

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year A) – June 1, 2014
Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36; 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11; John 17:1-11
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

In two parishes I've served, we had a sister parish relationship with the same Episcopal church in El Salvador called San Andres Apostol in San Salvador. That parish was formed of former refugees from different parts of El Salvador who fled their villages during the 13-year civil war that raged through the '80s in to the early 1990's. Oscar Romero, the former Roman Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, had taken a strong public stance against the repressive regime, and because of that, and his public defense of the poor of his country, he was assassinated early on in the civil war. During a visit we made to his former residence, a very humble apartment at a Catholic hospital in San Salvador, one of our group asked a question of the church leader who was our guide, "Where are the Oscar Romeros of today?" The reply was thoughtful. She said, "Our blessed Oscar Romero is still alive today, for he died *into* the Salvadoran people. We are his gospel carried by our own feet." In a similar vein, we approach our readings today.

This seventh Sunday of Easter is in some sense an in-between time in our Church's calendar, in between the Ascension of Christ celebrated last Thursday, and the powerful empowerment of the Spirit of Christ which we celebrate next Sunday, Pentecost Sunday. But what does that mean? We who live after the Ascension of Christ and after Pentecost ask how the Risen Jesus and His Holy Spirit are present with and in us today? Well first of all, it is good news that Christ did not abandon his humanity even when he ascended. Rather, he took all of us into the heart of God.ⁱ And secondly, the Ascension does not mean the *suspension* of the presence of Jesus. It is not about the absence of Christ, but rather his purposeful and powerful presence in a new way, *with and in* all those who join him in his ongoing mission of repairing the world ("tikkun olam" in the Hebrew), and restoring all to right relationship ("Shalom"). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it,

"The body of Christ takes up space on the earth...A truth, a doctrine...need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities, that is all. But the *incarnate* Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him."ⁱⁱ

That implies a way for Christ's continual presence and purpose and power to be truly manifested. But to grasp this more fully, we need to begin at the beginning. Jesus came on the public scene with great power of understanding and with a vision: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19). This vision, from the depths of his own heart, as well as from his Jewish prophetic tradition, is a vision of the repair of the world, of restoring everyone and everything into right relationship with God and each other. As he saw that he could not, and would not, fulfill this vision all by himself, Jesus creates a way to fulfill that vision. He selects twelve out of an ever widening circle of followers. He spends time with them deepening their discipleship and preparing them for apostleship and leadership. In our gospel reading today, we hear part of Jesus' prayer for his disciples just prior to his arrest. One of the twelve, Judas, washed out of the

training, but the other eleven hang in there more or less, even through the moments when it seemed all was for naught—when Jesus was arrested, tried, crucified, and lay in the tomb for three days. But when the Risen Jesus appears to them, he restarts their discipleship and continues to prepare them; and just before he makes his final earthly exit, he tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they are clothed with the power from on high, until they are baptized with the Holy Spirit. Jesus adds that when they have received power from the Holy Spirit, they would then become his witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth. They would realize Jesus' vision and join him in his ongoing mission. But, he tells them, don't go anywhere until you receive that power—that capacity—to carry forth Christ's vision.

Jesus then ascends and is gone from their physical sight; and during the (next ten) days following his Ascension the eleven disciples remain in Jerusalem (as described in our reading from the first chapter of Acts). They don't just mope around nor passively wait for Jesus' promised Spirit to descend on them. Instead they pray, preach, share their own resources, learn each other's stories and develop relationships. They actively do their part in building the community of faith, and from the eleven, this core community grows to about 120 people—men and women—all happening even before they encounter the great rushing wind of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Jesus' *power of vision* carried—and still carries with it—a *vision of power*. In other words, his *vision* needed—and has—a *vehicle*: an empowered community of faith joining him in his ongoing mission, and joining others who may not be part of that community but who nonetheless are living out his mission. We can't just have a vision: we need a vehicle with the capacity to carry out the vision. Today we are in a world where there seems to be a further erosion of community. We need effective vehicles: vital, healthy churches; gathered and organized peoples within and across congregations, denominations and religious traditions, who, with shared values and common interests—along with others—can call forth individual and social responsibility; who can help rebuild the bonds of our common humanity and a restored social fabric in which truly no one is left behind; who can reestablish family supports and stability, adequate education, job, housing and health care opportunities; and exercise real stewardship of God's planet. Just as we can all appreciate the powerful and watery metaphor of Amos' prophesy, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream;" as William Sloane Coffin put it, "someone's got to work out the irrigation system for that." That someone is us.

[So, it's not enough to say, as the proverb goes, that "it's better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness," because the world has a way of blowing out your little candle real fast. The Bible says, "Without vision the people perish;" but equally so, I would add, with a whole lot of vision and no vehicle to carry it out, the people still perish. Again, it is we who are summoned and empowered.]

While next week we celebrate the explosion from the Holy Spirit of the Ascended Christ on the Day of Pentecost (described in the second chapter of Acts), we can note today that all that empowerment by the Spirit of Pentecost didn't come out of nowhere. All the molten enthusiasm of the Spirit's empowerment on Pentecost mixed with the power of

the relationships that were *already* in formation. And so, Jesus lit the fire, the Holy Spirit *and* the earliest disciples fanned the flames, and later, James, Paul, Barnabas and others would use it to forge for Christ a Church—a vehicle to carry forth Christ’s vision.ⁱⁱⁱ

To continue to build and sustain such effective and powerful vehicles in our day, we need to be in a *conspiracy* with God and each other. This word “conspire” has its root in the Latin word *conspirare* meaning “to breathe with.” At Pentecost the Holy *Spiritus* of God came upon and inspired—*inspirare* (meaning “to breathe (in)”)—into a diverse people, a unity of relationship and a strength of purpose, leading to the power of numbers. From the 120 just prior to Pentecost, 3,000 more were added on that first day of Pentecost alone, we are told! (Acts 2:41). So, along with “inspire,” we also see “conspire” as the operative action here.

That is the nature of the Ascended Christ’s transformational presence and way with us. The Spirit of Christ acts *and* we act. It’s not just God at work. In fact, if we do not act at all, nothing happens. Again, as St. Augustine put it, “Without God we cannot. Without us, God will not.”^{iv} And so, we need to work with God and each other, as did the earliest church in Jerusalem prior to Pentecost: building relationships, caring and sharing, taking initiative—and then *conspiring* with the mighty work of the Spirit on Pentecost, and all the more doing these things as a Spirit-filled community after Pentecost. By our action we cannot force the power of the Holy Spirit. However, through quiet, usually faltering, but faithful diligence—or sometimes just letting go of what we are clinging to—we can awaken the Spirit’s power in ourselves and in our congregation and community. Thus, inspiration from God comes as we con-spire with Christ’s Spirit and each other. So then, let us go forth on this last Sunday of Easter rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit and with a mind to work together!

ⁱ See John 17; the Collect for Ascension; Colossians 3:3, etc.

ⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone (Simon & Schuster), (originally published 1937) Touchstone edition 1995), p. 248.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 2, verse 1 states, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” And in John’s gospel, this great event of empowerment is placed in the scene of the Risen Jesus appearing to the disciples on Easter Day. Significantly, in both accounts, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, and the “birth” of the early church took place only after the people were all together. And their empowerment created a community of diversity in unity. As St. Paul put it, “...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” [Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:7]. Thus the movement of the Spirit is personal but not private. Empowerment is not just for a privileged few, nor just for our individual benefit, but for all, so that together we can set about building and renewing our communities of faith which can act as instruments of God’s love and justice, restoring our hearts and repairing God’s world.

^{iv} Quoted in Robert Edward Luccock, *If God Be For Us: Sermons on the Gifts of the Gospel* (New York: Harper, 1954). In Augustine’s actual writings, the quote that comes closest to this is, “He who created you without you will not justify you without you.” (in his 169th Sermon).