

John 20:19-23

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ (Jesus) said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Context

This Johannine account of the appearance of Jesus follows upon the heels of the events that took place at the tomb in the early morning of the first day of the week (John 20:1–18). There near the empty tomb of Jesus, the risen Savior first appeared to Mary Magdalene. Our gospel contains the second and third appearances of the risen Jesus. These three appearances take place in Jerusalem. There is a fourth and final appearance of Jesus later in a section referred to as the “Epilogue” of John. This appearance is at the “Sea of Tiberias” in Galilee (John 21).

The people involved in the Johannine scene in the garden (20:1-18), despite the testimony of Mary Magdalene, are locked in a room *for fear of the Jews* (v.19). The proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection has not dispelled the fear. The “we” and “they” of v.2 are still active forces in the account. The disciples (we) have not overcome the fear that the Jewish leadership (they) have created throughout the Passion.

Pentecost

The Greek name (*pentēkostē*) for the Jewish Feast of Weeks, deriving from its occurrence 50 days after Passover (Acts 20:16; 1 Cor 16:8). Because the early Christians received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on this day, the term is now more commonly used to refer to that event recounted in Acts 2:1–13.

The Feast of Weeks was the second of the three great Jewish feasts. Its name signified that it concluded the period of seven weeks which began with the presentation of the first sheaf of the barley harvest during the Passover celebration (Lev 23:15–16; Deut 16:9). Thus it was originally an agricultural feast marking the end of the grain harvest and was celebrated during the month of Sivan (May/June). Both Josephus (*Ant* 3.10.6 §252; *JW* 1.13.3 §253) and Jewish intertestamental writings (Tob 2:1; 2 Macc 12:31–32) refer to the feast as Pentecost. [AYBD 5:222-23]

Luke’s Account – John’s Account

The first reading for Pentecost Sunday is the account from Acts 2 so familiar to every Christian. Luke’s account is a very public event compared to the very private Johannine account. Why the difference? Some scholars defend the basic historicity of the entire Lucan narrative; others conclude that it is essentially Luke’s theological attempt to explain the coming of the Spirit, not an historical account of actual events. Some, holding to the historicity of the Lucan account in Acts 2 hold that John’s account is symbolic only. The Second Council of Constantinople (AD 533) condemned the view of Theodore of Mopsuestia that Jesus did not really give the Spirit on that Easter evening but acted only figuratively and by way of promise. Some, like John Chrysostom, held that the giving of the purpose was for one particular gift or another; others have said that Easter’s coming of the Spirit is personal while Pentecost is ecclesial or missionary. And another set of scholars posit a narrower coming of the Spirit targeting special gifts intended for specific ministry (e.g., the forgiveness) versus a more general coming of the Spirit as a blessing and empowerment for the larger Johannine ministry of discipleship: love and holding to the commandments of Jesus. Some simply conjecture that since John is not overly concerned about date/setting but rather the theological implications, that the Johannine account is the same event – John has simply re-located the events.

The Roman Catholic view coincides with its theological sense of “both-and”. In a sense the very order of the Readings for Pentecost Sunday (Year A) outlines the sense of “both-and” as follows:

- Acts 2:1-11: the general coming of the Spirit
- 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13: the variety of gifts given – personal, ecclesial, missionary and more

³ Therefore, I tell you that nobody speaking by the spirit of God says, “Jesus be accursed.” And no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the holy Spirit. ⁴ There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; ⁵ there are different forms of service but the same Lord; ⁶ there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; ¹⁰ to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.

- John 20:19-23: the gifts given for specific ministry, e.g., continuation of the priesthood of Jesus is those that the community raises up for that particular ministry – in this case, the Catholic tradition sees the Sacrament of Reconciliation given to particular ministers to celebrate in the name of the community

²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the holy Spirit. ²³ Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Commentary

The Johannine account of the first post-resurrection appearance to the gathered disciples is linked to the events of the Resurrection by the simple expression “*that first day*.” As the startling and disturbing events of the last three days had unfolded the community’s overriding response was fear. They had gathered, but had locked themselves away out of fear of what persecutions the religious authorities might bring against them. It is into this complex of uncertainty, perhaps doubt and hesitation, that Jesus appears

The Peace of Christ

“*Peace be with you*” is in some way a conventional greeting (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:3; Gal 1:3) used by St Paul in his letters as a reflection of a standard option for the opening of a Greek letter. But here the greeting has an additional purpose – Jesus is fulfilling a promise from his Farewell Discourse: his gift of peace (John 14:27). The peace is given to a community who will experience the world’s opposition always and its persecution often. The gift of peace is an explicit reminder that their way in the world will be graced with the enduring promise of Christ.

The biblical idea of “peace” is complex, but simply but, peace is not simply the absence of war or hostilities. Peace is a positive notion in the biblical sense and has meaning of its own. At its root, the biblical idea of “peace” stems from the Hebrew *šālôm* which means to be hale, whole and complete [AYBD 5:2-6]. The Greek word *eirene* (peace) appears in almost every writing of the NT. It describes an a relationship of goodwill between God and humans.

The Fourth Gospel affirms that peace is intimately related to Jesus himself. It is a gift related to the commission to forgive sins (20:19, 21, 26) and go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, but also before his death he promises them: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid”* (14:27). The difference between the world’s peace and that of Jesus is not explained, but it has to do with John’s notion of the world (*kosmos*). *“In the world you will have trouble. But take courage! I have conquered the world”* (16:33). In Christ peace is available to them. The difference must not be drawn along philosophical lines, as if the peace of Christ “has nothing to do with the absence of warfare nor ... with an end to psychological tension, nor with a sentimental feeling of well-being” (Brown, 653). Caesar’s peace enforced by violence is not the same as the peace of Christ which derives from his victory over evil through the absorption of suffering. The two are dramatically different ways of bringing peace.

Prior to his death, Jesus told his disciples they would all be scattered and abandon him (16:32). Jesus was alone before the high priest and eventually before Pilate as he was condemned to death. The disciples, and especially Peter who had denied him three times (18:17–18, 25–27), would have felt deeply ashamed that they had abandoned Jesus in his *hour*. Thus when Jesus appeared to them behind locked doors, his greeting of *‘Peace be with you!’* showed he was not holding their failures against them; rather, he was offering a restored relationship – that they remained in the goodwill of God.

“When he had said this, he showed them his hands and side.” By showing them the nail prints in his hands and the spear wound in his side Jesus removed any doubt they had that the one who stood before them in that locked room was Jesus crucified but now risen from the dead. He predicted that the disciples’ sorrow at his death would be turned to joy following his resurrection (16:20–22), and now *“the disciples rejoiced when they say the Lord.”*

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you”

The Fourth Gospel speaks often of Jesus being sent into the world by the Father: to do his will (6:38–39; 8:29), to speak his words (3:34; 8:28; 12:49; 14:24; 17:8), to perform his works (4:34; 5:36; 9:4) and win salvation for all who believe (3:16–17). That the disciples were sent to continue the words and works of Jesus is foreshadowed at various places in the Gospel: Jesus urged them to lift up their eyes and see fields ripe for harvest, and told them he had sent them to reap where others had labored (4:35–38), he said those who believed in him would do the works he had done and greater works than these because he was returning to the Father (14:12); he told them, *“I ... chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you”* (15:16), saying that when the Paraclete comes *“he will testify to me. And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning”* (15:26–27), and when he prayed for his disciples he said to the Father, *“As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world”* (17:18). This last text, which parallels 20:21, confirms that the sending of the disciples was ‘into the world’, i.e. with a mission to the world. The other texts reveal the essential content of their mission was to ‘harvest’ men and women for the kingdom by their witness to Jesus by word and deed, alongside the ongoing witness of the Spirit.

“Receive the holy Spirit”

Verses 21–22 are a key passage in Johannine theology. The disciples receive the Holy Spirit at this second coming of Jesus: the *eschaton*, the final era, is now; future is present. In 7:39, the Spirit had not yet been given, since Jesus was not yet glorified. On the cross, Jesus, manifesting the nature of God, which is love, delivers over the Spirit (19:30), symbolized immediately afterward by the flow of the sacramental symbols of blood and water. And now, at his first encounter with the believing community, he breathes the Spirit again as he celebrates the re-creation of God’s people. Simultaneously, he sends out these disciples just as the Father had sent him (v. 21). His mission becomes theirs; his work is placed in their hands. And that mission, that work, is to manifest God who

is love in their words and deeds. Through them now, enlivened by the Spirit, will the presence of God become known and seen and felt in the world. .

Although the text does not use *parakletos*, there is unanimity among commentators that the *Holy Spirit* is that Advocate promised in the Farewell Discourse of the Fourth Gospel. That discourse had outlined the role the Advocate/Holy Spirit would play in relation to the disciples. The Holy Spirit will:

- be recognized by the disciples (14:17)
- teach the disciples everything (14:26)
- guide the disciples along the way of all truth (16:13)
- take what belongs to the Jesus and declare it to the disciples (16:14)
- glorify Jesus (16:14)
- bear witness to Jesus in order that the disciples will also bear witness to Jesus (15:26-27)
- remind the disciples of all that Jesus told them (14:26)

Fr. Raymond Brown nuances these promises in that the *parakletos* describes that aspect of the Holy Spirit which is specifically concerned with witness so that a believer is assured of all the power needed to be witness. Brown [1139-43] makes a case that the full power of the Holy Spirit manifest in others ways not connected to the witness of the person/community – e.g. baptismal regeneration, sacramental forgiveness of sins, and gifts that build up the community.

Thus Jesus' words about sending his disciples as the Father sent him applied immediately to the apostles both with respect to Christian mission and to them in their specific roles/gifts within the church. It is in Baptism that all believers are privileged to share in this Mission in so far as they all are recipients of the Spirit whom he bequeathed to his disciples (see 20:22). With the particular enabling that Spirit provides, each plays a part in continuing the work and witness of Jesus. What is clear in text such as 1 Cor 12:3-12 (the second reading on Pentecost Sunday, Year A) – to one a particular gift is given, to another, another gift – all from the same spirit.

“Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.”

Many scholars see a parallel between v.23 and Matthew 18:18: *“Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* The parallel becomes clearer when we know that the words “forgive” in John 20:23 are the Greek words *aphiēmi* and *krateō* which mean “send away” and “hold” respectively [EDNT 2:314]. But even with the parallels aside, the meaning, extent and exercise of the Matthean and Johannine powers has been a source of division with the post-Reformation Christian community.

The Council of Trent condemned the proposal that this power to forgive sins was offered to each of Christ's faithful – something one often sees in commentaries from a Reformed perspective. The Catholic Church has always held that the power to forgive sin was to be understood as that ministry to which the ordained minister was called; something it had maintained as the teaching of the church and only formally declared at Trent when it was challenged by the Reformers. As Fr. Brown notes [1041] this is not a debate that can be settled solely on exegetical grounds – nor does the Catholic Church propose such a solution. The Church looks to Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

The Church has also looked at Jesus own action toward sin as expressed in John. In 9:39-41 “Jesus says that he came into the world for judgment; to enable some to see and to cause blindness for others. Deliberate blindness means remaining in sin; and, implicitly, willingness to see results in being delivered from sin.” [Brown, 1042] So as Jesus was sent into the world, so too the apostles and their successors to exercise discriminating judgment between good and evil. This idea of the apostles as agents of discriminating judgment is reinforced by the idea that the Advocate/paraclete is working through the apostles as an avenue of the outpouring of the Spirit that cleanses people and begets within

them new life. All-in-all this passage is a declaratory statement that the core of Jesus' ministry, forgiveness of sin and the restoration of right relationship, continues within the community generally, but in specific sacramental ministries in the particular sense.

A Final Thought

This gospel passage makes clear that there is a strong relationship between the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit – and Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit points to the Resurrection as the start, the source and the reason for mission. As Jesus has been sent, so too are we sent on mission. Those are the final words of the celebration of the Mass: *Ita missa est* – Go! [the church] is mission!

Notes

General: Various passages in OT and Jewish writings have been suggested as providing the background against which the Pentecost events might be best understood: Philo *Decalog* 33, God created a sound on Sinai and changed it into fire; Exod 19:18, the Lord descended in fire; and Gen 11:1–9, the confusion of languages at Babel. More important from Luke's perspective are the prophecies by Joel (2:28–32, cited in Peter's speech in Acts 2:17–21), John the Baptist (Luke 3:16) and Jesus (Acts 1:5) regarding the pouring out or baptism of the Spirit. Luke also closely associates the baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost with the mission and expansion of the church to people of every nation.

20:19 *the disciples*: by implication from John 20:24 this means ten of the Twelve, presumably in Jerusalem.

***Peace be with you*:** although this could be an ordinary greeting, John intends here to echo John 14:27. The theme of rejoicing in John 20:20 echoes John 16:22. Literally, the Greek expression is *eirēnē hymin* – there is no verb – meaning “peace to you.” Many translators prefer the declarative statement that peace is already among the disciples.

20:20 *Hands and . . . side*: Luke 24:39–40 mentions “hands and feet,” based on Psalm 22:17. Where the Lucan account is apologetic in nature, here the Johannine description is revelatory.

20:21 *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*: By means of this sending, the Eleven were made *apostolos* (apostles), that is, “those sent” (see John 17:18), even though John does not use the noun in reference to them. A solemn mission or “sending” is also the subject of the post-resurrection appearances to the Eleven in Matthew 28:19; Luke 24:47; Mark 16:15. Especially in John one must also keep in mind the Messiah's mission: “*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17).

To express Jesus' being sent by the Father, here the evangelist uses the verb *apostellō*, while for the disciples' sending by Jesus he uses the verb *pempō*. However, nothing should be made of this, as the words are used synonymously in the Fourth Gospel for the sending of Jesus by the Father (e.g. 3:17; 5:36/4:34; 5:23), the disciples by Jesus (e.g. 4:38/20:21), John the Baptist by God (e.g. 1:6; 3:34/1:33), and various people sent by the Jewish leaders (e.g. 1:19, 24/1:22).

20:22 *he breathed on them*: The word used for ‘breathe’ is *emphysaō*, which, though found only here in the NT, occurs several times in the LXX, where it refers to God breathing life into the man formed from the dust (Gen. 2:7; cf. Wisdom 15:11), Elijah breathing into the nostrils of the widow's dead son while calling upon the Lord to restore his life (1 Kgs. 17:21), and Ezekiel prophesying to the wind to breathe life into the slain in the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:9). The words “on them” do not appear in the Greek text

***Receive the holy Spirit*:** In many places in the Fourth Gospel the promise of the Spirit is foreshadowed (1:33; 4:10, 13–14; 7:37–39; 14:16–17, 26, 28; 15:26–27; 16:7–15). The clearest of these is 7:39,

where, following Jesus' promise of streams of living water for those who believe in him, the evangelist adds, 'By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.' In John 7:39 we learn that the Spirit will be given when Jesus is glorified because until this moment, the role the Spirit is to point to Jesus (14:26, 15:26), but now the Spirit becomes the animating *dynamis* for mission in the world. This scene is often understood as the Johannine version of Pentecost.

There are problems with such a view. Thomas was not included (20:24), nor was there any great change in the disciples' behavior—they were still meeting behind closed doors when Jesus next appeared to them (v.26). If in addition one is trying to harmonize all the Gospels, then one wonders how to explain Pentecost (assuming harmonization is a valid way to compare the Synoptic Gospels and John – and there are serious questions regarding such an effort). Some scholars have suggested v.22 constituted a lesser bestowal of the Spirit to be supplemented with a greater endowment at Pentecost, or that what Jesus was bestowing was not the personal Holy Spirit (the promised Paraclete) but some impersonal power/breath from God. There is little to support either of these views in the Fourth Gospel. Another view is that there was a real impartation of the personal Spirit on this occasion, but that the Spirit was only experienced as the Paraclete, the one who replaced Jesus' earthly presence, after Jesus' final post-resurrection appearance and ascension. Finally, there is the view that Jesus' action was symbolic, foreshadowing the bestowal of the Spirit to take place on the Day of Pentecost. All the explanations' problems assume a harmonization with Pentecost and do not simply let John tell his account.

20:23 *Whose sins you forgive*: These words have affinities with the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus said to Peter, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matt. 16:19). It also has affinities to what he said to the disciples generally in relation to those who would not heed admonition who must be treated as pagans or tax collectors: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). The reference to forgiveness (or lack thereof) may echo the reference to "the key to the house of David" in Isa. 22:22. If so, what is at stake is the authority to grant or deny access to God's kingdom. In a Jewish context "binding and loosing" described the activity of a judge who declared persons innocent or guilty and thus "bound" or "loosed" them from the charges made against them.

This is the only place in the Fourth Gospel where forgiveness of sins is spoken about, though the idea of sins remaining unforgiven is mentioned a number of times (8:24; 9:41; 15:22, 24; 16:8–9; 19:11). The non-forgiveness of sins is always related to refusal to believe in Jesus. It is important to notice the passive voice used in the statements in this verse regarding the forgiveness and non-forgiveness of sins. They function as divine passives reminding us that God alone forgives sin (cf. Mark 2:3–12; Luke 5:17–26) and Jesus' disciples declare what God does.

20:21-23: The disciples' commissioning in 20:21–23 climaxes the characterization of Jesus as the sent Son and shows Jesus' followers as drawn into the unity and mission of Father, Son, and Spirit (cf. 15:26–27; 17:21–26). Succession is important both in the OT and in Second Temple literature. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus succeeds the Baptist and is followed by both the Spirit and the Twelve (minus Judas), who serve as representatives of the new messianic community. OT narratives involving succession feature Joshua (following Moses) and Elisha (succeeding Elijah).

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