

Sermon for Pentecost 2020

“Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.”²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Jesus giving this authority to the church is a very significant step. He is sending the disciples out on mission, and they are given tremendous authority over the spiritual well being of others. He gives them the power to forgive or to retain sins. This is no small thing and the responsibility that goes with it is overwhelming. Within the church it is an authority that has been exercised, threatened, and sometimes abused, for many years. Perhaps for as long as the church has existed.

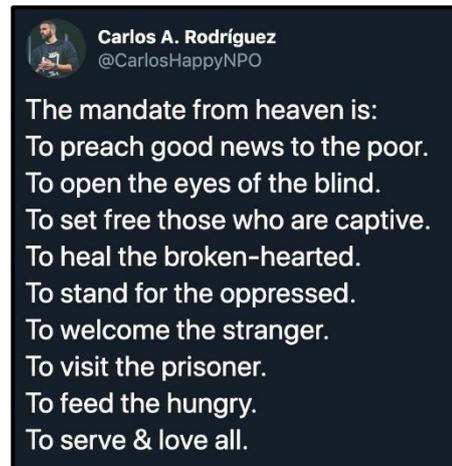
The church has been accused of using this authority to protect itself from accusations of using this power in the confessional to protect perpetrators of domestic violence, and those who sexually abuse children. The seal of the confessional has become a subject of conversation, perhaps controversy, in many levels of society. Authorities have become critical of this confessional silence and have moved to have Bishops and Priests prosecuted if they refuse to disclose information heard in the context of sacramental confession. The argument appears to be that clergy have intentionally concealed crimes so that perpetrators are not called to legal account. It seems to me that if clergy do intentionally allow perpetrators to leave the confessional without repentance, and an intention of putting right that which their sin has damaged, then the criticism of their role is valid.

When a penitent confesses their sin, it is for the priest to guide the penitent in their role of making right the damage caused by that sin. They are not free to unload on the priest and then go away as if nothing has happened, and with no further responsibility. Absolution must be dependant on the penitent accepting the moral and legal implications, if any, of their sin, even if this means attending the police station to admit their crime.

When Jesus told the disciples that they would have authority to forgive or to retain sins it was not, and is not, permission for people to put aside their conscience in order to do the same thing again, or pretend that it never happened. Nor is it an opportunity to be exercised for political expedient. For example, if it is expedient that the sin of a person not be exposed only because it would damage the reputation of the church, it is not a valid reason to hide, or to ignore, that sin.

When our Lord spoke to the disciples he was giving them a responsibility that could only be exercised with the greatest of care. It is not permission to punish and forgive according to our own instinct or desire. The forgiveness or retention of sin must be in keeping with the teaching and authority of Christ.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples and gave them this final instruction he was pointing the way forward. The disciples were to continue the work of Christ in the world. Full authority would be



given by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus told the disciples that he must ascend to the Father in order that the Holy Spirit may come to us. In this moment we are shown a vision, an insight, into the Holy Trinity of God. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is the sermon for next week.

Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, describes the day of Pentecost in great detail. The arrival of the Holy Spirit was announced with the great drama. The sound of wind filled the building and tongues of fire appeared on the heads of the people. And then the point that Luke expands the most, the disciples began to speak in many different languages.

We deduce from this that the gospel message is not confined to a few people. The gospel message of salvation is not confined to one particular type of person. The gospel message is not only for the people who think, and act, like us. The gospel message of salvation is for every man, woman, and child in the created world. The disciples role was, and is, to make this message known throughout the world.

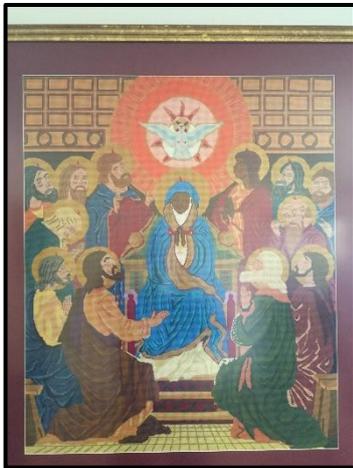


Figure 1 An image of Pentecost. Tapestry by Fr Adrian.

Pentecost is the opposite of the episode at Babel where it is noted that God scattered the languages of the world and people could not understand each other. This is where we get our term “Babble”. It indicates that when someone speaks, and we have no idea what it is that they are saying, they are babbling.

On that first day of Pentecost the disciples begin teaching in the many different languages of the world. Everyone could hear. Everyone could understand. Everyone, regardless of their nation heard the message of salvation in their own language.

As an aside, we recall that with the building of the tower of Babel people were trying to build a structure that would take them closer to God. At Pentecost, God as the Holy Spirit, came to earth. God came to us.

As disciples of Christ it is for us to continue the teaching of our Lord. It is for us to speak openly about our faith and to bring others to understand the wonder of the gift of eternal life in Christ. It is for us to be honest, humble, compassionate, and loving in the name of Christ. This is now our role, just as it was the role of the disciples so long ago.

It is not an excuse for us to judge everyone according to our own prejudice. It is not a reason for hating some people while loving others. It is a call to follow the two great commandments. We are to love God and we are to love our neighbour. And as we recall from the parable, our neighbour is everyone from the person standing with us in our home; to the people of this nation; to the people of the nations of the world. With God no one is excluded from hearing the gospel message of salvation. Nor are we excluded from the responsibility of sharing that message.

When God reaches out to us and offers us the authority to forgive or to retain sins there are some simple things to remember. And these are: 1. When I have opportunity to speak of salvation in Christ, God will put the words into my mouth. Therefore, I do not need to be fearful. 2. It is not my job to judge the character, faith, or personality of another in order that I might determine their worth and whether they are worthy of hearing the message of salvation. 3. God

rains his love and goodwill freely over the earth and all people will be able to accept this if they know that it is available and offered. 4. For all people to hear this message of salvation we, as disciples of Christ, must be prepared to speak and teach according to our own understanding of salvation.

It is true that there have been times when sinners appear to have been aided in their attempts to avoid legal, perhaps even divine, judgement. We read of priests being continually moved from one parish to another leaving a trail of grief and shattered innocence behind them. The church is rightfully criticised for this behaviour. But it should not, it must not, stop us from continuing our role as disciples. And that is to teach that there is salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ.