

“Wonders of the Spirit” John 20:19-23

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.””

Today is Pentecost... the Sunday devoted to the Holy Spirit. “Come, Holy Spirit, come and fill us up!” It is good that we can talk about the Holy Spirit. This is much needed a conversation for every Christian. Why?

Because without the Holy Spirit we are the Church of verse 19 from our today’s reading. “The doors being locked where the disciples were for fear...” With the Holy Spirit we can be the Church of verses 21 to 23: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you... receive the Holy Spirit.”

I invite you to reflect on two questions – **who are we, and why are we here**, and also how bringing the Holy Spirit into this picture helps to answer these questions. **Who are we and why are we here?**

Who are we? It seems that often the description in verse 19 is rather fitting. Doors shut... hiding out of fear... I think it is fair to say that the Church in our country often suffers of low self-esteem. Sometimes it seems that we are almost ashamed for who we are, for the eternal hope that we have in our hearts.

Surely, there is some hostility towards the Church, towards what the Bible teaches and what following Jesus requires. But too often we are timid. “Let’s keep our mouth shut, let’s not embarrass ourselves by revealing our beliefs, how we see and perceive this world, what we believe to be right and wrong”.

Too often it leads not only to silence, but also makes us to conform to this world. “Let’s become more like others, let’s blend in, let’s go with the time. Let’s focus on doing good, and not saying anything that could sound politically incorrect.”

Too often we behave like poor relatives ashamed to lift our heads and stand tall. As if we felt guilty that we exist. Have we forgotten who we are? We tend to. This is why our Lord invites us to gather every week so that He can remind us who we are so that we wouldn’t forget it. So – who are you?

It is Him, the Holy Spirit, who helps us to rejoice and wonder about who we are. It is Him, the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us, who we truly are in the eyes on our God. But He does even more, it is Him who makes you very special, who recreates you into someone you should look upon in wonder and awe.

You know how the Bible speaks about you? You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are early vessels, fragile and ordinary, but at the same time we are filled with the glory of God. As Jesus’ earthly body hid His divinity from our eyes, the same way our earthy bodies hide the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

You are a new creation, for now still hidden, but prepared to be revealed in all its beauty and majesty on the Day of our Lord. The Holy Spirit dwells in you, but not only that, He also unites you with the Father and the Son.

That is what Christian fellowship means. That we are, first, united with the Trinity, we are embraced and surrounded by the Triune God. But, second, the same Holy Spirit unites you with all God's children in the body of Christ, which is His Church. You are a member, precious and dearly loved member of God's own family, longed for and cared for by your Father who is in heaven.

We sometimes get confused, or perhaps are misled to believe that the great wonders of God are those when something miraculous happens. Some healings, or visions, or speaking in tongues, or something like that.

And we are blinded to see the true wonders of the Holy Spirit, that is – every single Christian, yourself including. For you were dead in your sins, and now you are alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. You were enemies of God, but now in the power of the Holy Spirit you are His children and His heirs.

You are the reason why God the Creator still keeps this world going, waiting for all your brothers and sisters to come to the knowledge of truth and to inherit eternal life. This is who you are, and may the Holy Spirit help you to never forget it.

When you next time walk into the Church, stop for a moment and embrace this great wonder, for what you see are people of God, chosen before the foundation of the world, called by Jesus Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit. Your family.

Be proud of your identity as Christian, stand tall your head high lifted, for there is no greater and more significant identity than this. And be humble, for you didn't earn it, you didn't merit it, it is God's undeserved gift to you.

Now our second question – **why are we here?** There are many misunderstandings, we are not going to list them all, most of them are widespread among those we don't actually belong to the Church.

But even Christians are not spared by misplacing their focus and losing sight from what is truly important and what defines us as the Church. The Church may be a community of like-minded people, united by shared beliefs, but she is far more than that. The Church may be a group of people who strive to lead holy lives, doing good to our neighbours, but she is far more than that.

It may be a place where our spiritual thirst and hunger are satisfied, but she is far more than that. So, why are we here? I think that many Christians realize that we are not here for ourselves only, but for the sake of something much, much greater. That the Church is not so much about us, as it is about God's mission. That we are here called and equipped and sent by our God, to be His partners and co-workers as He carries on His plan for the humanity.

But even if we agree on this much, there is still a can full of worms, meaning different false ideas on how to build God's Kingdom. Many of them are so persistent that it seems that we have been bewitched to uphold them.

The heart of the problem is that we don't trust our God, and we don't trust the power of the Holy Spirit. Instead we trust in ourselves. We trust that our wisdom, which is no wisdom at all, and our efforts will build God's Kingdom.

Pastors are often first to fall into this sin. We believe that we are building God's Church. We believe that those will be our efforts that will create God's Kingdom. If only we put in more hours, if only we do more this and that, if only we sacrifice ourselves, our time and energy, and sometimes health and families, then we will bring forth the Kingdom of Heaven.

The research data from Australia shows that pastors are among the hardest working professions, putting in enormous hours, suffering many burnouts, and many others at least partly self-inflicted problems. Why?

Because we don't trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, we trust in our own power and running. Or we could say that we confess that we do believe in the power of God's Spirit, but our practices seldom reflect our beliefs.

I stand before you guilty as charged. That's about me as well. And it is so hard to repent from this idolatry of self and to put our trust in the Lord. But then there are other ways where our distrust manifests itself.

There are other false ideas for how to build God's Church, some of them are incredibly persistent. There are three reoccurring themes which come up again and again, when we reflect on how to carry on the mission entrusted to us by our God.

I suppose that they all come from good intentions, rendered worthless by our distrust in the power of God's Word and His Spirit. One is that we don't need to focus so much on the Word of God, for that is too heavy and too threatening. Just leave it...

Another is that we need to abandon the Divine Service where the liturgy itself proclaims the Gospel and delivers God's gifts, even if pastors happen to be fools or heretics, and to replace it with something that... those outside the Church would like.

The third one is that we need to think how to offer people what they want, for then they will come. Just offer them prosperity... as many churches... And it seems it doesn't matter that these ideas are contrary to what our God teaches, and that even the experience confirms that they don't work, these ideas keep coming back.

There is something common to all of them. It is this – we don't trust the power of the Spirit and the power of the Word to do God's work, therefore instead of trying to be faithful and to use the tools that God has given us, we believe that if only we manage to please people, they will come to love the true God.

Today's Gospel reading helps us greatly to correct these wrong ideas and to recover our trust in the power of the Spirit, more – to enable us to appreciate and wonder on what our role is and what magnificent tools our Lord has entrusted to us.

So, why we are here. **“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”**
When Jesus had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them...”

Do you know what this is about? This is the beginning of God's New Creation. Remember what is recorded in Genesis One and Two? God formed Adam and then breathed the breath of life in him, then He made a woman and gave them the first Great Commission "be fruitful and multiply".

The Creator bestowed upon us the power to create a new life. He could have created everyone Himself, but He chose to kindly involve us in the creation of those wondrous beings with whom He hopes to spend eternity.

Now in John 20 we can see the same Person at work, the Son of God breathes again... and entrusts us another task, another Great Commission. A different "be fruitful and multiply" – this time bringing forth His New Creation.

As the Triune God gave to our bodies the power to produce a new life, now He gives us His power so that we can create with our words, just as our God does. He invites us, you! to participate in this New Creation that will stand forever.

"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." How did the Father send Jesus? Remember Jesus' baptism? The Father spoke and the Spirit descended on Jesus, and Jesus went on His mission for the power of God was with Him.

Now Jesus does the same for you. He speaks to us, and as He speaks, He sends His Spirit to be with us and in us. Then He sends us to continue and fulfil His mission, but not on our own, but in the friendly company of the Holy Spirit.

Every Gospel ends with the Great Commission, and everywhere it is about doing things with words in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because this mission that is entrusted to us, it is not our doing, it is indeed God's work, but He as our loving Father allows us to participate in His work of creation.

Jesus keeps speaking to us even today, this is why we are here. Now He speaks through His servants, through us, and as He speaks, or as much as we speak His message, the same thing happens: "I am sending you, receive the Holy Spirit!"

And don't let this treasure, the life-giving words of the Holy Spirit, to stop at you. Speak them as sent by Jesus Christ so that as you speak, someone dear to our Father in heaven, who are now dead in their sins, may come alive and be welcomed into God's family. This is why we are here!

Everything about being a Christian is much grander and fuller or wonders than we usually imagine. Bringing the Holy Spirit into this picture helps to recognize it. For you are one of His greatest wonders – this glorious being, created and redeemed and filled with God's Spirit so that you could walk with your God and live forever in His presence in His New Creation.

And now you are given the very words of life, the Holy Spirit has placed Himself on your tongue and on your lips, so that you could release Him to do His work bringing forth God's Kingdom, and He will not return empty.

"Come, Holy Spirit, come, and do your work in us!"

Amen.