

One of the things I love the most about my trips to Palestine is meeting active Episcopalians who are engaged with their parishes. They share so much about how their life in God brings meaning and joy in very difficult circumstances. They tell me about the challenges of living in an occupied land, and how Christ’s message of reconciliation and forgiveness enables them to have hope in the present, as well as the future. The clergy share their frustration at the dwindling attendance on Sundays and of competing activities in the lives of their members. Here, the birthplace of Christianity, people still grapple with their understanding of and commitment to church, their community of faith. And so, in my prayer life, I continue to ask the question, “What is Church?” On this Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the birth of the church, I wonder what exactly it is that was birthed.

In our reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that the apostles and other followers of Jesus have done as directed and gathered in the familiar upper room. Ten days before, they received the final commission and blessing of peace from Christ, before he ascends into heaven. This blessing and promise is the same that is given on Easter Day, as we just heard in the Gospel. In this appearance on Easter and then this final farewell, given before he ascends, Christ promises to not leave us “orphaned;” that the Spirit will descend and activate God’s energy within us as we are gathered in prayer and fellowship in the holy city of Jerusalem. This energy will make us Christ’s presence to all whom we encounter.

And so, they sit and pray. They share their anxieties and their hopes and dreams. As the days go by, they cook for each other and tend to each other. During this week and a half, they laugh and drink and cheer each other on. And as they privately ponder what’s to come, the holy arises within them.

This Holy Spirit is God’s breath which brought created order out of chaos. This same Spirit activated the faith of the ancient holy mothers and fathers, activated the leadership skills of Moses, Joshua and David, and activated the devotion and visions of Mary and Joseph. This Holy Spirit descended before at the Baptism of Jesus. And now, this Spirit of God breathes life into the relationship of these followers as she activates their gifts to be use for the common good; the kingdom of God. The arrival of the Spirit signals the beginning of a new creation, a new age, the beginning of the end-time when heaven and earth become one. This Spirit rose up in them so powerfully that their passion for God exploded out of their being, with passionate flames dancing above their heads. This energy bound them together in a mission; to be in a holy relationship with the world.

Not just the flames left their bodies; their self interests left them as well, as a deep and abiding love for one another and the world welled up within them. This was the Church that was birthed that day.

But what is it today? Is it the same charismatic experience?

Here is a paraphrase of a quote of The Rt. Rev. Samir Kaffity, Retired Bishop of Jerusalem that Bishop Gayle shared with me last week:

Christianity began as a vibrant faith of the victory of redemption and joy in Jerusalem.

It then traveled around and up the coast of the Holy Land.

It crossed the Mediterranean Sea, to the Aegean and landed in Greece,
where it became a philosophy.

It left there and crossed the Adriatic Sea and on to Rome,
where it became an institution.

It continued westward across Europe, and crossed the North Sea to Great Britain,
where it became a culture.

And finally this great religion crossed the Great Atlantic Ocean,
and lapped upon the North American shore,
where it has become an enterprise.

The people I met in Ramla, Israel on this last trip, have this original, vibrant faith that they carry comfortably with them; Arab Christians for whom it is part of their outgoing nature to be lovers of Christ.

But, we know of Christians who consider it a philosophy, simply a system of beliefs. They will gather and share their ideas about Christ and God, but falling in love with God frightens them, and so they put up the walls of thoughts and intellectualism.

We know of Christians for whom the Church is an institution, a formal body. They will follow established laws and practices, but their experience is not porous; it does not allow for anything outside of the institution to impact its well being.

We know of Christians for whom the Church is a culture. This is a particular temptation for us Anglicans. One definition of "culture" is "the enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training." As I said, we might be accused of our faith devolving into a culture.

Finally, we know of Christians for whom the Church is an enterprise, or business. They base religion on an economy of not just money, but of influence, self righteousness and power. Using religion to influence people for greater material wealth or status is well known in these United States.

So how do we bring the Church back to being people of a vibrant faith, who revel in the victory of redemption and joy? How do we reclaim "Church?"

Last night, Eric and I went to All Saints', Brookline. On Saturday evenings at 5:00 pm, they have a Celtic Service. We entered, not the church, but a Common Room much like our own. My friend Kim came over to give me a big hug. She is a priest at another parish, but loves Celtic Spirituality so much that she is the musician for this service most weeks. Eric and I immediately felt welcome, in a way that, quite honestly, is only familiar to me in church. As candles were lit symbolizing the Holy Trinity, calm came over me as I felt a strong connection to those who had come before. The Rector preached about gift giving, sharing a humorous story from his childhood that spoke about his relationship with his loving parents that resonated with us all. After praying for everyone and everything under the sun and in heaven, we shared the peace. And that is what it always feels like to me in church; that I am taking some of the peace God gives me and passing a bit on to you. And then, we had the grand banquet consecrated with the holy words from Iona, that sacred community in Scotland. It was then I realized what makes Church; people celebrating their relatedness in God. It's about one to one welcome in the peace of Christ. It's about showing up every week because our presence manifests Christ's presence. It's about committing to one another. It's about deploying our gifts and talents for the good of the whole. It's about having faith that God has fallen in love with us, and we are to do the same with God's world.

What is Church?

It is a relationship; one that runs deep and strong. It is a relationship between us and God. It is us being in a committed relationship where we follow through on our promises in the Name of Christ, because God has kept all of his. It is not a set of beliefs, or laws and practices, or an esthetic, or an enterprise. It is a community of faith, animated by God's breath; in the world to bring the world to the mighty Love of our Maker.

This is the Church birthed that day in the upper room in Jerusalem. This is the Church in which we live and move and have our being. Let us be ever mindful of the relationship borne in the victory of our souls over death. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to transport us this day into the full stature of Christ.

Amen.