

Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost  
May 15/28 2023  
Sermon (Dcn. Arsenios)

Christ is in our midst.

In the passage after today's Gospel reading, Jesus continues praying to His Father, I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of this world, just as I am not of this world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of this world, just as I am not of this world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18).

And what is this truth? Simply our Faith that we confess at every Divine Liturgy: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit one in essence and indivisible.

"In the beginning, God created Heaven and Earth (Gen 1:1)." "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made (John 1:1,3). We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

As Father Steven reminded us last Thursday on the Feast of the Ascension, Adam and Eve, by whom we understand all mankind, were part of that creation. In fact, we were the ultimate purpose of that creation. And God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness (Gen 1:26)." Adam and Eve – and all of us – were destined to share fully in the Love of God.

But Adam and Eve, consumed by pride in their own self-sufficiency, wanting to make themselves equal to God, disobeyed a simple command. Death entered the world. The world mourned – and waited – and waited – and waited – the period we now call Old Testament times – with only glimmers of hope and promises of a Messiah.

Chapter 2 of our story began not with a bang but with the whimper of a baby. The Word of God, the Son of God, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man. After teaching us about His Father, He suffered, died, and was buried. Defeating death, He rose on the third day. He raised Adam and Eve

from death. He ascended bodily into heaven, returning the human race to His Father, to God's Kingdom in Heaven.

And the disciples waited – this time joyfully, in prayer and supplication, for He had promised to send His Spirit, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth. Their wait was short – just ten days – this same wait between Ascension and Pentecost that we share with them today. For ten days we sing neither “Christ is Risen” nor “O Heavenly King.” The descent of the Holy Spirit will mark the beginning of the third chapter in our story.

Through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, the church was spread throughout the known world, even though widely persecuted. About 25 years after Pentecost, as he was traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast, St. Paul met with elders of the church in Ephesus and warned them,

. . . take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears (Acts 20:28-31).

Constantine legalized the church in 313, and the wolves burst forth with a vengeance. Heretics – notable among them Arius, a deacon and later priest from Alexandria – taught that “Christ was a man but not God.” “Christ was God but only inhabited a human body, and felt no pain.” “God is only one person – sometimes Father, sometimes Son, sometimes Holy Spirit.” The Synaxarion read at Matins last night in monasteries relates that, in 325,

When the Church was in such turmoil and there seemed to be no cure for the altercation over this doctrine, then Constantine the Great, using the government courier system, summoned the Fathers from all over the world to Nicaea, and went there himself. And when all the fathers had arrived, with their blessing he also took his place, though not on a royal throne, but on a simple stool, below his rank. Afterwards, following speeches against Arius, he, as well as all of like mind with him, committed [Arius] to anathema, and the Word of God was proclaimed by the holy fathers to be

consubstantial, equally worshipped and equally without beginning with the Father. (Pentecostarion, p. 259)

Two hundred thirty-two bishops and 86 priests, deacons, and monastics attended this first Universal (or Ecumenical) Council of the Church. Inspired (literally “breathed in”) by the Holy Spirit, this Council wrote the first half of the Symbol of Faith that we confess at every Divine Liturgy. Their declaration ended abruptly with the phrase “And in the Holy Spirit.” Putting words to the relation and action of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity became the task of the Second Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople in 381. Today while we wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, we commemorate the 318 Fathers of that first council.

And what happened to Arius after he was anathematized by the Council and by Constantine? The Synaxarion relates,

Even before Constantine passed on to God . . . Arius went to the emperor and said that he renounced all his heresies and desired to enter into union with the Church of God. . . . When the time drew nigh to to serve the liturgy with [Arius], [Metrophanes, bishop of Alexandria,] prayed with particular compunction. Arius was walking to the church when he felt a pain in his belly near the column of the marketplace, and he entered a public latrine; and there, bursting open, nearly all his entrails spewed forth, just as happened to Judas, who had burst open for a similar betrayal of the Word (Pentecostarion, p. 259)

This narrative mirrors the description in Acts, between the accounts of the Ascension and of Pentecost, of what happened to Judas: “Now this man purchased a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out (Acts 1:18).”

Jesus said to Pilate, “My Kingdom is not of this world . . . You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice (John 18: 36, 37)”. In this third chapter of our story, as we await the end of finite time and space, we are in this world but not of it. With Paul we can say, “All things are lawful for me (1 Cor 6:12).” Yet it also is true that we *are* what we *do*. May our light shine before all as we confess the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: the Trinity one in essence and indivisible. Amen.