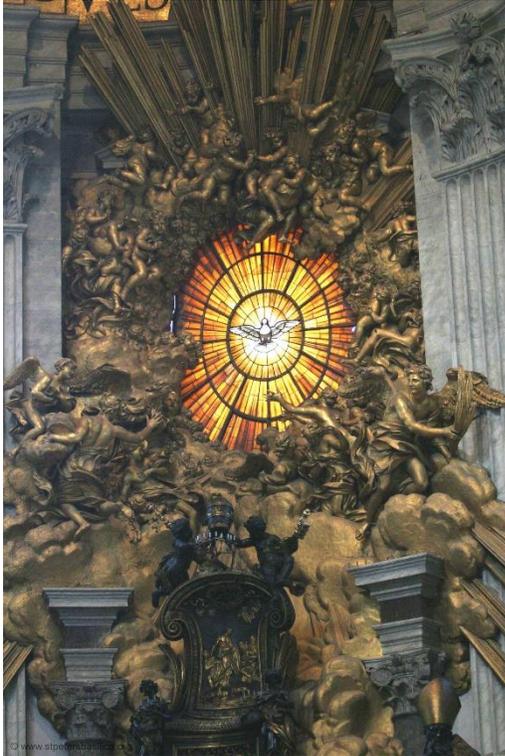


Come, Holy Spirit

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

May 17, 2020

by Rev. Dave Le Grand



Imagine, visiting a sacred space like this – of course when the pandemic has passed. You journey into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Behold, the Throne of St Peter. Grand, right?

I know. I know. Some of you would find the bush more sacred. I would too, if I were truly honest. But the architecture, the chair crafted in bronze, and, believe it or not, the stained glass with a soaring dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit is not made of glass, but, in fact is made of alabaster, a stone. ¹

I sauntered into Cathedrals of Europe when I was younger, had time, and felt a sense of wonder, reminded to look up and imagine, especially at times when we tend to look down. But, when we see injustice in our world, we wonder: Isn't this all ... well, a bit... extravagant? The expense of money and artisans' and architects' time and talent; their blood, sweat and tears invested in create such elaborate art.

That symbol of the Holy Spirit, though, reminds us that just because we cannot see it, doesn't mean something marvellous & powerful is not around us.

Today's Bible reading is part of what is called the Farewell Discourse; Jesus talking to his friends over a few chapters immediately after he shares a last supper with them. A poignant moment for teacher and followers, knowing he will soon die, he says:

...I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever...whom the world cannot receive...You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. ²

The word that Jesus, according to John, uses here is *Paraclete*, a Greek word that means Advocate, "one who has been called to our side' to stand up for us, to explain us to the court." ³

¹ A more elaborate description of St Peter's Throne and the "Dove of the Holy Spirit" window found at <https://stainedglasswindowsblog.wordpress.com/2014/04/08/dove-of-the-holy-spirit/>

² John 14: 16, 17. *New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicized Edition*, copyright © 1989, 1995 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission.

³ "Homiletical Perspective", Linda Lee Clader. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*.

Jesus has spent some meaningful time with his friends that night after rather emotional passover supper, where the bread and wine they shared became symbols of his ongoing presence with them, even if physically they would be separated. Jesus assures they will never be alone; others may not recognize this Advocate, this Spirit but, “You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

Jesus and his friends abided in one another in life; the life of Jesus and the lives of his friends interwoven. Christ’s presence would live on, abiding them, through this Spirit; their lives interwoven so closely that they feel one another’s pain, and joy.

This is scary stuff, the more I think about *abiding*. My family, the closest people to me, will tell you that I need space at times. But isn’t there something extraordinary to this kind of connectedness? Feeling known, truly known, by someone who is not your life partner. Community encouraged to be interconnected, and to always welcome people into the presence of Spirit and one another. All four Gospels describe an intimacy between Jesus and his friends, that is deep, and strong. The prospect of an end to that relationship *must have terrified the disciples*.

Kind of like the feeling of isolation some among us must feel as we are asked to isolate ourselves from dear friends and family.

At first, going into quarantine might have been stressful, “What will this be like?” We all wondered. But then, now that weeks, months have passed, perhaps a few of us have gone through the grief of a loved one dying, and not being about to Celebrate their life, *we feel all the more isolated*. How will we face this?

Time and again I have heard in the media: *We will get through this together*. Well, in a way, Jesus is saying that very thing today. I will not abandon you!

On May 29 there will be a Zoom presentation by James Walker, who made a trip to Palestine and Israel in a tour called “Youth for Peace.” We will be promoting this on our Facebook page and in our weekly email newsletter, by the way. Youth for Peace was an opportunity for young Canadians to immerse themselves in Palestinian and Israeli culture, to hear differing perspectives. Some of you know that the Holy Land is close to my heart. My job description included being an “accompanier” for Palestinians and Israelis who suffer and struggle non-violently to end the terrible occupation there. Accompanying – coming alongside people, letting them know that they are not alone. Being an advocate too, speaking up when some are made to feel voiceless. The world church is doing that. Well, we are trying to do that, even as we face enormous challenges.

St. Andrew’s and other churches and organizations are partnering with the downtown Mission, the off the street shelter, Réseau Access Network, to bring food and drink to people who face challenges I cannot imagine. Spirit, Paraclete, inspiring real people to accompany one another to create creative responsive communities. Interwoven.

It would be daunting to face our challenges alone. But Jesus is saying to you, and to me – you will not face this alone. Not ... at ... all. We are accompanied by Holy Spirit. It might feel at times like you are alone, but reaching out with ancient times, Jesus is, I think, speaking with fresh relevance in this time and place, saying: This Spirit, this Advocate, is real.

And don't be surprised, Spirit will descend upon you in the most unpredictable moments too. Like muffins or pizza arriving at the shelter or drop in, at a time when so many who depend on these agencies had come to think that the world doesn't care about them.

Spirit is right there with you, even if you don't yet feel it, when you are struggling with your gender identity, or an abusive relationship, or wondering if you will find a way to pay the rent this month. The social distancing we are asked to do only makes us feel more alone. But the Advocate abides in you, and you in that Spirit, and it is right alongside you, right now. Draw on that Spirit for courage to reach out, call someone, ask for help.

Like those frightened disciples facing the loss of their saviour, we all face periods in life when it feels like walking in the valley of shadow. Spirit is waiting to descend on your life, to come alongside you. Looking at that alabaster depiction of the Dove of the Holy Spirit, extravagant as it may seem, reminds people to look up, have courage, Spirit is with us if only we pay attention. Amen.

Note:

Photograph of the Throne of St. Peter and Dove of the Holy Spirit, and more information on it, can be found at <http://stpetersbasilica.info/Altars/Cathedra/Cathedra-Gloria-Chair.jpg>