

HEARING AND BELIEVING!

05 June Anno Domini 2011

EXAUDI SUNDAY

Acts 1:12–26, 1 Peter 4:12–19; 5:6–11, John 17:1–11

Today, this 7th Sunday or the last Sunday of the Easter season in the Church year. This is an in-between or transitional Sunday. This is the Sunday between the Ascension of our Lord and Pentecost. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended to His magnificent glory at the right hand of the Father and disappeared from sight of man until the Last Day. Fifty days after the resurrection comes Pentecost the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Today is part of the in-between days. But we also live in the time in-between time. That time between Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, and His grand reappearing in glory on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead. It's called the last days, the end times, and the sabbatical rest of the old creation. The resurrection was already the dawn of the new; but now we wait for the full blown day of eternal life.

This in-between times call for faith, trust in the promises of God through Christ Jesus. They are not times of seeing but **hearing and believing**. In fact, there isn't much to look at – words, water, bread, wine, church, ministry. Nothing fancy, nothing to suggest power and glory, but simple humble and earthy means by which the crucified and risen, and reigning Lord is present with us and interacts with us.

These in-between time calls for patient endurance, rejoicing in suffering, sober watchfulness, faithfulness, and prayer. It's the age of the Church when the Assembly of God's chosen people are called to a specific purpose - **to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light**. We are given to be God's royal priesthood, His holy nation, His chosen people, His new Israel, true children of Abraham who walk by faith and not by sight. We are God's last day Israel created by the blood of Christ. We are the bride of Christ awaiting the wedding day.

How does the Church survive in the in-between time? What will sustain us as the people of God? What hope does the Church have as we approach the Last Day, as apostasy increases, as the old creation accelerates to its death, as society becomes more unraveled and those who have put their hope in this life are driven into utter despair? How will the Church survive?

Today's three readings give some warnings and some comforts to Christians living in these time in-between. Yet we have the unholy trinity to contend with: the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh.

Peter reminds the newly baptized Christians that their lives have just become more dangerous and complex. They can expect persecution and suffering for the name of Jesus, and they shouldn't be surprised when it happens. Jesus Himself said so. **"The world will hate you because of me, but take heart, I have overcome the world"** (John 16:33). They can expect to be insulted for the name of Christ, but they should count themselves blessed, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:11&12, **"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you"** Peter simply says it this way, **"The Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you"** (1 Peter 4:14).

Now this is the suffering for being a Christian, not the suffering that we create with our own sin. That's yet another matter. That's a good suffering too though, because that's the refining fire of God at work in your life. And don't think the Lord doesn't judge His Church. In fact, **"judgment begins with the household of God"**(1 Peter 4:17). Just as He did with Old Testament Israel, God makes an example out of His Church, showing mercy to the faithful remnant, showing His wrath on those who reject His gifts. And if judgment begins with God's baptized believers, how will it go on with those who refuse to believe?

We have our sinful flesh, that arrogant proud egocentric old Adam in us that gets in the way, which causes us all manners of shame and vice. We think we're high and mighty, we don't need to be picked up, we think we can pull ourselves up by our own boot straps. But Peter says: **"Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God,"** (1 Peter 5:6). Humility is the way of faith, the way of Jesus who is humble and lowly of heart. Humble yourselves and God will lift you up and exalt you, as He already has in Christ Jesus. But exalt yourself, and you will be toppled from your throne. This is a warning not just for us but for all who hold on to a theology of glory and prosperity, a theology of exulting ones self rather than humbling ones self. Numerous are the books on shelves and words of man, even preachers of the church who promote these thoughts. Such notions ultimately weaken the Christian and separate them from the power that is in Christ Jesus which is made manifest in our weakness and our willingness to admit we are nothing. Humble yourselves lest you fall.

We have the devil, prowling around like a hungry lion looking for his next meal. Jesus defeated him by His death and resurrection. The devil is judged the deed is done. Yet he stalks around looking for the weak, the isolated Christian, separated from the flock, separated from the church, tempting them to doubt and unbelief, enticing them with man's religion and all they ways we invent to try to bribe God. "Resist him," Peter says. The devil is resistible in the same way that Jesus resisted the devil - by the Word of God. "**Resist him, standing firm in the faith**" (1 Peter 5:9). Know what you believe and stand firm in it.

There is grace under the pressure of persecution and temptation. "**After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you**" (1 Peter 5:10). God doesn't leave His church in the bondage of persecution. He doesn't abandon His baptized believers to the prison house of suffering and temptation. As a good shepherd sets sheep who have fallen over back on their feet again, our Lord restores those who are down, He confirms us in the faith, He strengthens us in our weakness, He establishes us in Himself.

Remember that and cling to it when you are suffering for the faith, insulted for being a Christian, when you are beset by the devil, or those used by him or even tried by your own sinful flesh, the Lord will lift you up and sustain you. He provides the means - the Word preached and heard.

Philip Melancthon, Luther's side-kick and one of the fellow engineers of the Reformation once noted that without the Word the Church will die. The Church is born of the Word and is sustained by hearing the Word. This is why Melancthon argued so forcefully in the Confessions that the churches have an inalienable right to preachers, and no one, not even someone in a high church office, may deny a congregation a pastor to preach the Word.

In this in-between time of our Acts text, this time between Jesus' ascension and Pentecost, a pastoral vacancy was filled. Jesus had just disappeared after sending and blessing His disciples. Peter and the others returned to Jerusalem, and Peter took the head count. The number was eleven, one short of twelve. Judas was gone. He had betrayed Christ, vacated his office, and killed himself. His place had to be filled by another. But what were they to do? Jesus was nowhere in sight. Jesus had appointed them as apostles. How were they supposed to fill this vacancy without a visible Jesus around to help them?

The Book of Acts is the traditionally called "The Acts of the Apostles" though it is really the acts of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord Jesus through His apostles and His Church. It's interesting, that the very first act of our ascended Lord Jesus, the Jesus that you cannot now see though He is very much still here, is to call and ordain someone to fill the vacancy left behind by Judas. Even before Pentecost, where the ascended Lord Jesus breathes out His Spirit over His Church, He is active giving His gifts of Preachers, apostles, evangelists, pastor-teachers.

The apostles narrowed the field of choices to the two eyewitnesses who had been with them from the beginning - Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. They prayed to the Lord whom they could no longer see but trusted in His words that He would be with them and hear their prayers. And then they drew lots, flipped a coin as it were, and the lot fell to Matthias, and the apostolic vacancy was filled. The ascended Lord had acted, providing the twelfth apostle to His Church. The Church must never be without her ministers, those called under shepherds.

The Lord also prays for His Church. In our Gospel reading we heard the first part of Jesus' high priestly prayer, the prayer He prayed at the table where He gave them His body and blood, His Eucharistic prayer. He prayed that He would be glorified - in His death, His resurrection, in His ascension. He prayed for His apostles, that they would be kept in the Name in which they would baptized and teach. And He prayed for all who would believe through their word which was His Word. He prays for you and me, for His Church. He prays for our unity, that we would be one. He prays that we would see His glory. He prays that the love of the Father for the Son might also be in you.

This is the prayer that sustains us. This is the apostolic Word that restores and keeps us. This is the apostolic ministry that restores, confirms, strengthens, and establishes you and the whole Christian Church and keeps it in Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit in this in-between time - This time between Jesus' ascension and His reappearing in glory on the Last Day.

So **HEAR AND BELIEVE**, Jesus has not left us but is every present with us. For in Christ Jesus every sin you have ever committed is forgiven and your faith is restored in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit for Jesus sake and in Jesus name, AMEN and AMEN!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!