

# THE SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION DAY

MAY 8, 2016

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM R. FLEMING



THIS DAY WAS ORIGINALLY KNOWN AS EXPECTATION SUNDAY, AND IT LOOKED FORWARD TO PENTECOST SINCE, DURING THE TEN DAYS BETWEEN THE ASCENSION AND WHITSUNDAY, THE APOSTLES WERE WAITING FOR THE PROMISED GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. THE EXPECTATION OF PENTECOST WAS VIVIDLY EXPRESSED DURING ANCIENT TIMES IN ROME BY THE CUSTOM OF SHOWERING ROSES THROUGH THE OPENING OF THE ROOF OF THE PANTHEON DURING THE SERMON AT THE STATIONAL MASS.

THE GOSPEL FOR THIS SUNDAY DEALS WITH THE COMFORTER, THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH, WHICH WILL LEAD THE CHURCH INTO ALL TRUTH. CHRIST TELLS THE APOSTLES THAT WHEN THIS COMES AT PENTECOST, THEY WILL BE TAUGHT BY THE SPIRIT, TESTIFY TO JESUS AMONG MEN AND INCUR THE HATRED AND HOSTILITY OF THE WORLD.

WHAT DOES THE ASCENSION MEAN? REMEMBER THAT INCIDENT IN THE EASTER GARDEN, WHEN MARY MAGDALENE LONGS TO EMBRACE THE RISEN LORD? AND HE SAYS, "TOUCH ME NOT, FOR I AM NOT YET ASCENDED TO THE FATHER." THE POINT IS THIS: THOSE WHO FOLLOW HIM MUST BE ABLE TO GROW FROM SOME EARTHLY HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS. THE FLESH MUST BE TRANSFORMED SO THAT WE SEE ITS TRUE REALITY AS SPIRITUAL. IN THAT SENSE, HE MUST DEPART FROM US, AND IT IS EXPEDIENT THAT HE MUST GO AWAY. THE WORDS I SPEAK UNTO YOU, THEY ARE SPIRIT, AND THEY ARE LIFE. IN THE TRAVAIL OF EARTHLY LIFE, WE MUST GIVE COMMITMENT TO FAITH, A FAITH WHICH KNOWS GOD AS SPIRIT. AND THUS HE RETURNS TO US IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT, AND THAT IS PENTECOST.

I KNOW THAT TO SPEAK OF SPIRITUAL LIFE, OR LIFE IN THE SPIRIT, SOUNDS SOMEWHAT OBSCURE TO MANY CHRISTIANS. BUT IF THAT IS REALLY SO, WHAT THEN IS OUR RELIGION ALL ABOUT? "WE HAVE NOT FOLLOWED CUNNINGLY DEvised FABLES," SAYS ST. PETER. WE ARE

RISEN WITH CHRIST; WE ARE BORN ANEW OF WATER AND THE SPIRIT. WE SEEK THOSE THINGS WHICH ARE ABOVE, THE LIFE OF ASCENSION AND PENTECOST BEING THE FUNDAMENTAL REALITY OF OUR LIFE. WE ARE TO ASCEND WITH HIM "IN HEART AND MIND" AND "WITH HIM CONTINUALLY TO GROW." AND THAT IS NOT REALLY SO OBSCURE. THERE IS A FINE PICTURE OF SPIRITUAL LIFE SET BEFORE US.

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST? AFTER JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD, HE "PRESENTED HIMSELF ALIVE" TO THE WOMEN NEAR THE TOMB, TO HIS DISCIPLES AND TO MORE THAN 500 OTHERS. IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING HIS RESURRECTION, JESUS TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF GOD. FORTY DAYS AFTER THE RESURRECTION, JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES WENT TO MOUNT OLIVET, NEAR JERUSALEM. THERE, JESUS PROMISED HIS FOLLOWERS THAT THEY WOULD SOON RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND HE INSTRUCTED THEM TO REMAIN IN JERUSALEM UNTIL THE SPIRIT HAD COME. THEN JESUS BLESSED THEM, AND AS HE GAVE THE BLESSING, HE

BEGAN TO ASCEND INTO HEAVEN. IT IS PLAIN FROM SCRIPTURE THAT JESUS' ASCENSION WAS A LITERAL, BODILY RETURN TO HEAVEN. HE ROSE FROM THE GROUND GRADUALLY AND VISIBLY, OBSERVED BY MANY INTENT ONLOOKERS. AS THE DISCIPLES STRAINED TO CATCH A LAST GLIMPSE OF JESUS, A CLOUD HID HIM FROM THEIR VIEW, AND TWO ANGELS APPEARED AND PROMISED CHRIST'S RETURN, "IN JUST THE SAME WAY THAT YOU HAVE WATCHED HIM GO".

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST IS MEANINGFUL FOR SEVERAL REASONS:

1. IT SIGNALLED THE END OF HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY. GOD THE FATHER HAD LOVINGLY SENT HIS SON INTO THE WORLD AT BETHLEHEM, AND NOW THE SON WAS RETURNING TO THE FATHER. THE PERIOD OF HUMAN LIMITATION WAS AT AN END.
2. IT SIGNIFIED SUCCESS IN HIS EARTHLY WORK. ALL THAT HE HAD COME TO DO, HE HAD ACCOMPLISHED.
3. IT MARKED THE RETURN OF HIS HEAVENLY GLORY. JESUS' GLORY HAD BEEN VEILED DURING HIS SOJOURN ON EARTH, WITH ONE

BRIEF EXCEPTION AT THE TRANSFIGURATION.

4. IT SYMBOLIZED HIS EXALTATION BY THE FATHER. THE ONE WITH WHOM THE FATHER IS WELL PLEASED WAS RECEIVED UP IN HONOR AND GIVEN A NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES.

5. IT ALLOWED HIM TO PREPARE A PLACE FOR US.

6. IT INDICATED THE BEGINNING OF HIS NEW WORK AS HIGH PRIEST AND MEDIATOR OF THE NEW COVENANT.

7. IT SET THE PATTERN FOR HIS RETURN. WHEN JESUS COMES TO SET UP THE KINGDOM, HE WILL RETURN JUST AS HE LEFT-LITERALLY, BODILY, AND VISIBLY IN THE CLOUDS.

CURRENTLY, THE LORD JESUS IS IN HEAVEN. THE SCRIPTURES FREQUENTLY PICTURE HIM AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER – A POSITION OF HONOR AND AUTHORITY. CHRIST IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH, THE GIVER OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND THE ONE WHO FILLS ALL IN ALL.

*BE, THEREFORE, STEADY AND SOBER IN MIND SO THAT YOU WILL REALLY BE ABLE TO PRAY AS YOU OUGHT. ABOVE ALL CHERISH FOR EACH OTHER A LOVE THAT IS CONSTANT AND INTENSE.*

WHEN PEOPLE REALIZE THE NEARNESS OF JESUS CHRIST, THEY ARE BOUND TO COMMIT THEMSELVES TO A CERTAIN KIND OF LIFE. IN VIEW OF THAT NEARNESS PETER MAKES FOUR DEMANDS.

1. HE SAYS THAT WE MUST BE STEADY IN MIND. WE MIGHT RENDER IT: "PRESERVE YOUR SANITY." THE GREAT CHARACTERISTIC OF SANITY IS THAT IT SEES THINGS IN THEIR PROPER PROPORTIONS; IT SEES WHAT THINGS ARE IMPORTANT AND WHAT ARE NOT; IT IS NOT SWEEPED AWAY BY SUDDEN AND TRANSITORY ENTHUSIASMS; IT IS PRONE NEITHER TO UNBALANCED FANATICISM NOR TO UNCONCERNED INDIFFERENCE. IT IS ONLY WHEN WE SEE THE AFFAIRS OF EARTH IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY THAT WE SEE THEM IN THEIR PROPER PROPORTIONS; IT IS WHEN GOD IS GIVEN HIS PROPER PLACE THAT EVERYTHING TAKES ITS PROPER PLACE.
2. HE SAYS THAT WE MUST BE SOBER IN MIND. WE MIGHT RENDER IT:

"PRESERVE YOUR SENSE OF SELF-RESTRAINT AND CONTROL." THE VERB PETER USES ORIGINALLY MEANT TO BE SOBER AS OPPOSED TO BEING DRUNK AND THEN CAME TO MEAN TO ACT SOBERLY AND SENSIBLY. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE LOST IN A GLOOMY JOYLESSNESS; BUT IT DOES MEAN THAT THEIR APPROACH TO LIFE MUST NOT BE FRIVOLOUS AND IRRESPONSIBLE. TO TAKE THINGS SERIOUSLY IS TO BE AWARE OF THEIR REAL IMPORTANCE AND TO BE MINDFUL OF THEIR CONSEQUENCES IN TIME AND IN ETERNITY. IT IS TO APPROACH LIFE, NOT AS HUGE JOKE, BUT AS A SERIOUS MATTER FOR WHICH WE ARE ANSWERABLE.

3. HE SAYS THAT WE MUST DO THIS IN ORDER TO PRAY AS WE OUGHT.

WE MIGHT RENDER IT: "PRESERVE YOUR PRAYER LIFE." WHEN ALL OF US HAVE A FRIVOLOUS AND IRRESPONSIBLE APPROACH TO LIFE, THEY CANNOT PRAY AS THEY OUGHT. WE LEARN TO PRAY ONLY WHEN WE TAKE LIFE SO WISELY AND SO SERIOUSLY THAT WE BEGIN TO SAY IN ALL THINGS: "YOUR WILL BE DONE." THE FIRST REQUIREMENT OF PRAYER IS THE EARNEST DESIRE TO DISCOVER

THE WILL OF GOD FOR OURSELVES.

4. HE SAYS THAT WE MUST CHERISH FOR EACH OTHER A LOVE THAT IS CONSTANT AND INTENSE. WE MIGHT RENDER IT: "PRESERVE YOUR LOVE." THE WORD PETER USES TO DESCRIBE THIS LOVE HAS TWO MEANINGS. IT MEANS OUTSTRETCHING IN THE SENSE OF CONSISTENT; OUR LOVE MUST BE THE LOVE THAT NEVER FAILS. IT ALSO MEANS STRETCHING OUT AS A RUNNER STRETCHES OUT. AS C. E. B. CRANFIELD REMINDS US IT DESCRIBES A HORSE AT FULL GALLOP AND DENOTES "THE TAUT MUSCLE OF STRENUOUS AND SUSTAINED EFFORT, AS OF AN ATHLETE." OUR LOVE MUST BE ENERGETIC. HERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL CHRISTIAN TRUTH. CHRISTIAN LOVE IS NOT AN EASY, SENTIMENTAL REACTION. IT DEMANDS EVERYTHING AN INDIVIDUAL POSSESSES OF MENTAL AND SPIRITUAL ENERGY. IT MEANS LOVING THE UNLOVELY AND THE UNLOVABLE; IT MEANS LOVING IN SPITE OF INSULT AND INJURY; IT MEANS LOVING WHEN LOVE IS NOT RETURNED. CHRISTIAN LOVE IS THE LOVE WHICH NEVER FAILS AND INTO WHICH EVERY ATOM OF



OUR STRENGTH IS DIRECTED. IN THE LIGHT OF ETERNITY, CHRISTIANS MUST PRESERVE THEIR SELF-CONTROL, PRESERVE THEIR PRAYERS AND PRESERVE THEIR LOVE.

"LOVE," SAYS PETER, "HIDES A MULTITUDE OF SINS." THERE ARE THREE THINGS WHICH THIS SAYING MAY MEAN; AND IT IS NOT NECESSARY THAT WE SHOULD CHOOSE BETWEEN THEM, FOR THEY ARE ALL THERE.

1. IT MAY MEAN THAT OUR LOVE CAN OVERLOOK MANY SINS. "LOVE COVERS ALL OFFENCES," SAYS THE WRITER OF THE PROVERBS. IF WE LOVE A PERSON, IT IS EASY TO FORGIVE. IT IS NOT THAT LOVE IS BLIND, BUT THAT IT LOVES A PERSON JUST AS HE OR SHE IS. LOVE MAKES PATIENCE EASY. IT IS MUCH EASIER TO BE PATIENT WITH OUR OWN CHILDREN THAN WITH THE CHILDREN OF PEOPLE WE DON'T KNOW. IF WE REALLY LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS, WE CAN ACCEPT THEIR FAULTS, AND BEAR WITH THEIR FOOLISHNESS, AND EVEN ENDURE THEIR UNKINDNESS.

2. IT MAY MEAN THAT, IF WE LOVE OTHERS, GOD WILL OVERLOOK OUR WEAKNESSES. IN LIFE WE MEET TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE. WE MEET THOSE WHO HAVE NO FAULTS AT WHICH THE FINGER MAY BE POINTED; THEY ARE MORAL, ORTHODOX, AND SUPREMELY RESPECTABLE; BUT THEY ARE HARD AND AUSTERE AND UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND WHY OTHERS MAKE MISTAKES AND FALL INTO SIN. IT IS THE SECOND KIND OF PERSON TO WHOM THE HEART MORE READILY WARMS; AND IN ALL REVERENCE WE MAY SAY THAT IT IS SO WITH GOD. HE WILL FORGIVE MUCH TO THE PERSON WHO LOVES OTHERS.

GOD'S LOVE COVERS THE MULTITUDE OF OUR SINS. THAT IS BLESSEDLY AND PROFOUNDLY TRUE. IT IS THE WONDER OF GRACE THAT, SINNERS AS WE ARE, GOD LOVES US; THAT IS WHY HE SENT HIS SON.