

31st May 2026

Pentecost Sunday

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1] Today, we heard St Luke's account of Pentecost. Fifty days after the Jewish Passover; fifty days after Christ rose from the dead, the apostles, gathered in Jerusalem, received, in a mystery, their confirmation, their authorisation, their empowerment but, most of all, their illumination in the Holy Spirit. With simple words, mere approximations, St Luke speaks of rushing wind and tongues of fire, by way of describing that which is indescribable, ineffable, unfathomable. He is, after all, dealing with the mystery of God Himself and the apostles' sharing in the divine energies.

2] Later on in the same Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells of how St Paul spoke in the Areopagus at Athens to a crowd of enquirers. The Areopagus, like any forum in the Roman Empire, was the place to be seen and heard; a public space where people went to trade and do business, to hear news and debate the matters of the day; a place in which to promenade, gossip and watch the world go by: it was where people were.

3] It is here that Paul engages in a theological debate with certain of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, as well as other locals and visitors to the famous city. The apostle had noticed how they had, among many others, an altar dedicated to *The Unknown God*. Thus he seized the day! A perfect opportunity to proclaim the one true Creator, the Living God, and of the coming

judgement by One risen from the dead, whom he does not even name at this point.

4] The apostles at Pentecost had spoken in many languages, reversing the disaster of Babel and to bring many to know the Living God. And in that ancient world it would be one language, the Greek that Paul spoke in Athens, that became the conveyor of Theology, not least in the New Testament itself. It was, after all, a common language of commerce throughout the eastern and southern empire at the time.

5] What, therefore, did Paul, and all the other apostles, promise in their preaching of Christ? It was a simple invitation to a new and everlasting life in God. There was much more than that, of course, but at heart, that *is* the gospel. We might assure ourselves that we have found *The Way* to eternal life and, indeed, that is so. But ask yourself, what that means exactly? For the apostle and evangelist, John, that answer, too, was simple, straightforward: *'This is eternal life,'* he writes. *'That they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.'*

6] In other words, eternal life is knowing God through Jesus Christ who has made Him known. This is true theology, this is that theosis which the apostles experienced at Pentecost. Not knowing about God; not even just a familiarity with the biblical stories of God's dealings with mankind; and certainly not mere human reasoning with philosophical arguments that a god

must exist: but *knowing* God, just as we might know one another ~ in relationship; *I And Thou*. For in the encounter with Christ, the real, the Orthodox Christ, we encounter God.

7] How mysterious is the holy, consubstantial Trinity, One Godhead in three divine hypostases or persons! God the Father, the source of the divine nature that can never be comprehended; the divine and Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father, ever hidden behind metaphors of fire and wind and breath: always pointing us towards Christ: the only-begotten of the Father, who has made know the Divine by his incarnation in our flesh.

8] But what is it to *know* God; where does such knowledge begin? '*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding,*' says the Book of Proverbs (Prov 10:9] When the patriarch Jacob at Bethel dreamed of ascending and descending angels of God, he woke in fear: '*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it,*' he says to himself. '*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!*' [Gen 28:16-17]

9] It is entirely fitting that a holy dread; that awe and fear should, first, come upon us in the presence of God, that thereby, we might learn humility before the Divine. But we cannot just remain motionless, fixed in fear and trembling. For the fear of the Lord is but the beginning

of wisdom, of that knowledge of God: we move on from fear to worship. Doxology, the *word of glory*, is our natural response to knowing God. Then, from that fear, we pass onto the love of God for, as St John says in his first epistle, '*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear... He who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us.*' [1Jn 4:18-20]

10] This is why we abide in Orthodoxy, to glorify the One who has redeemed us and is working still to save us. We have many questions to ask, just like the rest of our species, passing along the itinerary of human history. We are no different in kind, save that we have come to know the true God in knowing Jesus Christ, and in that knowledge we have eternal life in Him.

11] But that knowledge, that heavenly wisdom, is sufficient for us, for the time being. In the Orthodox Christian faith we can be content to live in mystery. When we are ill, most of us are content to accept a prescribed treatment, not knowing exactly how it works, yet content in the belief that it will heal our body. How much more so with our faith in God, when it comes to the cure of our souls!

12] How fitting it is that matters of belief and of worship combine in that one word, *Orthodox*. If directly translated into English, it comes out as, *correct glory*. In other words, the right way of worshipping what we rightly believe in. It is to be found nowhere else but in

His Orthodox-Catholic Church, knowing the love of Christ which passes knowledge; filled with all the fulness of God. (cf Eph 3:19)

13] That great sweep of nations, listed by St Luke this morning, who heard the apostles telling of the mighty works of God in their own tongues, were soon superseded by the whole known world, for the witnesses of Christ's resurrection were spread out from India to Britain. It was the Catholic, that is, universal Faith, preserved in Orthodoxy, that informed and inspired the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church for a thousand years. Her way of worship, in a multiplicity of rites, the truth of her teaching, confirmed in ecumenical councils, and the beauty of her life, lived by countless saints and martyrs, continues still, unchanged, among us to this day in an unbroken chain, even if others have departed to follow their own notions and confessions.

14] Knowing God, our relationship with the Divine, is revealed, made manifest, in many ways: there is devotion of prayer, the ascetic struggle against sin, the outpouring of the love of God in charity for all. Yet all that begins and culminates here, because for us, it is supremely in the Liturgy that the original experience of the risen Christ, and the transforming power of Pentecost, is transferred to us. Here, even the symbols, the icons, the metaphors, are all eventually surpassed as well, and we can encounter each time, a mystery. For the Holy Spirit Himself, speaking in Holy Tradition,

has led us into all truth and life everlasting, in knowing the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent.