

May 19, 2024

The Day of Pentecost

Texts: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:23-31

Our Lord Jesus, in wonderful words of comfort, tells His Church, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.” The contrast between the world’s ideas of peace and the peace of God is shown for us in the readings for Pentecost. Whereas the peace of man will always fail, the peace which God the Holy Spirit bestows is a peace that lasts into eternity.

When we think of peace in the world, we think of everybody just getting along, an absence of conflict. And this is good, when people are not in conflict with one another. Yet in addition to not being in conflict with each other, it is essential for true peace that man also not be in conflict with God. If this isn’t the case, then this outward peace goes from good to something that can be very bad.

That’s what we see in our Old Testament reading. Not long after the Flood, all the people on the earth are at peace with one another. They have one language, the same words, and they all desire to be together, to live in one great city, which they plan to build on the plain of Shinar.

Sounds great, doesn’t it? Everyone getting along, working together. However, though they might be at outward peace with one another, they are joined together in rebellion against the Lord. After the waters of the Flood receded, the Lord commanded man to fill the earth. But in defiance of this command, they all stayed together.

And their staying together wasn’t just an innocent desire to not be separated from distant family. No, it came from much more sinful longings. Having outward peace, they say, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”

Do you hear all the rebellion in that statement? For one, they expressly state their intentions to not be dispersed, against the express command of the Lord. For another, they seek to make a name for themselves. They aren’t satisfied with what God has made them to be; they need to achieve something more.

And this is tied to the greatest rebellion in that statement, that they will make a tower into heaven. They will not humbly believe in the Lord and His promise to bring them to heaven through His gracious working. No, they will make their own way. Their hearts are unified, not in love, but in pride and defiance toward the living God.

This outward peace – with inward defiance – will lead them to reject the only source of true peace. The tragedy here isn’t that humanity will waste untold effort in building a tower to nowhere, which they’ll end up abandoning into ruins.

No, it’s that they are all unified in the rejection of the true God and in their belief that they can elevate themselves to godhood. They are joined together in damnation, holding hands as they all walk the road to hell.

And so, when the Lord descends and confuses their words, it's an act of mercy. God takes away their outward peace so that they might repent of their pride and rebellion and instead seek true peace in Him.

This pride, and its desire to replace God or make Him unnecessary, is still seen today. Sometimes it's more obvious, such as in something like the American Humanist Association, whose motto is "Good without a god." The idea is that if humanity would just do what they know is right and follow their reason, then we'd be able by ourselves to bring about world peace.

Or, the prideful embrace of scientism, where gods and religion are quaint stories believed by primitive mankind, but now they need to be discarded by serious people as we "know better" now.

Less obvious, but even more dangerous, are the efforts to replace God and His word within churches. It's very, very rare that a church ever goes from being faithful one minute to deciding to toss the Bible the next. Rather, it's a slow, creeping process, and it's almost always rooted in the desire to have outward peace with the world and with other churches that have also compromised the truth.

Holding to the entire Bible as the literal, inspired, inerrant revelation of God to man began to be rejected because smart guys in universities thought that there's no way a text could be preserved over thousands of years. This defies Jesus and His promise that the Spirit would lead the Church into truth and bring to our remembrance all the He had said.

Or believing that God created the world in six literal days started to slip away because other smart people said that "science" had disproved it, and "science" has never been wrong before. But Christians wanted to remain thought of as intelligent, leading members of society, not foolish bumpkins, and so they allowed and even embraced such teaching in their church bodies.

To go back to Babel, they wanted to make a name for themselves, one that included favor in the world's eyes, rather than be content with the name the Lord had given to them and delight in His favor.

Churches also sought unity with other churches, not for the sake of having actual unity grounded in God's truth, but for the sake of worldly glory and outward peace. If we just ignore what we believe the Bible says, then we can all merge together and have the most numbers and the biggest budgets and the newest church buildings and the most entertaining worship and by all this attract more people who want to be part of something popular.

This pursuit of the lowest common denominator, the endless watering down of doctrine, leads eventually to not even having to believe in Christ. Just look at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In an effort to be popular with other religions and the world at large, it adopted a statement declaring that "we must be careful about claiming to know God's judgments regarding another religion or the individual human beings who practice it." This is, in effect, to say that maybe it's okay that other people are building towers to heaven and seeking paths to salvation that have nothing to do with faith in Jesus Christ.

God has declared plainly in His word that salvation is found in Christ alone, and that loving our neighbors means leading them to the truth rather than affirming them in their lies. Striving for outward unity rather than being faithful even if it means being dispersed or scattered – again, the sin of Babel.

Just as the sin of Babel would have led to the condemnation of the peoples back then, it still leads to condemnation for those who embrace it today. Yet the Lord doesn't desire to see any of the people whom He has created in His image led astray or crushed by the effects of their sinful pride. And so He comes, working through His word, to grant truth and peace.

This is what happens at Pentecost. Peoples from all over the ancient world are gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, as described in Leviticus 23. They're able to gather in Jerusalem because the Mediterranean world was then enjoying the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace. Yet this peace was very much a worldly peace, brought about and preserved through the bloody swords and spears of the feared Roman legions.

But the Almighty God, who guides all things for the sake of His people, brought this worldly peace about to create the perfect conditions for the spread of His heavenly peace. With people from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit enacts a reversal of Babel. He doesn't make it so that everyone there speaks the same language. Instead, He causes them to hear their own native languages coming from the mouths of simple Galileans.

The Spirit is here showing a wonderful truth that echoes back to Babel. Back then, the people sinfully refused to scatter, thinking they would lose themselves and their name. Now at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit shows that wherever they have been scattered to, He still hears them, and He will call them by name in whatever tongue they might speak.

The people of God, the holy Church throughout the ages, is a people that transcends nations, tribes, and tongues. God is the God who grants true unity, true peace.

And where is this true unity found? The various people exclaim, "We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." The Spirit does not cause the disciples to speak the various folk tales and pagan myths of each hearer's homeland. No, in all these tongues, the mighty works of the one God are proclaimed.

People from Mesopotamia and Crete will both hear that it was God who made the world and everything in it. Elamites and Egyptians will hear the one Law of right and wrong which God had written on their hearts and even more so on the tablets given to Moses. Residents of Phrygia and Pamphylia will hear how they have failed to keep this law and have thereby rejected God and His peace. And both natives of Judea and visitors from Rome will hear of the Lord's great promise to come as Messiah, Christus, the Anointed One, and through His atoning sacrifice bring reconciliation and peace with God once more.

The hammer of the Law will ring out for all to hear in Peter's divinely-inspired sermon that day, when he proclaims, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." And when the Holy Spirit has used this word to cut them to the heart, so that they cry out, "Brothers, what shall we do?", the Spirit will give Peter words of soothing Gospel to proclaim. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Through the preaching of the word of Jesus and through Baptism in the name of Jesus, the Holy Spirit grants peace. Though the people had rebelled against the Lord, causing Him to be crucified for their sins, nevertheless that same Lord sent His Spirit to give them the peace He had won for them on the cross.

Regardless of what language they spoke or what land they called home, the promises of God were for them. As Peter, quoting the prophet Joel, declared, “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Unlike the prideful striving of the peoples of Babel to make a name for themselves, God had bestowed His name, the name above all names, upon all who repented and were baptized. They didn’t need to make a tower into heaven, for the Son of God had descended from heaven in order to bring them to Himself. There, at Pentecost, the Old Testament harvest festival, the Lord began to gather in His harvest from all nations.

Being gathered into Christ and given the Holy Spirit, the people could then disperse gladly, for they brought back with them the unifying word of God, through which He grants peace. They could return to Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia and declare that the one true God had died to forgive the sins of all men.

Those who lived under the shaky peace of Rome, and those outside it wondering if they would be forcibly brought in, could rest assured that all who believed and were baptized would share in perfect, eternal peace.

That is the proclamation that we the Church still proclaim today. By the Holy Spirit’s power, we proclaim the truth of God’s word to all.

We call to repentance, and repent ourselves, where the word of God is not kept, where His commands are ignored because “we know better.”

We declare that only in the Lord Jesus is there peace and life, that man’s prideful efforts to build towers to heaven will never succeed.

We strive for unity, unity in the truth of the Holy Scriptures, which God the Holy Spirit brought to the remembrance of the prophets, apostles, and evangelists.

Where the Spirit grants repentance and faith, we rejoice in His gathering in of the nations. When it seems our proclamation falls on deaf ears – or is even met with hostility – we remember the words of our Savior: “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” We the Church have been given everlasting peace by our God.

We need not fear the world or its wicked prince, for we are joined to Christ, and as He declares, that ruler has no claim on us. All the devil’s accusations on us were nullified on Calvary. His lies and offers of other paths to heaven will all be exposed and crumble at the last day, but the peace God gives to us through His word of truth will remain forever.

We have peace with God now, and we will see the fullness of that peace when we are gathered together with all the saints, not in an earthly city of our building, but in the city made by God, the New Jerusalem.

In the name of Jesus, amen.