

Historic Commentary

(Pentecost Sunday - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 20:19-23 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

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Peter Chrysologus: It was evening more by grief than by time. It was evening for minds darkened by the somber cloud of grief and sadness because although the report of the resurrection had given the slight glimmer of twilight, nevertheless the Lord had not yet shone through with his light in all its brilliance.

Chrysostom: It was likely that when the disciples heard these things from Mary they would either not believe the woman—or if they did believe her, they would be sad that he had not considered them worthy of such a vision even though he promised to meet them in Galilee. Since this was so, he did not let a single day pass so that they might not dwell on this and become distracted. Rather, he brought them to a state of longing by their knowledge that he was risen and by what they heard from the woman. And when they were thirsting to see him and were greatly afraid (which especially made their yearning greater), he then, when it was evening, presented himself before them. And he did so in a very marvelous way. And why did he appear in the “evening”? Because that was probably when they would be especially fearful.

Gregory the Great: The Lord’s body that made its entrance to the disciples through closed doors was the same as that which issued before the eyes of people from the Virgin’s closed womb at his birth. Is it surprising if he who was now going to live forever made his entrance through closed doors after his resurrection, who on his coming in order to die made his appearance from the unopened womb of a virgin? But because the faith of those who beheld it wavered concerning the body they could see, he showed them at once his hands and his side, offering them the body that he brought in through the closed doors to touch. By this action he revealed two wonderful, and according to human reason quite

contradictory, things. He showed them that after his resurrection his body was both incorruptible and yet could be touched.... By showing us that it is incorruptible, he would urge us on toward our reward, and by offering it as touchable he would dispose us toward faith. He manifested himself as both incorruptible and touchable to show us that his body after his resurrection was of the same nature as ours but of a different sort of glory.

Gregory of Nyssa: He did not remain in death's power. The wounds that his body had received from the iron of the nails and spear offered no impediment to his rising again. After his resurrection he showed himself whenever he wanted to his disciples. When he wished to be present with them, he was in their midst without being seen, needing no entrance through open doors.... All of these occurrences, and whatever other similar facts we know about his life, require no further argument to show that they are signs of deity and of a sublime and supreme power.

Maximus the Confessor: Through his greeting of peace he breathes on them and bestows tranquility as well as a sharing in the Holy Spirit.

Cyril of Alexandria: When Christ greeted his holy disciples with the words "peace be with you," by peace he meant himself, for Christ's presence always brings tranquility of soul. This is the grace Paul desired for believers when he wrote, "The peace of Christ which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds." The peace of Christ which passes all understanding is in fact the Spirit of Christ, who fills those who share in him with every blessing.

Leo the Great: He offers to the doubters' eyes the marks of the cross that remained in his hands and feet and invites them to handle him with careful scrutiny. He does this because the traces of the nails and spear had been retained to heal the wounds of unbelieving hearts, so that not with wavering faith but with the most certain conviction they might comprehend that the nature that had been laid in the sepulcher was to sit on God the Father's throne.

Chrysostom: Do you see the words issuing in deeds? For what he said before the crucifixion, that "I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you," this he now accomplished in deed. But all these things led them to a most exact faith. For since they had an endless war with the Jews, he continually

repeated “Peace be to you,” giving them consolation to counterbalance the strife. And so this was the first word that he spoke to them after the resurrection. (Similarly Paul keeps on saying, “Grace be to you and peace.”). To the women, however, he gives good news of joy, because they were in sorrow and had received this as the first curse. Therefore he gives good news to each in their own situation: to the men he gave peace because of their war; to the women he gave joy because of their sorrow. Then having put away all painful things, he tells of the victory of the cross, and this was the “peace.”

Peter Chrysologus: What does this repetition in bestowing peace mean, except that he wants the tranquility that he had announced to their minds individually also to be kept collectively among them by granting peace repeatedly? He knew, at any rate, that they were going to have far from insignificant struggles in the future stemming from his delay, with one boasting that he had persevered in faith and another in grief because he had doubted. ... Peter denies, John flees, Thomas doubts, all forsake him: unless Christ had granted forgiveness for these transgressions by his peace, even Peter, who was the first in rank of all of them, would have been considered inferior and undeserving of his subsequent elevation to the primacy.

Cyril of Alexandria: Christ says that he sent the apostles even as the Father had sent him, that they might fully comprehend their mission: to call sinners to repentance and to minister to those who were caught up in evil, whether of body or soul. In all their dealings on this earth, they were not in any way to follow their own will but the will of him who sent them. They were also called to save the world by their teaching, so far as was possible. And in truth we shall find that holy disciples were eager to show the utmost enthusiasm in performing all these things. It is not difficult for people to see this, if they give their attention to the Acts of the Apostles and the words of the holy Paul.

Gregory the Great: The Father sent his Son, appointing him to become a human person for the redemption of the human race. He willed him to come into the world to suffer—and yet he loved his Son whom he sent to suffer. The Lord is sending his chosen apostles into the world, not to the world’s joys but to suffer as he himself was sent. Therefore as the Son is loved by the Father and yet is sent to suffer, so also the disciples are loved by the Lord, who nevertheless sends them into the world to suffer.

Augustine: But the reason why, after his resurrection, he both gave the Holy Spirit, first on

earth, and afterward sent him from heaven, is in my judgment this: that “love is shed abroad in our hearts,” by that gift itself, whereby we love God and our neighbors, according to those two commandments, “on which hang all the law and the prophets.” And Jesus Christ signified this by giving them the Holy Spirit once on earth because of the love of our neighbor and a second time from heaven because of the love of God. And if some other reason may perhaps be given for this double gift of the Holy Spirit, at any rate we ought not to doubt that the same Holy Spirit was given when Jesus breathed on them, of whom he says, “Go, baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” where this Trinity is especially commended to us. It is therefore he who was also given from heaven on the day of Pentecost, that is, ten days after the Lord ascended into heaven.

Cyril of Jerusalem: This was the second time he breathed on human beings—his first breath having been stifled through willful sins. ... But though he bestowed his grace then, he was to lavish it yet more bountifully. And he says to them, I am ready to give it even now, but the vessel cannot yet hold it. For awhile therefore receive as much grace as you can bear. And look forward for yet more. “But stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high.” Receive it in part now. Then, you shall wear it in its fullness. For the one who receives often possesses only a part of the gift. But the one who is clothed is completely enfolded by his robe.

Cyril of Jerusalem: The Son, sharing the same nature as God the Father, has the Spirit in the same manner that the Father would be understood to have the Spirit. In other words, the Spirit is not something added or which comes from without, for it would be naïve—even insane—to hold such an opinion. But God the Father has the Spirit, just as each one of us has our own breath within us that pours forth from the innermost parts of the body. This is why Christ physically breathed on his disciples, showing that as the breath proceeds physically from the human mouth, so too does Christ, in a manner befitting God, pour forth the [Spirit] from the divine essence.

Cyprian: To all the apostles, after his resurrection, he gives an equal power and says, “As the Father has sent me, even so send I you: Receive the Holy Spirit. Whoever’s sins you remit, they shall be remitted to him. And whoever’s sins you retain, they shall be retained.” And yet, that he might promote unity, he arranged by his authority the origin of that unity, as beginning from one ... so that the beginning proceeds from unity. And this

one church, also, the Holy Spirit in the Song of Songs designated in the person of our Lord, saying, “My dove, my spotless one, is but one. She is the only one of her mother, elect of her that bore her.”

Ambrose: The church holds fast its obedience on either side by both retaining and remitting sin. Heresy is on the one side cruel and on the other disobedient. It wishes to bind what it will not loosen and will not loosen what it has bound, whereby it condemns itself by its own sentence. For the Lord willed that the power of binding and of loosing should be the same, and he sanctioned each by a similar condition. So whoever does not have the power to loose does not have the power to bind. For as, according to the Lord’s word, the one who has the power to bind also has the power to loose, their teaching destroys itself, inasmuch as those who deny that they have the power of loosing ought also to deny that of binding. For how can the one be allowed and the other disallowed? It is plain and evident that either each is allowed or each is disallowed in the case of those to whom each has been given. Each is allowed to the church; neither is allowed to heresy. For this power has been entrusted to priests alone. It is only right, therefore, that the church, which has true priests, claims it. Heresy, which does not have the priests of God, cannot claim it. And by not claiming this power heresy pronounces its own sentence, that not possessing priests it cannot claim priestly power.

Gregory the Great: It is pleasant to observe the disciples, lifted up to a height of glory equal to the burden of humility to which they were called. You see how they not only acquire peace of mind concerning themselves but even receive the power of releasing others from their bonds. They share in the right of divine judgment so that as God’s vicars they may withhold forgiveness of sins from some and grant it to others. So it was fitting that only those who had consented to be humbled for the sake of God be raised up by him. Those who feared God’s strict judgment were made judges of hearts. Those who were themselves fearful of being condemned condemn some and set others free. Their place in the church is now held by the bishops. Those who obtain the position of governing receive authority to loose and to bind. It is a great honor, but the burden is heavy. In truth it is difficult for one who does not know how to exercise control over his own life to become the judge of someone else’s life.

Chrysostom: You should hold your pastor in high honor. You care about your own affairs, and if you care for them well you won’t have to give an account to anyone else. But your

pastor, even if he orders his own life well, if he does not have an anxious concern for your life as well, yes and of all those around him, he is sent to hell with the evildoers.... Therefore, knowing the greatness of their danger, give them a large measure of your goodwill.... They should receive your most favorable attention. But if you join with the rest in trampling on them ... and throw them into despondency, you weaken their hands and render them, as well as yourselves, an easy prey to the waves, no matter how courageous they are.... You have respect for secular authorities, but when God appoints do we despise him who is appointed and abuse him and besmirch him with ten thousand reproaches, and though forbidden to judge our brothers, do we sharpen our tongue against our pastors?... I am not saying that I approve of those who exercise their pastorate unworthily, but I do greatly pity them and weep for them.... And even if there is much to say against the way they have lived their lives, this in no way invalidates what they do by commission from God.... But why am I speaking only of pastors? Not even an angel or archangel can do anything on its own. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit do it all while the pastor only furnishes the tongue and the hand. For it would not be right that the salvation of those who come to the sacraments in faith should be endangered by another's wickedness.

John Calvin: Peace be to you! This is the ordinary form of salutation among the Hebrews; and by the word peace they denote all that cheerfulness and prosperity which is usually desired for a happy life. The phrase, therefore, means, "May you be well and prosperous!" I mention this, because there are some who, in explaining these words, enter into unnecessary discussions about peace and harmony, though Christ intended nothing else than to desire that his disciples might be happy and prosperous.

If any person think it strange and inconsistent with the glory of Christ, that he should bear the marks of his wounds even after his resurrection, let him consider, first, that Christ rose not so much for himself as for us; and, secondly, that whatever contributes to our salvation is glorious to Christ; for, when he humbled himself for a time, this took nothing away from his majesty, and now, since those wounds, of which we are speaking, serve to confirm the belief of his resurrection, they do not diminish his glory. But if any person should infer from this, that Christ has still the wounded side and the pierced hands, that would be absurd; for it is certain that the use of the wounds was temporary, until the Apostles were fully convinced that he was risen from the dead.

Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. This means, that all the grief which had been occasional to them by the death of Christ was dispelled by his new life.

As the Father hath sent me. By these words, Christ, as it were, installs them in the office to which he had previously appointed them. True, they had been already sent throughout Judea, but only as heralds, to issue a command that the supreme Teacher should be heard, and not as Apostles, to execute a perpetual office of teaching. But now the Lord ordains them to be his ambassadors, to establish his kingdom in the world. Let it therefore be held by us as an ascertained truth, that the Apostles were now, for the first time, appointed to be ordinary ministers of the Gospel.

His words amount to a declaration, that hitherto he has discharged the office of a Teacher, and that, having finished his course, he now confers on them the same office; for he means that the Father appointed him to be a Teacher on this condition, that he should be employed, for a time, in pointing out the way to others, and should, afterwards, put those persons in his room to supply his absence, for this reason Paul says that he gave some, apostles; some, evangelists; some, pastors, to govern the Church till the end of the world, (Ephesians 4:11.) Christ therefore testifies, first, that, though he held a temporary office of teaching, still the preaching of the Gospel is not for a short time, but will be perpetual. Again, that his doctrine may not have less authority in the mouth of the Apostles, he bids them succeed to that office which he has received from his Father, places them in his room, and bestows on them the same authority; and it was proper that their ministry should be ratified in this manner, for they were unknown persons and of mean condition. Moreover, though they had the highest splendor and dignity, yet we know that all that belongs to men does not approach to the excellence of faith.

It ought likewise to be observed, that the only subject which is handled in this passage is the preaching of the Gospel; for Christ does not send his Apostles to atone for sins, and to procure justification, as he was sent by the Father. Accordingly, he makes no allusion in this passage to anything which is peculiar to himself, but only appoints ministers and pastors to govern the Church; and on this condition, that he alone keeps possession of the whole power, while they claim nothing for themselves but the ministry.

22. He breathed on them. Not one of the sons of men is qualified for discharging so

difficult an office, and, therefore, Christ prepares the Apostles for it by the grace of his Spirit. And, indeed, to govern the Church of God, to carry the embassy of eternal salvation, to erect the kingdom of God on earth, and to raise men to heaven, is a task far beyond human capacity. We need not be astonished, therefore, that no man is found qualified unless he be inspired by the Holy Spirit; for no man can speak a word concerning Christ unless the Spirit guide his tongue, (1 Corinthians 12:3;) so far is it from being true that there is any man who is competent to discharge faithfully and honestly all the duties of so excellent an office. Again, it is the glory of Christ alone to form those whom he appoints to be teachers of his Church; for the reason why the fullness of the Spirit has been poured out upon him is, that he may bestow it upon each person according to a certain measure.

It ought to be observed, that those whom Christ calls to the pastoral office he likewise adorns with the necessary gifts, that they may be qualified for discharging the office, or, at least, may not come to it empty and unprovided. And if this be true, there is no difficulty in refuting the foolish boasting of the Papists, who, while they employ lofty terms of commendation in extolling their hierarchy, cannot show a single spark of the Holy Spirit in their bishops. They wish us to believe that they are the lawful pastors of the Church, and, in like manner, that they are the apostles and vicars of Christ, while it is evident that they are utterly destitute of the grace of the Holy Spirit. A sure criterion is here laid down for judging of the calling of those who govern the Church of God; and that criterion is, if we see that they have received the Holy Spirit

The principal design of preaching the Gospel is, that men may be reconciled to God, and this is accomplished by the unconditional pardon of sins; as Paul also informs us, when he calls the Gospel, on this account, the ministry of reconciliation, (2 Corinthians 5:18.) Many other things, undoubtedly, are contained in the Gospel, but the principal object which God intends to accomplish by it is, to receive men into favor by not imputing their sins. If, therefore, we wish to show that we are faithful ministers of the Gospel, we must give our most earnest attention to this subject; for the chief point of difference between the Gospel and heathen philosophy lies in this, that the Gospel makes the salvation of men to consist in the forgiveness of sins through free grace. This is the source of the other blessings which God bestows, such as, that God enlightens and regenerates us by his Spirit, that he forms us anew to his image, that he arms us with unshaken firmness against the world and Satan. Thus the whole doctrine of godliness, and the spiritual building of the

Church, rests on this foundation, that God, having acquitted us from all sins, adopts us to be his children by free grace.

While Christ enjoins the Apostles to forgive sins, he does not convey to them what is peculiar to himself. It belongs to him to forgive sins. This honor, so far as it belongs peculiarly to himself, he does not surrender to the Apostles, but enjoins them, in his name, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, that through their agency he may reconcile men to God. In short, properly speaking, it is he alone who forgives sins through his apostles and ministers.