

The Kingdom of the Holy Spirit

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We begin the Divine Liturgy with the words, “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and *of the Holy Spirit, ...*”. The kingdom of God is Trinitarian, and at Pentecost—on the Feast of the Descent of the Holy Spirit—we are invited to focus our attention on the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the kingdom.

In the Gospels we read that St. John the Forerunner came preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of God *is near* (Mt 3:2). Jesus followed soon thereafter not, as we might have anticipated, presenting himself as the fulfillment of St. John’s words but rather preaching the same message, “Repent, for the kingdom of God *is near*” (Mt 4:17). During his earthly ministry, Jesus offers a wide variety of parables explaining what the kingdom is like and teaching us how to enter it. But when he sends out the disciples to preach, he tells them to preach the same message, “Repent, for the kingdom of God *is near*” (Mt 10:7).

The kingdom of God remains *near but not present* throughout the Gospels, including after the resurrection, until the disciples, who have become apostles (sent ones), are proclaiming the good news in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:9). They do *not* preach that the kingdom is near, but they preach the kingdom *as a present reality* (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25). The Book of Acts closes with St. Paul in Rome under house arrest “declaring the kingdom of God” first to the Jews (28:23), and then to the Gentiles, which is described in this way:

He lived there [under house arrest in Rome] two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, *proclaiming the kingdom of God* and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (28:30-31)

How did the followers of Christ move from *anticipating* the kingdom to *living* the kingdom? The transition from the kingdom *being near* to the kingdom *being present* begins in the first chapter of Acts. There we read that Jesus “after his suffering, presented himself alive to [the apostles] by

many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and *speaking about the kingdom of God*” (1:3). St. Luke then informs us that the content of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom was that the disciples would be *baptized by the Holy Spirit* (1:5). They completely ignore Jesus’ instruction and ask instead—with their final words before he ascends—“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (1:6). Jesus responds to their confused inquiry with a reminder of the promise and power of the Holy Spirit: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (1:8). It is as if they are speaking at cross-purposes; when the disciples are talking about the kingdom, Jesus is speaking about the Holy Spirit. How are we to understand this impasse? How does it get resolved?

In spite of Jesus’ teaching throughout the Gospels and for forty days after his resurrection, the disciples stubbornly think of the kingdom in *external terms*—as an earthly reign where the lion lies down with the lamb (Is 11:6), where the child plays by the hole of the asp (Is 11:8), where swords are hammered into plowshares (Is 2:4), and—maybe most importantly—where Israel is not living under the Roman occupying force. The Old Testament articulates this vision of a just and harmonious world, and this is what all Israel, indeed, all humans, yearn for. We want things to be set right in the world around us, where sorrow and suffering are replaced with joy and health. It seems, however, that the intense longing for *the world* to be set right is precisely what blinds us from our Lord’s offer to set *us* right.

The tension between Jesus associating the kingdom with the Holy Spirit and the disciples associating it with world peace and justice is resolved when the Spirit is poured out upon the disciples in the form of fiery tongues (Acts 2:1-4). The scales fall from their eyes, and their lives are transformed. The kingdom lived and proclaimed by the apostles *as a present reality* lacks the slightest hint of it having anything to do with the restoration of Israel, with which they were so concerned on the day of the ascension, or with anything external. Nowhere, on any occasion, do the apostles direct their preaching toward the transformation of the world outside ourselves, but instead they preach an *internal* transformation—a transformation that they identify with the kingdom that Jesus was teaching: “the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk 17:21).

Throughout his letters, St. Paul emphasizes the living and present reality of the inner kingdom brought about and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. To the Romans and the Galatians he explains that “*the kingdom of God* is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy *in the Holy Spirit*” (Rom 14:17). Righteousness, peace and joy are *character qualities*, internal realities that withstand the onslaught of external trials, inconveniences, sufferings, and ultimately even death. They are the fruit of the Spirit—the fruit *produced in us by the Holy Spirit*: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). St. Paul goes on to say, “Against such things there is no law” (Gal 5:23). His point is quite simple: even the coercive powers of the state cannot take the fruit of the Spirit away from us. This is a power, a force, that the world knows nothing of. The world cannot give it, and the world cannot take it away.

To the Corinthians, St. Paul says, “For the kingdom of God is not in word but *in power*” (1 Corinthians 4:20). Talk is easy but it doesn’t hold up under life’s pressures and trials. The power St. Paul has in mind is one that enables us to live sexually controlled lives, with freedom from destructive and judgmental relationships with those outside the Church, and at peace with those within the Church (1 Cor 5-6), all because “[our] body is *a temple of the Holy Spirit* within [us]” (1 Cor 6:19). In short, the personalized power of the Holy Spirit frees us from being controlled by our self-destructive passions—not by self-reliance, but by the indwelling of God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

There is for us, every bit as much as there was for the disciples, a tendency to look outside ourselves for the source of our troubles, and for the solution to them. Jesus warned us about this: “They will say to you, ‘Look, there!’ or ‘Look, here!’ Do not go out or follow them” (Lk 17:23). Hoping to have our inner lives flourish by having our external circumstances change is the fundamental lie of Satan. It is the ultimate expression of not taking responsibility for our inner life, our character. Don’t go looking outside yourself for the kingdom, Jesus told his followers, but instead look inside; that is where we will find the kingdom, planted there as a potent seed by the Holy Spirit.

This power of the kingdom of God that St. Paul is preaching is the same power which Christ practiced and preached:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:25-28)

Worldly coercive power is to be supplanted by self-sacrificial service. Followers of Christ, empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, experience and exhibit greatness as self-offering and self-emptying love toward others. For “the love of God has been poured into our hearts *through the Holy Spirit* who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5), and “*the law of the Spirit of life* has set [us] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2). With this freedom to love, we have died to the isolation of self-interest and have been raised to the Trinitarian communal life embedded not only in our hearts individually but so also in our ecclesial communal life where we are “being equipped *for the work of service* for the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:12-13). In this way, the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in glorifying Christ, making him known to an ailing world, just as he said was to happen (Jn 16:14). The kingdom of the Spirit is the kingdom of the Son.

”The law of the Spirit of life” is “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor 3:3). The letter that kills by a burdensome legalism and a coercive judgmentalism has been overthrown by the Spirit who gives life (2 Cor 3:6). Even as the Holy Spirit conceived the eternal Word of God in the womb of Mary (Mt 1:18, 20; Lk 1:35), so too the Spirit of Life conceives the very same Son of God within us (Jn3:5,8; *cf.* Mt 3:11; Mk 1:8; Lk3:16; Acts 8:15-18). The kingdom of God is within us because the King has been born in the odorous manger of our hearts, making us sons of the Most High in virtue of our spiritual birth. “And because [we] are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘*Abba! Father!*’”(Gal 4:6). The kingdom of the Spirit is the kingdom of the Son is the

kingdom of the Father. The kingdom of God manifest in our hearts is a Trinitarian kingdom. It is the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer that we would be united to the Holy Trinity and partakers of divine love (Jn 17:20-26).

Receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, then, is nothing less than the establishment of an *inner* kingdom, where Christ the King himself reigns, and where we come to experience ourselves as children of the Father. The apostles are not preaching that the lion will lie down with the lamb but that our inner roaring lion of anger will be tamed by the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. They are not preaching that the child will play by the hole of the asp, but that the self-deception of our inner serpent will be enlightened by child-like humility. They are not preaching that swords will be repurposed as plowshares, but that our aggressive compulsion for dominance over others will be reforged into the cultivation of fertile soil in our hearts.

The Spirit-infused inner freedom from the bondage of our passions is precisely what allows the kingdom in our hearts not to be isolated, severed from communal life, but rather to be the passageway into the self-emptying love that unites us with one another, which is most beautifully expressed in the Divine Liturgy. And entrance into the Divine Liturgy *as kingdom* isn't simply made by passing through the doors from the narthex into the nave, but rather by each and every participant entering through the inner kingdom within their hearts into the blessed communion with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, where we are all united with one another with the inseparable bond of divine love.