

Seventh Sunday of Easter – May 20, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
John 17:20-26: “That they may be one”
Rev. Kent Higgins

You have heard me say before that it is very difficult to understand and appreciate the New Testament unless you have at least some familiarity with the Hebrew Bible – the Bible known to Jesus himself. Many of the stories, and especially the acts of Jesus, have Old Testament parallels.

When you are more familiar with these things, you may be prepared to say that the Old Testament contains prophecies which are carried out in the New, which is certainly one perspective. I would prefer to say, however, that Jesus takes certain actions in certain ways so that those who see or hear of him will immediately recognize that he is perfecting – that is to say “completing” – the stories of God’s activities in choosing the Hebrew people to be his own.

Modern readers, especially those who rely primarily on the New Testament, will be unable to see the actions of Jesus in the same context in which he saw them.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day – one of the great feasts of the Christian year, for reasons I trust are obvious – certainly they were obvious to the people who named this church, but the feast has the misfortune to fall in the middle of the week, and we all know that, especially in a small church, it is hard to draw a crowd on Sunday, much less other times! There is a discussion going on in the larger church about transferring the feast to the nearest Sunday, but for now the Feast of the Ascension remains exactly where the Biblical description places it, forty days after the crucifixion.

This is not the first case of an ascension in the Bible. A Jewish reader of this story would immediately and forcefully be reminded of Elijah, the great prophet of Israel, who was “taken up” into heaven in a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire.¹ But the truly notable part of the story is not what was taken up, remarkable as that is, but what was left behind.

This is one of those parallels of which I spoke. Elijah’s disciple is Elisha, and the disciple asks the master for a gift, a “double portion” of the spirit which Elijah has had. It is a gift that he receives – the hymn says that “Elijah’s mantle is o’er Elisha cast.”

At the Ascension of Jesus, the master blesses the disciples and tells them they will soon receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And that brings us to the Gospel reading for today. “Brings us” not in the sense of a time line, but logically, for in the Gospel today we hear the prayer Jesus makes to his Father – the parallel to the request Elisha makes of Elijah – the prayer of the disciple to the master. Jesus asks the Father that those who believe in Jesus may be one as Jesus is one with the Father.²

You know the new commandment that Jesus gives us, that we love one another as he has loved us. This prayer is the enabling act for that commandment, for as God the Father grants us the wherewithal to truly love one another, he completes his new creation. You and I are the heirs to those disciples so many years ago, blessed by our risen Lord and commissioned to do his work.

¹ See 2 Kings 2:1-15

² See John 17:20-26

Our mission is to spread the Gospel, and this point in the church year reminds us of that mission as we re-tell the story of the disciples waiting for Pentecost. They did not have long to wait, only ten days, but try to imagine what it was like, and to feel the emotions they had experienced in the time since their master was killed:

- After that last Passover meal, the disciples watched powerlessly as Jesus was taken away and put into prison.
- And then the downhill slide to despair as Jesus is lead out to be crucified. Try to imagine what it is like for people who were so close to the one they believed was God incarnate, to see him suffer and die.
- And then the feeling of abandonment, the inevitable questions: what do we do now? Why did this happen?
- And then the realization of the personal danger – was someone coming after them, or had the authorities decided that these few men and women were of no concern now that their leader was gone.
- And then, with hesitation at first, hearing and believing – two completely different processes – hearing and believing that Jesus had been raised from the dead.
- And now the emotional tide begins to rise. Out of death comes hope, out of death comes life.
- And their master comes back to them, teaches them again, breaks bread with them (which is, you see, really the same thing). And they begin to understand.

- At the Ascension, Jesus leaves them once more, but this time they are confident, a completely changed group of people. Their transformation is almost complete – they await only the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We tell this story each year so that we can be reminded of both the tasks we have been given to do – the same tasks that faced the disciples, and also reminded of the power with which we have been blessed. It is that power, the grace of God, which makes all things possible for us. We have already been given that power, we have already been made one with God. But just in case it occasionally slips your mind as the supposed burdens of the world become too heavy, remember the prayer of Jesus for his disciples – then and now:

“I ask ... on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”³ Amen.

³ John 17:20-21.