



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Whitsunday or Pentecost
Sunday June 8, 2014

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans.

“if thine enemy hunger, feed him, if he thirst give him drink, for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Romans 12:20-21

Love my enemies. Do good to them, even when they do me evil. Somehow, that doesn't seem like practical advice. How is that going to start a fire on the heads of the people that hurt me.

The only way we can make sense of this is if we understand what kind of fire we're dishing out. The fire that heaps upon the heads of our enemies, when we return good for their evil, is the fire of the Holy Ghost, the grace of God that sustains us through our harms in this world, and reflects the love that God reserves for us, back into this broken and sinful place. The flame we send is The Holy Spirit, acting through us to convert the rest of the world to the saving power of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

“there appeared unto them cloven tongues, like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.” (Acts 2:2) Last week, when Father Guy preached on the Ascension, he reminded us how badly the Apostles misunderstood his message. Even as Jesus was being transported

back to heaven, they were still asking Him if the time has come, if the Revolution would start, if they would finally be elevated into the seats of power that would result in overcoming the Roman Empire.

It is only in the light of the fiery tongues of Pentecost that the Apostles finally understand the message Jesus had been teaching for more than three years. There was no military campaign. There was no Avenging angel unleashed. There was no elevation to earthly glory for those closest to Jesus.

There would be prayer. There would be service. There would be the humility. There would be the emulation of Jesus in the greatest sacrifice possible, when they would surrender their lives as prisoners, exiles and ultimately as martyrs. As they gave their lives for Christ, they too would forgive and bless those who murdered them. They would heap the fire of the Holy Ghost upon the heads of their enemies. It would be that fire of love and kindness that would bring the Kingdom of Jesus, the rise of Christianity throughout the world. First they would inspire their own followers, like Blessed Stephen, for whom we are named. Remember that he too, as he gave his life, forgave the men that stoned him. That encounter with St. Stephen set in motion the events that led to St. Paul's conversion. Finally the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome, the heaping of the fire of love and forgiveness on their enemies, led to the

conversion of Rome, and the spread of the Gospel through the known world. Christianity finally did overcome Rome, not in military insurrection, but in the example of love and sacrifice. The Apostles' victory came only after they were seated with Jesus in heavenly thrones, not in the earthly thrones they sought. True Victory is the heaping of understanding, love and forgiveness upon the enemies that opposed them, and it happened in God's time, not their own.

The flame of Pentecost is also described as the refiners fire. The refining process takes contaminated ore, filled with impurities, and separates everything that is not valuable and precious from what is common and worthless. In our lives, the flame of the refiner's fire, the purifying process for our lives, is called sanctification. Sanctification is our inheritance of the Pentecostal gift to the Apostles.

If we are honest, we have to admit that we want our faith to lead us to victory in our lives and dominion over our enemies. Like the Apostles before Pentecost, we believe that following Jesus will lead to relief of our pains and to celebration our triumphs, but in fact, there is very little sanctification in our victories. The procession through the palms to the Temple ended at the throne of the Cross. The victories we celebrate are only temporary, and our lives ultimately lead us to confrontation with hurtfulness, loneliness, illness and death. Our sanctification, the elimination of pride, selfishness and temptation from our characters, is accomplished in the trials we face. We are refined when we give charitably when we have little, when we forgive the hurts of others, and dare to ask forgiveness for the hurts we inflict. We are refined when we face sickness and death, understanding that they can only be defeated through transcendence to a different and enduring life. We are refined when we meet hatred with love.

The flame of Pentecost still burns brightly in the legacy of the Apostles. Through them we have both Scripture and Sacrament,

the means by which the love of Jesus, the understanding of His teachings, His very life, which transforms our lives from metal corrupted with sin, to the pure gold of Christian love. The flame of Pentecost ignites our own lives through the sacrament of Confirmation. The Bishop is the spiritual descendent of the Apostles, linked the particular anointing that has been passed from Apostle to Bishop, and ultimately, to our own Bishop through ordination. The mitre that the Bishop wears is the symbol of the flame of Pentecost, which sanctifies and inspired the Apostles on Pentecost. The mitre is the outward symbol of the grace of the Holy Spirit to invest and transform our own lives, to be the means of our sanctification.

When Rome fell to the successors of the Apostles by its conversion, the first great battle of the Cross, was won. The heaping of flames of forgiveness and love on the enemies of the martyrs of the early church led the way to the proclamation of the Word to the world. But the war is not over. We inherit the battle against sin, death and the devil. We inherit the responsibility to live lives that imitate Christ and proclaim his sovereignty. As we are sanctified, as we forgive and love those who harm us, often those closest to us, our families and parishes, we continue the battle to convert our world. As the common elements of sin and pride are refined from our lives, we inspire those who are trapped in the futility and despair of this world. We open the vision of heaven to those who are trapped by the fear of death. Like the Apostles, we may not see the ultimate victory from earthly pedestals, but as surely as Rome was converted, the sacrifices we make will convert the profane and hateful character of our time, which will lead to the ultimate and final victory, the transformation of this world to the Kingdom of God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.