

Sunday after Ascension

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Preacher: Seminarian Matthew Stuart

[0 : 00] In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen. Our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, crowned with honor and glory.

Today we stand liturgically where the first disciples stood after the ascension, waiting for Pentecost. Jesus spoke the words we heard in our gospel text this morning on the night before his crucifixion, preparing them for what was to come after his ascension.

These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. Our Lord's prophetic warning is our spiritual armor against apostasy when persecution comes.

Jesus does not leave his church ignorant or defenseless. He tells us in advance what we will face so that our faith will not falter when the world turns against us.

He warns us of persecution so we will not stumble. And he promises the Spirit who will empower our witness, even in the face of opposition.

[1 : 23] What does Jesus warn us about? He says, They will put you out of the synagogues. Yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God's service.

The disciples were expelled from the synagogues. Stephen was stoned. James was killed by Herod. And Paul was persecuted.

All by those who believed they were serving God. Over the centuries, the church has continued to suffer persecution. Why does this happen?

Our Lord tells us. These things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor me.

The root of all persecution is spiritual ignorance of God himself.

Those who persecute the church do not know the Father or the Son. Some use the language of religion and invoke the name of God while creating a false gospel that serves their own purposes.

[2 : 34] Others openly reject God and his call to sacrificial love, embracing autonomy and self-fulfillment instead. This is why Jesus emphasizes the helper, the spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father and bears witness to Christ.

The spirit reveals the true God. Without this revelation, religious zeal divorced from truth and confidence and worldly wisdom both become instruments of persecution.

Notice that Jesus says, These things I do not say to you at the beginning because I was with you. While Christ was physically with his disciples, they benefited from his visible protection and authority.

Now he is ascending and going to the Father. So he must prepare them for what comes next. They will suffer persecution without his visible presence to defend them.

But Christ's ascension is not abandonment. He has gone to the Father to be enthroned at his right hand, the place of all authority and power.

[3 : 55] From that throne, he rules over all things and exercises that authority for his church. The one who was sacrificed now reigns in glory and sends the helper to us.

The church will face persecution. But she remains under his care because the ascended Lord reigns. And he has sent the Holy Spirit to sustain her.

Jesus says again, But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. This demonstrates the highest level of pastoral care.

Our Lord understands that during suffering, we might be tempted to think that God has abandoned us or that our faith was not strong enough.

If we remember that Christ himself told us this would happen. Then persecution becomes a confirmation of our faith rather than a contradiction of it.

[4 : 59] When the world hates us, when we are cast out, when those who have twisted scripture for their own ends oppose us. Remember, Jesus told us this would happen.

Because they do not know the Father or the Son. Our Lord also gives us a promise. When the helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father.

He will testify of me. And you will also bear witness because you have been with me from the beginning. The Spirit testifies and we testify with him.

Fulfilling the church's mission and to our Lord's return on the last day. We are witnesses because we have been united to Christ in baptism. And have received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Who empowers our witness. Even under persecution. Notice that Jesus says he will send the helper from the Father.

[6 : 07] This is the authority of the ascended Christ. He has gone to the Father and now exercises divine authority to send the Spirit. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son.

The church's witness in the world is strengthened by the Spirit sent from the throne of God. The warning Jesus gave to his disciples applies to us as well.

The church today faces increasing opposition. In some places, religious zealots persecute in God's name. They have abandoned the apostolic faith and have crafted a false gospel that conforms Scripture to their own ends.

Rather than conforming themselves to Christ. But we also face opposition from the world. Which rejects Christ's call to repentance and sacrificial love.

Embracing autonomy and self-fulfillment instead. Both forms of persecution share the same root. They do not know the Father or the Son.

[7 : 18] In some places, this opposition is violent. In others, it's social and cultural. Christians are mocked and marginalized because to hold fast to the teaching of Scripture on marriage, sexuality, and the sanctity of life is to be labeled hateful or dangerous.

The Spirit of the age demands conformity. And those who refuse are cast out. This is the modern equivalent of being put out of the synagogue.

Jesus told us this would happen. But he sent the Spirit to strengthen us. Our calling is to remain faithful and to testify to the truth.

Trusting that the Spirit of truth will vindicate the witness of the church, even if we do not see it in our lifetime. This also means we must examine our own hearts.

Are we willing to stand firm when it costs us something? Are we willing to be excluded? To be misunderstood? To be persecuted by the world and those who claim to speak for God, yet do not know the Father or the Son?

[8 : 39] Or will we compromise and soften the gospel to make it more palatable? Will we remain silent when we should speak? Jesus tells us these things so that we will have the strength to endure.

Our ascended Lord reigns at the Father's right hand, exercising all authority. He has warned us that persecution will come and has promised us the helper, the Spirit of truth, who will testify to Christ and empower our witness.

Let us remember that Jesus has told us and stand firm in the faith, bearing witness to the truth, no matter the cost.

Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Amen. Thank you.