

- The day of Pentecost or mid Sunday as some church calendars had it is something of a stepchild among the great festival days of the church here. As religious festivals go, Christmas and Easter far outshine the celebration of this day. Traditionally at Pentecost, the church commemorated the descent of God in the form and mode of the Holy Spirit as the active in inspiratory power in the life, faith of the first Christians, and this event would seem to be of such magnitude that it was constitutive in the history of the church. But the church in our time gives only peripheral attention to the recollection of this event. Pentecost, it's one of those Sundays which seem to sneak up on us unawares, and here it is again. If you read the sermon titles listed in the newspapers yesterday, you will find that a surprisingly large number of preachers, as far as one can tell from the listing of their sermon titles have other things in mind for this morning. You may ask your roommate tomorrow morning what Pentecost is all about, and you'll find in his face, an illustration to the second verse in the Bible, the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of it. I must say that I have wondered a little why we seem to have lost the touch for this day. Is it perhaps because the whole event as recorded in the book of Acts is made up of such odd material that we don't quite how to handle it? Or is it perhaps because we have all run into those religious fanatics who would want to make every outward feature of that day normative for every day, and at all times. And in rejecting them, we put aside the whole event? Is it perhaps because the holy spirit, the third person in the Trinity is the least real and most enigmatic of all the manifestations of God in our book? Or is it perhaps simply because we do not understand what it is to be a Christian at all? I recognize that that last question deals and illegitimately low blow to us particularly if we put our belts around our necks and outlaw any punches to the heart, but it is itself a fully legitimate question. It's prompted for me by a renewed study of the New Testament and the solid conviction that has dawned on me as a result of it, that it was at Pentecost that the Christian faith finally came into full flame in the life of these first Christians. It was at Pentecost, not by the River Jordan, not by the mountain side, not by the lake shore, not even at the cross. No, not even at the open tomb, but at Pentecost that their relationship to Christ became truly faithful, truly religious, if you will. Up to that point, they had simply been wavering and floundering about, oscillating between insight and blindness, shifting from doubt to dedication, from faith back to frustration again. But here at Pentecost, all that was changed. From now on, they knew who He was in relation to them and who they were in relation to Him. They had really only been observers before. Now, they were true participants. I'm anxious to understand what happened to these people. I mean, what really took place behind the odd symbolism of the story, the sound like the rush of a mighty wind or tongues of fire and all the rest of it? Perhaps if we understood that, the meaning of this religious festival would be a little clearer to us. And perhaps if we understood the message of this day a little better, we might be able to grasp the nature and meaning of our Christian faith a little firmer. And in our time, that is sorely needed. Now in order to get at the meaning of Pentecost, I propose that we go not to the story of it in the book of Acts, but to a piece of theological reflection published by Saint Paul in the second letter to the Corinthians. I'm reading from chapter 5:14-17, he says "The love of Christ controls us because we are convinced that one has died for all. Therefore, all have died and He died for all that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for Him, who for their sake, died and was raised. From now on therefore we regard no one from a human point of view, even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new

creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come." "From now on," he says, "The new has come." What is this old that he's talking about? And what is the new he's speaking of? And what is that now of transition? Well, Paul gives clear directions towards finding the answers. The old is obviously the human point of view, the worldly way of looking at things, what as he expresses it, looking at things Kata Sarka or according to the flesh, he indicates that even Christ can be considered from that perspective. That is simply historically, factually, common-sensically, there is facticity in his life. Paul is in no doubt, whatever about that, the human existence of Jesus can be ascertain. Historically, the historical Jesus was not in Paul's mind, a fluffy myth. He was a real man, solid flesh, red blood. But to say that is not really very significant for Paul, particularly not after Jesus' death. If the factual description of His historicity was all that one can talk about. Then once reason for talking has now actually passed away, one's relationship to this person has been brutally broken. And it is because of that, that the new point of view must be found. From now on, says Paul, we regard no one from a human point of view. What then is the new perspective? Paul indicates that it has to do with an inward or existential awareness of an identification between us and Him, a relationship of mutual love and self-giving. It's obviously a responsive or an interpretive standpoint, a commitment to a spiritual view of things to looking at life particularly the life of Christ according to the spirit, it takes the historical facts even the most drastic fact of all is cruel death on the cross. And it sees it as symbolic of religious meaning, the cross is no longer a frightful sign of tragedy and obliteration. It is now even the lovely symbol of Christ's (indistinct) self-giving for us on our behalf, for our redemption. And it is in this new way of seeing things that Paul could look the ugly fact straight in the eye and say, He died for me and such love and sacrifice demands my life, my soul, my all. That was the new which had come to place the old. The new way of looking at things and a new life to go with it. But how did he find it? What was that now that set a limit to the old and marked the transition to the new? Paul calls it a conviction. I am convinced, but he might as well have called it conversion had he only remember to tell us what the Greek word for conversion really means, metanoia is the word. And it means to have a new mind. What happened actually was that some little switch in his mind snapped over from the outward observation of worldly facts, to an inward interpretation of their spiritual meaning. It was not that the old was forgotten, it was more that it had been superseded by a new dimension much as if you switch from common recordings to stereo, the gospel had now become internalized in Him, inspired in Him. And from that moment, everything was new. Now, if that was Paul's experience, I would propose that it is in essence the experience of the first in community also at Pentecost they had finally here reach their decisive now, the moment of their metanoia, when their mind was changed. And after that, nothing was ever the same again, the old had passed away. The new had come, the gospel of Christ had found full response in their own conviction. The spirit of it filled them now with new meaning. If you look a little closer, at the largest cycle of the experience of these early Christians, you can fairly easily uncover the clearer features of their old and their new life. And that moment of transition between them, the story of the disciples as we have it in the New Testament, of course, is written in retrospect from the point of view of Pentecost it is looking back over their former experience from the standpoint of their new, and this has quite naturally influenced these sources to a certain degree. We do not in the New Testament have straight recordings of historical events, which simply describe the external actual objective happenings. These stories mix together, fact and faith, interpreting facts faithfully, expressing faith factually, but in view of this, it is so much the more surprising to find that not in any one of these stories in the New Testament is any attempt made at all to glorify the picture of the disciples or to (indistinct) the impression they leave of confusion and blundering on practically every page. One wonders

why, could it be that these writers writing in retrospect from the vantage point of Pentecost, did not for a moment want to give the impression that the Christian faith and the Christian life is simply a matter of hearing Jesus' words, joining the disciples circle, receiving the religious instruction, observing His life and death and affirming His resurrection. Well, that's how it really looks. Even from the first day of their call to discipleship. When Christ said to them, follow me and I will make you fishers of men. We recognize that if these men were going to be anything at all, it was He who would have to make them and all along the line, as the story proceeds we are held in suspense to see if He really would make it. There was first a period of initial instruction when they were given a beginner's understanding of the kingdom and the first awareness of the needs around them. And with that bifocal orientation, they were sent out to face the world on His behalf. Now, they came back with great enthusiasm. They'd seen some marvelous things happening out there and now they thought they were ready for the big league. So Jesus instruction took on a new dimension. His parables were no longer the simple analogies of nature, transparent at the first glance. His teaching now took on depth and developed the cutting edge. When they heard it, they worried and they went to Him and they said, did you know that you offended the Pharisees just now? And Jesus turned around and said, so what? They are blind guides. And if a blind man leads a blind, both will fall into the ditch. Well, how are we to understand a statement like that? They say, or something to that effect. And Jesus looked them in the face and said, are you still without understanding? And there were others such disappointing moments for the teacher. Jesus found them with a sick boy, standing around not knowing what to do. And He looked at them and He said, how faithless and perverse you are? How long am I gonna have to be with you? Perverse is right. They began to discuss among themselves who it was that was to be the greatest in the kingdom. And He said to them, don't you know that unless you turn up about and become like a little child, you won't even enter the kingdom at all? They pushed the children aside when their mothers desired His blessing and He snapped, don't you see, these are the ones to whom the kingdom belongs. They were plainly astonished when He turned a rich, young ruler away, sorry. And they were equally surprised when He didn't desire to crush His opponents. Now, there was one bright moment of revelation. Peter, as you remember in response to Jesus direct question did manage to utter the grand confession thou art the Christ, the son of the living God, but when Jesus took the lead from it and began to tell them what now was to take place since they had reached that level of understanding, Peter fell flat on his face again. Could not understand why the tragedy of His suffering and death could not be avoided. It was like that it seems all the time. As Jesus said to Peter, Peter, you are on the side of man and not of God. So when Jesus died, they all seemed to be finished also, "We had hoped He was the one to redeem Israel, they said, commiserating together." As they walked on the road about what had happened. And still in the story, He comes back in His old role as a frustrated teacher and says to them, "Oh, you foolish, men, how slow you are to believe." How did they ever find the nuke when they were so solidly stuck the old all the time? Well, there are some pointers that keep reoccurring. We heard some of them read to us earlier in the service. They're actually promises of something more, something dramatic that was to take place. Something essential that was to happen to them. I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. I did not say these things from the beginning because I was with you, but now I'm going. It is to your advantage that I go away. But if I do not go away, the counselor will not come to you. The counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name. He we'll teach you all things and bring to your remembrance what I have said to you, He will glorify me or He will take off all His mind and declare to you. I'll say that these are pointers to something more. They're actually direct pointers toward Pentecost.

"Behold, I send the promise of my father upon you." He said, "But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high. And I will pray the Father. And He will give you another counselor to be with you forever. Even the spirit of truth." And as Acts opens the record, it is said He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father as he had said before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit. You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses. These were the promises of the New and Pentecost was the answer. The fulfillment, that is obvious from what took place. And I'm not thinking now of the odd phenomenon of speaking in tongues, much more significant by far is a dramatic change which occurred in them, in their faith. Look at Peter, for example, the very same man who had taken Jesus' side at Caesar Philippi and suggested that there must be a way by which suffering and death could be avoided. Now, he stands before the people and pronounces openly, this Jesus delivered up according to the foreknowledge of God, whom you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, being therefore exalted at the right hand of God has poured out this, which you now see and here. Let all the House of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made Him both Lord and Christ. This Jesus who you crucify. What had happened was nothing less than a radical transformation. At this point, Peter at last understood the gospel. The meaning of it all had finally dawned on him. At this point for the first time, all that he had heard and seen in this sojourn with Jesus fell into place and made sense. Before that moment, the gospel had simply been Jesus teaching. And now it became Peter's own conviction. Before that moment, Peter had been scared of the ugly event of Jesus' death. Now it was a center of his triumphant faith. Before he had looked at everything from a human point of view. Now, he was on the side of God and he saw something new. We see then that it was only in the moment when the historical and factual perspective on things was superseded by the personal conviction of spiritual meaning, that the faith of the first Christian believers reached its true character. That was when their religion became religious. When the Jesus they had known before in the flesh came near to them in a new way, in a more significant kind of presence, in the spirit, filling their life existentially. Now finally, if this understanding of Pentecost points to the true nature of the Christian faith and life, what are the consequences for our understanding of our life and faith now in 1966? What is it to be a Christian now? Is it to be a follower of Jesus? Walking in His footsteps as we so often hear? Is it to know his teaching or to join in the company of his friends or to imitate to the best of our ability those things which He exemplified in life? Yes, we may say it is that, but it is much more than that. What is it then? Is it to know more of His teachings or to be more active as participant in the life and work of the church? Or to go further in the imitation of Jesus suffering and death? It might, we may say, but the more that we are talking about is not simply a matter of quantity, it's a matter of quality. It's the result of a transformation of the inner man, not just an extension of our outward reach. It is actually a moment of conversion, of metanoia, of the transformation of one's mind, of one's point of view. It is to have the mind of Christ. It is to be in Him, in His love or as the Pentecost story expresses it to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I'm sure that you can sense the struggle I've had to break open the secret of this transformation, this now in relation to which everything that goes before is old and everything which follows is new. I must struggle with it because I do want to understand what it is that makes our religion truly religious. It's an old struggle. Luther worried about it before he had his marvelous power experience. Wesley brooded over it before his heart was strangely won. And I can see the church still struggling with it also. Every one of us each in his own way, we do not really find spiritual satisfaction in the outward observation of a ritual of worship. We do not in the final analysis find personal fulfillment simply in performing certain duties we have responsibly. We do not when all is told, find ultimate meaning in the

theoretical understanding of some Christian teachings or do we? Has our religion simply become synonymous with these things, with liturgical and ecclesiastic activity? With ethical obedience and social righteousness or with intellectual arguments about theological theories, is that perhaps the reason why we are so upset when someone suggests that the institutional church is a hindrance to true religion and should be given up in favor of a total Christian involvement in the world? Is that the background for our shock? When someone proposes that a legalistic conformity to moral rules and regulation is actually immoral and should be replaced by personal ethical decision in every kind of relationship. Is that also why we arise with indignation when someone indicates that our theoretical ideas about God are idolatrous and unchristian and should be blown to bits and pieces to make room for the true agnosticism of Christian confession? Is it perhaps that our religion is still old, still simply human, not new, not inspired. Is it for chance that we have not yet reached the moment when we are convicted within and convinced without? When our worship is worship in spirit and truth. When our ethics is the ethics of free responsibility. When our theology is a glad confession of faithful reflection. Here is perhaps the core of our problem, is our forgetfulness of Pentecost simply a sign that we have stopped short in our religious quest of a full faith? In that case, I have a word to say, a pointer toward Pentecost, for on our side of Pentecost, Jesus the Christ is still standing as He stood with His disciples before us and He lifts His hands on us. He breathes our way and He says, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit." Come Holy Spirit, heavenly love with all thy quickening powers, kindle a flame of sacred love in these whole hearts of ours, look how we gravel here below, fond of these earthly toys, our souls how heavily they go to reach internal joys, come Holy Spirit, heavenly love with all thy quickening powers, come shed a broader saviors love, and that shall kindle ours. And now unto Him, who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us and to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end.