelevant and have perverted the beautiful until intelligent people with some sense of aesthetics have lost all interest in this tremendously important subject. And this is a pitfall into which we must not slip. For the real truth here is too wonderful and precious to be lost in a maize of ferocious literalism.

Those early Christians experienced an unseen power and presence which they could not describe. That doesn't change the fact that the Holy Spirit was there. They simply didn't have words to express what they experienced and so they spoke in figures of speech.

They said this coming of the Holy Spirit was like a mighty rushing wind. They said it was as if tongues of fire sat upon each person. Various ones present began speaking in different languages as God gave them power to proclaim His message. All of them were literally surprised by joy. They were so filled with a holy happiness that people who observed them thought they were intoxicated. But the important thing here is not the colorful language employed by the disciples to describe the infilling of the Holy Spirit. The important fact is that there was, and there is, “an unseen power of goodness” which was present there on that day and that is available here to us on this day.

“A power that is nearer to you than breathing. A presence that is waiting to become the master impulse of your life.”

Now some of those who, in our own time and town, have experienced this filling of the Holy Spirit have shared sensory experiences similar to those the disciples described. Some have spoken in exotic languages. Others have been overwhelmed by joy. Some, like myself, have neither spoken in strange tongues nor experienced any emotional fireworks. But we have nonetheless sensed with an absolute and unshakable certainty that the Holy Spirit has come and has filled, and has gone on filling us for special, or for that matter, not so special service. In other words, while there has been an almost complete absence of the flamboyant and dramatic, there has been the presence of a calm assurance that He has come. In the end, that’s what matters!

Note also that the work of the Holy Spirit was definite. Specific things happened. Special experiences were shared. Clear-cut evidences were all around that removed any shadow of a doubt in the minds of anyone present that something unique and wonderful had taken place.

Contrast that, if you will, with the average church service and the average church member who give little, if any, evidence that anything special is happening in, to or through them as a result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In fact, I think most Christians would be the last ones on earth to expect anything to happen in, too, or through them, and they get exactly what they expect.

There are millions of Christians today who look upon their Christianity as more of an encumbrance than a means to set them free. They look upon church attendance as a social chore which includes the singing of a few innocuous songs, listening to an undisturbing sermon, giving enough money to salve their conscience, but beyond that

“Do not disturb.” “Don’t fence me in.”

How different from the first Pentecost when something definite happened. I say to you this morning: either Christianity has something distinctive to offer or it doesn’t. If membership in the family of God has nothing more to give than that which you can get through social clubs,

recreational centers, cultural societies, and political activities, then you had better face that fact and act accordingly.

“If the orange has no juice, why bother to squeeze it?”

We need to face up to this question: What can an experience of Christian faith do for us that nothing else can? What has it done for us that makes us any different from the next fellow we meet on the street? Can it offer anything distinctive? If not, then let us drink from other fountains, for this one has run dry. But if so, then let us start putting it into practice, for the world is in dire need of better Christians. Christians who know who they are, why they are here, and where they are going. For as Kagawa so forcefully put it:

“It is a shame for Christians to be ordinary.”

What is the distinctive message of Christianity? It is the message that through the coming of Jesus Christ, divine life is entered into human life for

“The word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a).

It is the message that when Divine Life enters into human life, human life is changed and there is born within that soul the potentiality of becoming a little Christ.

That’s what the bible means when it says:

“Christ you the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

It means that in the truest sense of the word, you are dead. You do not live anymore. But Christ lives in you and through you!

That is the deeper meaning of Baptism. When these people were baptized this morning, they were saying:

“I am crucified with Christ. I am dead.”

There’s a sense in which we were holding their funeral service. We buried them with Christ in baptism and they were raised to walk in the newness of life. But, you say, Christ lived 2000 years

ago. How could He live in me today? That is where the person of the Holy Spirit comes into play. Christ, you see, was bound by certain limitations. He had taken on the form of man and, as a result, submitted to the inadequacies of humanity. He was bound by the limitations of time and space. By His very nature, He could not be everywhere at the same time.

The Holy Spirit has no such human limitations. Therefore, He can be, and is, equally everywhere with all believers. Thus, when Christ left this planet and the Holy Spirit came to take His place, He became to the Christian (the church) what Christ would be if He had tarried among us to be our personal companion and guide. Through the operation of the Holy Spirits in our lives we, as Christians, are given a plus factor which enables us to be more and do more than others. For now it is not we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

Do you see what I'm saying? The Holy Spirit is to the Christian and the church what Christ would be if He were here Himself. Therefore, we as Christians and as the church, must be to the world what Christ would be if He were here Himself.

How important our lives become when we see it in that light. No longer is church attendance a chore. No longer is tithing a burden. No longer is Christian service an affliction to be endured. We are Christ's ambassadors. His personal envoys to a needy world. And with whatever skills and wisdom we possess, we must be busy at our task.

Do you see, now, the necessity of being sold out to Christ? For insofar as we are committed wholly and solely to Him, in just that same degree, are we filled with the Holy Spirit. And insofar as we are filled with the Holy Spirit are we given power to conquer in the name of Christ.

Indeed, it will cost much to obtain the power of the Holy Spirit. For that reason alone, many Christians never rise above the shallow mediocrity which has become the curse of modern Christianity.

They're like an organ which has only an inadequate supply of air. Everything is in order. It is a

beautiful piece of furniture. But it is of no earthly good. It can make no sound. All that one can hear is the clicking of the keys as the organist tries to produce music. If only they could become like an organ which is given a full and even supply of air. An organ whose every pipe bursts forth with music at the player's touch.

Well, such thrilling power does not come easy. As someone with greater life experience than I has said,

“It will cost much in terms of self-surrender and humiliation and the yielding up of the most precious things to God. But when we are really in that power, we shall find this difference, for whereas before it was hard for us to do the easiest things, now it is easy for us to do the hardest things.”

Yes, Pentecost was the birthday of the church. It was then that ordinary Christians, folks like you and me, became the channel of divine blessing to the world. It was on the day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit took His rightful place in human hearts. Up until then, people had the Holy Spirit. But after Pentecost the Holy Spirit had people. And that's what made the difference. And that's what will make the difference today. For while it's true that, as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit, the great question is:

“Does the Holy Spirit have us?”

May God give us a new experience of Pentecost this morning. May there be born within us a determination to conquer mediocrity. May there be a willingness to say with Christ: Whatever it may cost, wherever it may lead,

“Thy Will Be Done”.

In the fifth chapter of Genesis there is the story of Enoch. He was one of the Old Testament

prophets who really knew what it meant to be empowered by the Spirit of God. In verse 24, there is a simple statement which I think sums up what I have tried to say this morning. It is the wee epitaph which Moses wrote in praise of Enoch.

“He walked with God and he was not, for God took him.”

“‘He walked with God’“! Could grander words be written?

Not much of what he thought or said is told:

Not where or what he wrought is even mentioned;

‘He walked with God’ - brief words of fadeless gold!

“Such be the tribute of thy pilgrim journey,

When life’s last mile thy feet have bravely trod,

When thou hast gone to all that there awaits thee,

This simple epitaph: ‘He walked with God!’”

(J. Danson Smith)