

V Easter (b)  
1 Jn 3.18-24; Jn 14.15-24  
10 May 2009  
Fr. Patrick Allen

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As Fr. Sanderson noted last week, our Sunday lessons have taken a turn – a turn away from Easter’s resurrection triumph towards the next great Christian holy day; I speak, of course, of Mother’s Day.

Actually, we begin today a turn toward the Ascension of our Lord and, ten days later, the Feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit to strengthen, encourage, and enable Christian discipleship and ministry.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus speaks to his disciples in anticipation of the Spirit’s coming: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, even the Spirit of truth.*

In our Epistle lesson, John the Beloved Disciple considers the Christian community’s present possession of – perhaps we could even say, “possession by” – the Spirit, who is the seal of Christ’s own Presence: *By this we know that [Christ] abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us.*

So we have a “before and after” comparison: there is anticipation of the Spirit and his work, and also reflection on the “already” of the Spirit’s presence. And it’s interesting (at least to me) to note that both in our Lord’s promise to his original disciples of the Spirit’s coming (the “before”) and in St. John’s reflection on the Spirit’s presence (the “after”), both are tied closely to, bound up with, the loving obedience of Christian disciples to the Lord’s commands.

*If you love me, you will keep my commandments, Jesus says, and I will pray to the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, ...even the Spirit of truth.*

*All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them, writes St. John, and by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us.*

So our Lord virtually identifies obedience with love. And St. John seems to make obedience almost – we have to be careful here – but almost a precondition for inclusion in Christ and his Spirit. *Love equals obedience.* Now, let’s admit, that doesn’t sound right. After all, the British rock star summed up our understanding of love’s requirement when he sang, “If you love somebody, set him free.” Actually, Mr. Sting sang, “If you love somebody, set *them* free.” But today is Mother’s Day, and my Mama wouldn’t want me to let such atrocious grammar pass without comment.

We romantic moderns want somehow to reconcile love and the unfettered freedom of the autonomous self, the upshot of which is that we have reduced and degraded love into a mere sentiment, a state of mind (or perhaps a state of something more glandular) which one falls into and may just as easily and wily-nily fall back out of.

But our Lord, on the night in which he was betrayed for us, on the night before he died for us – our Lord tells us, and has shown us, that love is more truly an act of the will, that love actually *binds*, that love obeys, that love is the surrender – the free and willing surrender – of the autonomous self for the sake of another.

So at the end of this chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus will say, "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that world may know that I love the Father. His obedience reveals his love, because it is his love.

I suppose that our Lord's identification of *love* with *obedience* may sound at first like a thin and lifeless kind of love, but if we think about it – better yet, if we see and experience it – we'll find that Jesus is taking us right to the heart of Love's matter. Here is love fully alive; here is love with hands and feet.

St. John puts his finger on it: *Little children, let us not love with words or speech but in deed and in truth.*

Love that is only words (as important as words may sometimes be), love that is only a feeling (even if it is a sincere feeling) – that is a thin and lifeless love. I saw part of an interview the other night with a husband and wife whose marriage was ending, coming apart. The husband insisted that he loved his wife, had always loved her, loved her still; he insisted on his love passionately, even with tears, right there on national television. Except that he had had an affair, and then another – though he said this one only extended to "some innocent smooching." And then, sadly, another. And then one more after that.

Now that is a thin and lifeless love; in fact it is no kind of love at all. And it is precisely the indulgence of the autonomous self.

Of course, I choose an extreme example to make the point, but we can easily multiply examples. Today, in addition to being Mother's Day, is Youth Sunday, so let's beat up on them for a bit. We can imagine – *it's easy if you try!* – young people who love their parents, in a sense, but fail to honor them with obedience.

Conversely, there are parents who want to love their children, but withhold, perhaps without ever meaning to, their time and affection.

And there are the many of us who want to care for the poor, but looking back find that we have continually passed them by.

And all of us who, as C.S. Lewis said, find it easy to love everybody in general but no one in particular.

Well, our Lord wants better from us and for us, and so he gives something better to us, and claims our obedience not by the power of his command but by the force of his love. He will take this logic of love as the willing surrender of the autonomous self for the sake of another all the way to the end. Just a few minutes after the point at which our Gospel lesson leaves off, he will say to his disciples, *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.* And then he went out and did it – for his friends, for you and for me.

This is Love Himself, Love with hands and feet pierced.

And he calls us to follow him – in the way of life and love which is the way of the cross, in the hope of the resurrection, and in the power of his Spirit.

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