

The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Saint Patrick's
May 2, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

From the Gospel: **“when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.”** (John 16:13)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Once I had the pleasure of being invited to friends' home to share their Passover Seder.

I hope many of you have had this same pleasure, but if not, you have seen it depicted in movies or on TV.

The Passover meal is normally a joyous, although solemn, occasion.

It is joyous because it calls to mind God's deliverance of the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt.

That last Passover which Jesus shared with his disciples, although equally solemn, was not a joyous occasion.

We can only imagine what must have been running through the disciples' minds.

While the disciples had a very imperfect understanding of what was going on, they did understand their Lord, Master, and Friend was about to be taken from them.

Jesus uses this time to prepare them for what is to come.

It is interesting John, although the most sacramentally minded of the Evangelists, does not record the institution of the Lord's Supper, presumably because he thought the other Evangelists, and Paul, had done a very adequate job and there would have been no reason for him to cover the same ground.

Instead, John records those things the others left out, especially Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples, which is related in our Maundy Thursday service, and the conversation during that Passover meal.

Interestingly, the record of this conversation provides the Gospels for the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays after Easter, which seems a bit out of place because they record what happened before the crucifixion while we are now celebrating the events between the Resurrection and the Ascension.

Nevertheless, it is vital we hear this conversation so that we can understand what is to come.

Jesus, knowing the sorrow and confusion the disciples were feeling, comforts them with the promise of another Comforter, who, like himself, will be with them and lead them.

He tells them **“I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”** (John 16:7)

They did not understand who or what this comforter was to be, but they would later and recall Jesus' words.

He tells them, **“when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.”** (John 16:13)

He will continue our Lord's mission of teaching and leading the Church.

Of course, we immediately think of the wonderful events of Pentecost, when the Spirit came with great power and enabled the disciples to boldly proclaim Gospel.

He would continue to lead the Church by inspiring men to write what we call the New Testament.

This is the continuation of His work in inspiring the writing of the Old Testament, as we say of Him in the Creed, “He spake by the Prophets.”

The fact the same Spirit who inspired the writing New Testament inspired the

writing of the Old, which is why we must study the Old Testament to fully understand the New.

As Augustine put it, “The new (testament) is in the old concealed; the old (testament) is in the new revealed.”

Of course, He did not stop teaching and leading the Church after the Books of the New Testament were written.

He empowered the Church as she continued to fulfill our Lord’s command to **“be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8)

He continued to lead the Church as She discerned which writings were truly inspired and should be regarded as Scripture and which were spurious.

This was critical as there were many other Gospels and Acts and Letters circulating in the early Church many of which contained teachings which were inconsistent with the Faith, and which could have been a source of confusion and error.

Over time, the Church was led by the Spirit to recognize those writings which were His work, and which were spurious.

This was not a matter of some group of graybeards sitting around deciding which books they liked and which they did not, but rather from the discovery of a consensus of all the Churches as to which of these books they treated as Scripture, and which they did not.

Those which were universally treated as Scripture continued to be used and those which were accepted in only some places but not in others gradually were abandoned.

This principle of consensus indicating the leading of the Holy Spirit is critically important in understanding how he leads the Church.

It would be nice to think of consensus as something which happens in an instant, a flash of inspiration which is immediately acknowledged by everyone.

Church history shows us something quite different.

When the Council of Nicaea was over, there was no instantaneous acknowledgement of the Creed.

Not every heretic said, “oops, I’m sorry, I will accept the decision of the Council.”

Indeed, for a long time, in some places until the 7th century, some parts of the Church continued to follow Arianism.

Ultimately, however, Arianism simply ceased to be a problem.

It is not simply the decision of a council which assures us of the Holy Spirit’s guidance, it is the eventual acknowledgement of the whole Church of the decision which assures us of the truth of the decision.

This reminds us of the old rule of Faith known as the Vincentian Canon, which defines the Catholic Faith as that which has been believed, "everywhere, always, by all."

Of course, in the midst of controversy, it is not possible for those going through it to know what will come to be believed "everywhere, always, by all."

Only with the benefit of history do we know how those controversies came out.

The one thing we do know is whatever is right can never contradict what has come before.

The Holy Spirit never contradicts Himself; He is not a spirit of confusion.

For example, if someone proposes a fourth person of the Holy Trinity, we know that is simply wrong.

Or to use a perhaps more relevant example, something the Church has always taught as being sinful cannot be made lawful by the decision of any Church body.

Where a consensus of the whole Church can be discerned, we know such a consensus gives us assurance of the Spirit’s guidance.

Of course, the Church never achieved a consensus on many issues about which

Christians might like answers.

For example, in the teaching of the Church of the first millennium, there is a clear consensus of the Real Presence of our Lord in the Eucharist, but the exact mode of His presence was never defined.

So long as we teach Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, we stand on firm ground, but if we advance a theory of exactly how He is present, we are on our own.

We are welcome to advance any theory we like and to believe it if it is helpful to us, but we are not welcome to say anyone who does not accept our theory is not a good Christian.

In many ways, this is the wonderful thing about Anglicanism.

The history of the Church in England made it necessary for us to limit those things which we demand people believe for salvation to those things about which the universal Church has reached consensus.

If you think about it, the trouble in the Church for the last thousand years has been caused by one part of the Church adding things to the Faith of the Undivided Church and then demanding the rest of the Church accept their new teachings.

This inevitably leads to division.

The first example of this would be the addition by the Western Church of the phrase "and the Son" to the Nicene Creed.

Without arguing the merits of the phrase, the problem was the Western Church added it without the acquiescence of the Eastern Church, which was one of the factors which led to the Great Schism which has divided the Church for the last thousand years.

Another example would be the many teachings which were unilaterally added to the Faith by the Western Church in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation, things like indulgences, for example.

The Reformers rejected these additions, but not, with few exceptions, the universal

consensus of the Church; they continued to cite the Fathers and Doctors of the Church in support of their theology.

In England, after a period of turmoil after the death of King Henry and the reign of “Bloody Mary,” the Elizabethan Church sought a middle ground.

In the attempt to define the Faith in a way which was acceptable to all but the most extreme Protestants and Roman Catholics, the Anglican Church sought to reduce its doctrine to the Faith of the Undivided Church, “Mere Christianity” to use C. S. Lewis’ name for it.

The Anglican Church teaches that Faith as being necessary for salvation, as it must, but allows its members freedom to believe as they will on things which go beyond the essential deposit of Faith, so long as what they believe is not contrary to it, and they do not demand others acquiesce to it.

In so doing, Anglicanism provides a model for what a reunified Church might be like.

If the different Christian denominations would become willing to allow all other Christians the same liberty, while upholding that necessary universal deposit of faith, the most intractable cause of the divisions within the body would disappear and the Church could begin to move towards reconciliation and reunification.

Until that great day comes, however, we can begin by treating other Christians in the same spirit, remembering the quote often attributed to Augustine, “In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.”

Amen.

And now we ascribe, as is most justly due, unto Thee, O Lord, all might, majesty, power, and dominion, both now and forever. *Amen.*

Offertory Sentence: **“To do good, and to distribute, forget not; for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”** (Heb. xiii. 16.)