



The Episcopal Diocese of Long Island

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Sermon for Pentecost

Sunday, May 31, 2020

The Right Reverend Lawrence C. Provenzano

Bishop of Long Island

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Throughout my ordained ministry, I have loathed any attempt by preachers using themselves as an example in a sermon. Today I will do that loathsome thing because my prayer and preparation for preaching today leave me little choice. I beg your indulgence.

In the mid-1970s, I was a member of a cloistered religious community. I lived in Eremo Beato Bernardo, the Hermitage of Blessed Bernard. The monastery was named for the local Capuchin Franciscan Friar who lived in the town in the hills of Corleone, Sicily who had been named by the church as “blessed”.

I had entered the community to live a monastic expression of the Franciscan rule, to escape the world in that classic intent of monastic life, *fuga mundi*—to flee the world.

I was convinced of a religious vocation and sought, as a very young man, to escape the distractions, curiosity and work of the world outside the walls, in an effort to learn to pray, to study, to have union with God. I lived that cloistered life with thirty other brothers for two-and-a-half years until one warm sunny late April day, I experienced a personal, but very real, Pentecost event.

It was siesta time and as I often did not sleep mid-day, I would climb up on the inside wall of the monastery and look out over the small city of Corleone. This day in the stillness of a warm afternoon, I eavesdropped on a conversation on the street below the wall. A father washing his car, talking, actually negotiating, with his teenage children about the use of their money, priorities of their family life, and the need for the children to live within a budget. That was a Pentecost moment for me. Everything changed that afternoon and the days that followed.

The disciples were locked away for fear of the world following the events of Good Friday and the days that followed. They were bewildered, scared and not knowing what to do next.

The risen Christ comes and stands in their midst and says, "Peace be with you!" And as we have heard from the Acts of the Apostles, having been encouraged by the gift of the Holy Spirit, they emerge preaching in various tongues and giving witness to the reality of the resurrection.

Pentecost is often referred to as the birthday of the church. It may be an oversimplification, but accurately describes that movement of the Holy Spirit that released the disciples and empowered them to reveal the redemption of humanity found in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we have lived through the past twelve weeks of quarantine and isolation for fear of the illnesses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, each of us, I am certain, have longed for a return to what we believed to be normal.

But we have discovered, haven't we, that our way of being, the craziness of our existence, the way in which we carried on in life was not normal at all. We have learned some significant lessons about our place in life, the importance of the people around us each day that we often take for granted, the choices we make, the assumptions we carry, the evaluation of what is essential.

We all now understand that what we imagined about the priorities of our common life might have been a little too self-serving and little too exclusionary to actually be called common life. It appears that social distancing and a bit of isolation has taught us each how to appreciate the gift and genuine need of each other in reality. We are relearning the holiness of the human family. We are having a Pentecost event as a people anew!

As members of the church, the people of God, we know well that the celebrations of the liturgical calendar are never, ever meant to be solely occasions to recall a past historical or biblical event. The Incarnational theology that forms our liturgical and sacramental life dictates that our celebrations encompass the real time experience of the people of God.

Today, this celebration of Pentecost provides us the opportunity to be renewed by God's Holy Spirit, not in wishful thinking, not in a delusion of returning to some misconceived normalcy, but in holy expectation of God acting in our time to move the church into the moments of terror and fear so many of us are experiencing, and transforming this experience into a time of deep and abiding peace that God brings to us, breathes on us and creates in us to move out beyond

our walled-in reality to a transformed movement of sharing Jesus' love and compassion with a hurting and confused world.

The Pentecost event as recorded in scripture did not change the world outside that locked room, it created the church to serve and help transform the world.

Out of our deep prayer, our liturgical and sacramental life, the church must—absolutely must—serve the world, challenge the world and overcome the sin and selfish greed that infects the world as a means of further breathing the peace and wholeness that was the original intent of the creator and sealed for all humanity in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That April day in Corleone was a Pentecost event in which the common, everyday experience of a family was the vehicle by which the Holy Spirit moved my heart and informed my will to understand that, what I firmly believed was the direction of my life, for which I sacrificed so much else in my life, was misguided and not of God. Or at least not totally on mark for what God had intended. There have been many Pentecost events in the over-45 years that have followed, all of which I remember, and for which I give thanks this day as they find their place in this great solemnity of the church.

I pray this is true for you as well.

That this feast of Pentecost, this feast of the ministry of the church, may include all those moments and times in your life in which God has created rich, unexpected experiences of grace, transformation and maybe healing.

I invite you to look for them in your own life, especially in the places where you are locked away in fear or complacency. I invite you to embrace, and not merely endure, this moment in which we are all a part in the midst of this pandemic, and pray the Holy Spirit to breathe upon you, your family and loved ones, the people all around us—to renew the face of the earth and to recognize the face of God and the will of God in all things, common and holy.

Amen.