

Exaudi, the 7th Sunday of Easter
June 5, 2011

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

WAITING

John 15:26-16:4; I Peter 4:7-11; Ezekiel 36:25-27

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Just a few days ago we celebrated our Lord Jesus Christ's ascension into Heaven. The one who was crucified, having arisen from the dead, now has gone up to take His heavenly throne. The wounds that He received for the sins of the world, were become proof of His resurrection and victory, and are now glorious tokens of His victory and the cause of much heavenly worship and celebration. As we hear from the Revelation of St. John, the heavenly hosts saying: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing."

A French abbot named Prosper Guéranger describes the ascension and enthronement of Christ this way:

"Behold this Jesus crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death! See how the Father has magnified Him in return for His having emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, though in His other nature, He was equal with God. His crown of thorns is replaced by a crown of precious stones. The cross that was laid on His shoulders is now the ensign of His power. The wounds made by the nails and the spear are now like five bright suns that light up all heaven... Let us rejoice at seeing the Man of sorrows become now the King of Glory."

Yes, Christ our dear Lord is now enthroned and seated at the right hand of God the Father. He who made Himself subject to men and the servant of all, truly rules over heaven and earth.

And yet it often seems as the Christ does not reign, at least not over earth. The world, for the most part, continues its rebellion against God and against Jesus. God's Law is trampled while His Gospel is rejected as foolish. The Christian Faith is treated with contempt by the supposedly wise and by the powerful of the world. Christ's followers are mocked for their supposed naivete and close-minded conservatism and irrationality. And the Church is held up to ridicule as the cause of more suffering in this world than good, and as the arbiter of oppression and backwardness.

And sin, though dealt with decisively by Jesus' cross and blood, still endangers the souls of the human race, keeping the unbelievers from embracing Christ's grace, and tempting the believers to doubt the grace they have received, saying to the one: "To follow Christ is to put yourself under an unnecessary yoke, to give up the wondrous freedom you have to live the way you wish", and to the other: "How can

the grace of Jesus which you have received before do you any good when you keep sinning, thinking and behaving in a manner like those who have no grace or forgiveness?" And the devil, though crushed by the heel of Christ's cross, still rages against you. And, the grave, though broken open by Christ's resurrection, still greedily awaits your body.

But though it seems from such evidences that our Lord does not really reign over this world, or over sin, or over death, or over the devil, He actually does rule over all of them. And all of them lie under His authority and under His doom. He has defeated and overcome them, truly; and this we know for certain because He has risen from the grave alive and has ascended bodily to the throne of God. But until the day of His return, we wait for the glory of His reign to be revealed. And so now it is hidden from our eyes, but then it will be seen by all, to the joy and consolation of the faithful, but to the horror of those who do not believe. But until that Day we are in a state of hopeful, confident, waiting.

In ancient times, as some of you may remember, this Sunday was called *Domenica Expectationis*, the Sunday of Expectation - or simply "Waiting Sunday" because this Sunday falls in those ten days in which the disciples were waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As we heard today, Jesus had promised them that the Paraclete, "the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father", would come to them. And just prior to His ascension He said to them: "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

Now why did they have to wait? They needed to wait because they could not do what they were being sent to do as apostles unless they had the help of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit would do two very important things for them. Jesus calls the Spirit "the Paraclete" in this passage, and that is a key name, for it describes the Holy Spirit's activity. It's a Greek word meaning one who calls from along side. And this is just what the Spirit would do for the apostles. He would call out from along side of them.

First He would do this to strengthen their own faith. You see, even for an apostle, it is not enough to have Jesus in your heart, or to listen for God's voice inside your own head. Rather God works from the outside in. The Word comes externally - it is heard from the lips of others as it is read out and prayed, chanted, sung, confessed and preached. And in this proclamation, the Holy Spirit is at work calling out to the faithful and empowering that Word so that it strengthens faith and is internalized to sustain that faith.

And the second thing the Spirit would do for them as a Paraclete, was to empower their own preaching so that by it others would receive His working and by His power come to faith or be strengthened in the faith they had already received from Him. The word of the apostles as mere men had no power to save. But empowered by the Holy Spirit, their Word was inspired and powerful to do just that, to impart faith, knowledge, hope, forgiveness, and life.

So this is why the apostles waited. Of course their waiting was ended after just 10 days when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost and they began their great apostolic work. But at another level they continued to wait, waiting not for the outpouring of the Spirit, but for the return of Christ and for the heavenly life. Oh but that must not have been so difficult, right? I mean they had the gift of the Holy Spirit after all, and they could do miracles and all kinds of cool things that showed and proved the reign of Christ outwardly. But let us not forget that the apostles also suffered greatly, shedding their own blood, and giving their lives for the sake of the Gospel they preached. No, waiting for them was not an easy thing. This is why St. Paul says at one point: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you." You see how much the apostle longed to get to heaven, longed for the waiting and the suffering to be over, and yet waited faithfully.

I don't know about you, but I hate waiting. I don't like it when life seems to be on hold while I wait for something to happen that will determine my future. I don't like not knowing what is coming next. I'm tired of waiting for the economy to turn around, as I'm sure are many of you. I'm tired of waiting for a decision to be made about the possible sale of our chapel, though I know having more time for such a decision to be made is to our advantage. I just don't like waiting. I want to get on with things. And I imagine many of you are the same way. No one likes feeling like their life is in limbo while things outside of their control determine what comes next.

Of course waiting is a little easier when you know what the outcome will be, assuming that outcome is good. Then you may not particularly enjoy the wait, but you can bear it, because you know it's going to turn out well. But even then getting the good outcome or the good thing that you have been waiting for is better.

The Lord, through the Word of the apostles and the preaching of that Word, has sent His Holy Spirit to us too. And He comes to us also as a paraclete, One sent to call out from alongside of us to give and strengthen our faith in Christ as we await His glorious return and the revealing of His kingdom. And what a gift this is to us. We do not have to wait with this sense that we do not know what is coming next. Our lives are not in a spiritual limbo as we wait. By the Word of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we know full well what is coming. And so we have that second kind of waiting, the waiting in hope and confidence, knowing that the ultimate outcome for us is good, wonderful even beyond all imagining or description.

But that does not mean that our waiting is easy either. As I said earlier our enemies, though defeated and dethroned, still fight against us. We must still struggle against sin. The devil still tries to accuse us and cause us to doubt the grace and victory and reign of Christ. And the world still rages against our Lord and against us. Jesus warned the apostles of this: "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me."

But then He adds: “But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.” Do you see the beauty of that? These things do not mean that Christ’s reign is weak or ineffectual, or that His grace is not sufficient for you. He knew all of this would happen, and He tells us of it so that we should not be disheartened by it. And why? Because we will overcome in the end by His grace and with the help of the Holy Spirit who gives us strength to endure. And part of that strength is the knowledge and trust that Christ’s reign, and therefore our salvation, is secure, accomplished, and enacted already.

Moreover, our Lord has given us another gift by the working of the Holy Spirit, to help us as we wait. He has given us the community of His Church. He has given us one another. And in this Church, this fellowship of believers gathered around Christ and His holy Word and Sacraments, we should find a place of rest and relief, a place where Christ’s reign is not so hidden, but is revealed in us and our interactions with one another. The Church, as Peter urges us, should be a place where we pray together, are hospitable and kind to one another, serve one another as stewards, and act always in love toward one another.

But even here we see the dark forces of our enemies at work, where the devil gets in and promotes false doctrine, misbelief, heresies and dissensions, where the sin that is still active within us rears its ugly head against the fellow Christian, harming instead of helping, wounding instead of healing, tearing down instead of building up, and where the world continually batters against our doors, seeking to knock them down and open us to its unfaithful and ungodly ways. And so we must continually be in a state of repentance over these things, and in prayer against them. Here we must follow the commands of St. Peter and of Christ Himself to love one another and to be gracious toward one another in forgiving and living together as beggars who are all dependent entirely upon Christ’s mercy and grace. For as Peter says: “love will cover a multitude of sins”. And Christ’s love does just that, so also should ours as we both repent when we sin and forgive when we are sinned against, as we wait for the Day when sin will finally be gone from us and from the Church, the Day when Christ reveals His reign and takes us to be with Him at the Father’s right hand.

So waiting is hard for us too, even though we know the outcome. But we have the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and keep us in the Faith and in fellowship with one another. And we wait as those who already know the outcome. For Christ our Lord has risen victorious over all that stands against us, and He has ascended into heaven, where He truly reigns, even now, over heaven and earth, and over His Church, as St Paul indicates when He says: “to who belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Not just in the future, but forever. And that means now as well. May our Lord by the power of the Spirit, keep us faithful as we wait to see this reality with our own eyes. Now to Him be all glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +