

Psalm 68 Joel 2:28-32 Acts 2:1-11 St. John 14:15-31

From Prayer to Pentecost to Prayer

MISSION STATEMENT:

The Anglican Church of St. George the Martyr is a community of believers in Jesus Christ seeking to live out the Gospel among ourselves, seeking to take the Gospel to the world, and committed to being Biblical in our faith, liturgical in our worship, and evangelical in our witness.

5. We are committed to liturgical worship:

We seek to provide excellence in our liturgical form of worship, variety in musical expression and education for our parishioners regarding the biblical basis for the historical development and spiritual meaning of the liturgy.

Pentecost is such a wonderful time because it serves to remind us that, not only was our Lord faithful in the fulfilment of His promise to send us His Holy Spirit to help us live as we ought to live if we are to be true followers of His, but also because Pentecost serves to remind us that our Lord Jesus reigns as King at the right hand of God the Father. If the Holy Spirit was never poured out upon us as promised, we would have been left wondering whether or not Jesus ever made it to the throne. So the recollection of the coming of the Holy Spirit is a wonderful exercise as it strengthens our faith and encourages us to live lives appropriate for those who are sons and daughters of the King.

But Pentecost also serves to remind us of a time when the Presence of the Holy Spirit with every single believer was but a hope for the future...a dream unfulfilled...a vision not yet realised...a prayer still spoken but not answered...a longing...a yearning...a sigh. We see this in many places in the Old Testament especially in the writings of the Exilic Prophets...those who spoke to encourage God's people who collectively pined for an end to their trials and a return to their land...a time when their enemies would be scattered and their God would vindicate them and exalt them to their rightful position as vice-regents over His creation. The Prophet Joel described

this as a time during which the way things used to be would change dramatically...those authorities who ruled over the world, represented in prophetic language as celestial bodies such as the sun and moon, would be defeated as the saints of God, even the very least of them, were filled with the Spirit of the Omnipotent God of the Universe, and thus adopted into the Divine Royal Family as co-heirs of His Kingdom and thus co-rulers with Him. But for Joel, Ezekiel, Daniel and others this victory was yet a prayer spoken on the wind...a prayer they only saw answered in their visions.

For us, of course, the positive Divine reply to their many prayers is evidenced in what happened on the Day of Pentecost. All who called on the name of the Lord were and are indeed saved as the promised power from on high filled and continues to fill each and every member of the Church with the courage and the conviction to witness to the truth concerning Jesus the King. As all authority is His, both in Heaven and on Earth, those who believe in Him have a Divine mandate to proclaim His victory over that which once ruled the world, namely sin, satan and death.

But today, as we are examining objective number 5 of our Mission Statement regarding our commitment to a liturgical form of worship, I would like to focus, not on the fulfilment of the collective prayers of God's Old Testament people, but rather on the nature of the collective prayers themselves. In the first verse of our Epistle lesson for today, we read that "when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place". In chapter one verse 14 we are told what they, no doubt, were doing at that time, and I quote: "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers", in other words, the whole Church at that time. Later, at the end of the second chapter of Acts, we read that those who were added to the church all

“continued steadfastly in the Apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.” Now, what are these prayers St. Luke spoke about, prayers spoken by all gathered together with one accord, both before and after Pentecost? It seems important to me that we understand the answer to this question as the Divine response to at least the first half of these prayers was that which we celebrate today, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh.

Now, the Prayer Book as we know it first made its appearance in the English Church in 1549. But this was most certainly not the first Prayer Book. When Pope Gregory I sent Augustine as a missionary to Britain in the year of our Lord 596, he and his fellow monks found a fully functional church with a valid ministry and valid services using a valid Prayer Book, which only serves to show that the use of Liturgical Books were commonplace throughout the Church from the earliest times on. But besides this fact, even before the First Advent of our Lord, worshippers worshiped corporately, praying, as it were, with one accord the ancient prayers of God’s people. This is what the Psalms and other written prayers in the Old Testament are all about. Indeed, the corporate nature of worship in the Old Testament can be seen in the ceremonial and ritualistic detail surrounding the singular manner of approaching God for everyone...every believer had to do the exact same things if their prayers were to be acceptable to God. For instance, Cain’s sacrifice was not accepted whereas Abel’s was and the sons of Aaron incurred God’s wrath when they offered incense incorrectly (or profane fire, as some translations have it). There were also specific blessings to be invoked upon God’s people such as the Shema Yisrael (Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!) and the Priestly Blessing found in Numbers 6 where God instructed Aaron and his sons to bless Israel with these specific words: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be

gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.”

After the destruction of the Temple, the one gathering place for corporate prayer in the Old Testament, many of these blessings and prayers formed part of what became known as the Siddur, a Jewish Prayer Book.

Now, in this light, it is important for us to remember that the Early Church was primarily a Jewish Church, although Gentiles began flocking in soon after Pentecost. However, most of these Gentiles had at one time been what was known as ‘god-fearers’ and had, most probably, been exposed to the liturgical worship performed in synagogues on the Sabbath throughout the known world at that time. So, it would seem only natural for them to continue the traditional manner of worship, not so? And this seems to be precisely what happened...Morning and Evening Prayer replaced the Morning and Evening Sacrifices, and the Eucharist service (or the breaking of the bread) patterned itself on the Jewish Feast of the Passover, and so on and so forth. Indeed, the Prayer Books of the Church down throughout the ages are all able, in one way or another, to trace their origin back to the Prayer Books used by the Apostles themselves. Of course, language and structure and positioning of certain prayers have been altered to suit the different needs of different people who would use the books, but essential the Prayers and services have remained the same, granting us the unique honour of repeating words and statements spoken by the Church since its inception.

The reasons for corporate, liturgical prayer are manifold, but one good reason is to ensure sound doctrine. In the Old Testament, when Jeroboam wanted to make sure that the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who broke away from their brethren in the Southern Kingdom of Judah would forsake the habit of worshipping at the Temple in Jerusalem, what did he do? He set up rival places of worship with a new

set of priests and a ritual that looked oh so like the original, but for a few minor changes here and there. Other than the glaringly obvious deviation in the construction of the golden calves, most of these differences were small, but very, very effective. Within a few generations the whole nation was so corrupt that the people were serving all sorts of gods along with what they thought was the god of Israel. Does this sound familiar? Well, it should! Any change in the Prayer Book ultimately results in a change in the way in which we approach God.

Let me hasten to add here that this does not mean that the Prayer Book can never be revised or revisited. No, our own Prayer Book is a revision of the 1662. However, the fact that the Prayer Book has been adapted over time to suit different audiences and to better reflect changes in the use of certain words or expressions, shows that revision is not only permissible, but advisable, because if the meaning of a word or an idiom has changed (such as the word 'prevent' which originally meant 'to go before') it can and will cause confusion and misunderstanding. Be that as it may, due to the fact that the Book of Common Prayer is largely made up of either direct quotation or, at least, allusions to the unchanging written Word of God, changes in meaning or doctrine or purpose ought not to be permitted as to change this would change the faith of those who use the liturgy in worship. So, I am all for Prayer Book revision if such a revision is limited to updating language and idiom...but nothing else.

Now, we here at St. George's have committed ourselves to a form of corporate worship that is both ancient and modern in that the Word it uses so extensively in the services is a Word that is new for each successive generation. It ought not to become a hindrance to our freedom in worship any less than the reading of God's Word should become a chore or a bore in our repeated reading of it. But, just as we read God's Word through the power of the poured out and indwelling Holy Spirit, so too

we should engage ourselves to pray the liturgy with His help and illuminating Presence. Nothing said or done by the Church ought ever to become rote or empty repetition. What we say in the services here are words taken from Scripture and therefore we ought never to say them lightly or flippantly, but always reverently as it is, for the most part, the inspired Word of the Spirit we form on our tongues and utter with our lips.

So, dearest beloved brethren, as we come to participate in the Word made Flesh, let us remember our commitment to our historical, traditional and biblical liturgy as our particular form of worship, remembering that as we repeat these ancient words, we are not only praying together in one accord here, but we are also praying with one accord with the Church throughout the Ages which used these same structures in their worship of our common Lord. And as we partake of the Word Who unites us all into one holy spiritual union, let us covenant to never break that bond by ensuring that we remain true to the Word once given to and received by the Church, and the words so carefully and prayerfully put together in a form through which we might utter in our worship, not our own shaky opinions, but rather, as it were, the very oracles of God.