



Lord and Life-Giver

Nine days of Reflection and Prayer
as we await the Feast of Pentecost or
Whitsunday

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A Parish Novena

May 10 - 18, 2024

INTRODUCTION

This nine-day series of reflections between Ascension Day and Pentecost takes inspiration from an extraordinary Christian whom tradition knows as St Basil the Great. He lived (c. 330-78) in the tumultuous fourth century of the Christian era, a younger contemporary of St Nicholas of Myra, to whom one of our parish's churches is dedicated. Basil was born into a wealthy family with estates in Cappadocia (now central Turkiye) and Pontus on the Black Sea. Like Basil himself, two of his siblings were regarded as saints (St Macrina the Younger and St Gregory of Nyssa) and together they witness to the vibrant commitment to the Christian message and life in a period of church turmoil and to the possibility of growth into robust sanctity through intentional and heart-felt Christian family life. Basil was ordained a priest and then in 370 became the metropolitan Bishop of Caesarea (the capital city of Cappadocia), an office he held for the rest of his life.

Trained to the highest standard in the great universities of the eastern Roman Empire and for a time a teacher, Basil then chose to live an ascetic life. In that context he wrote a monastic *Rule* which became the basis of communal order within the church's monastic movement. St Benedict's rule, which became dominant in the western church, is the child of St Basil's insights and values on behalf of communal ascetic life.

As a bishop he was exemplary. Eminently judicious, a seeker of compromise without harm to truth! - he was also committed to the church's charitable ministry. Hospitals for the sick and hostels for the poor were the result of his organizational acumen and distinguished his episcopal city of Caesarea. He was also a prolific writer, leaving volumes of letters, sermons, addresses and a eucharistic service, *The Liturgy of St Basil*.

St Basil may be regarded as the first great theologian of the Holy Spirit. Finding himself caught-up in the last stage of doctrinal controversy about the Trinity, it fell to St Basil to advocate and defend the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, equal to the Father and the Son, in his major work *On the Holy Spirit* (375). In the spirit of his commitment these days of prayer and reflection look to St Basil's writing and witness for inspiration as we reflect together on life 'in the Spirit'.

The Revd Dr Charles Miller, *Team Rector*

DAY ONE (May 10th) - 'A Second Life'

How do we view Christian baptism? Too young, most of us, to remember the occasion, we easily forget that the meaning of baptism defines our whole Christian life. In our parish's preparation for baptism we stress that baptism is both a point • and a line —; that is, a baptismal moment opening onto a whole baptismal life. The moment, whether sensed as such or not, constitutes a break between the old life of sin and death and new life in Christ. The new life is both a gift from God, our incorporation into Christ, and our project as the Holy Spirit works upon us to fashion us into Christlikeness. In this passage from *On the Holy Spirit* St Basil describes some of the implications of the road to Christian perfection.

So, for perfection in life it is necessary not just to imitate Christ in the examples of gentleness and humility and love which he gave us in his life, but also to imitate him in his death, as St Paul the imitator of Christ, says: 'Becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead'. How then do we become like him in his death? By having been buried with him through baptism. But how does this burial take place? What benefit has this imitation? First of all, one must break with one's past life. This is impossible unless one is born again, as the Lord said...Consequently, before beginning this second life, we must bring the first to an end. As in the double course [here Basil refers to a sporting image] where the competitors must run to the turning point and back to the start again, so also for a change of life it seemed necessary that death intervene between the two lives, to make an end of all that went before and a beginning of all that follows. (On the Holy Spirit, ch. 15,35)

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, as you hovered over the waters at creation and then by your presence sanctified the water by which I was buried with Christ in baptism, so strengthen me to walk in newness of life, forsaking what has hindered my 'second life' in Christ and pressing on toward the full stature of my humanity in him, my Lord and Saviour. Amen.

DAY TWO (May 11th) - Worldy-wise or Friend of God?

As a student in Caesarea, Constantinople and Athens Basil excelled. The study of 'rhetoric' was far more comprehensive than learning how to speechify. Skill in arts *and sciences* - philosophy in its widest sense of 'loving wisdom' - was part of the preparatory drill. But in the ancient world the philosopher was above manual labour. The use of the mind was opposed to the labours of the body. But not so among Christians. St Joseph was a carpenter and so was the Lord Jesus; St Paul was a tent maker and worked with his hands to support himself during his missionary labours. That was a lesson Basil had to learn when, as a twenty-one year old, he ended his studies and returned home. When his brother, St Gregory of Nyssa, wrote the life of their formidable sister St Macrina, he described how big sister had to take young Basil in hand to shape the urban intellectual according to Christian values! For Christians, she knew, soul and body are deeply joined; our bodies are 'temples of the Holy Spirit' St Paul says, and so Basil had to discover. Have we?

'Macrina's brother, the great Basil, returned after his long period of education, already a practiced rhetorician. He was puffed up beyond measure with the pride of oratory and looked down on the local dignitaries, excelling in his own estimation all the leading men of position. Nevertheless, Macrina took him in hand, and with such speed did she draw him also toward the mark of philosophy [here the love of godly wisdom from the scriptures] that he forsook the glories of this world and despised fame gained by speaking, and deserted it for this busy life where one toil's with one's hands. His renunciation of property was complete, lest anything should impede the life of virtue.' (Life of St Macrina)

Prayer:

Creator Spirit, breath of life and breath of *new* life within those baptized into Christ: teach us to love our bodies as temples of your divine presence and to use them virtuously to the edification of others and to the praise of the Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

DAY THREE (May 12) - Read, Mark, Learn

The reading of scripture, the 'God-breathed Writings' (to use his phrase) was basic to St Basil's understanding of the spiritual way and the growth in virtue. Writing to his friend (and future fellow-bishop and saint) Gregory Nazianzus Basil gave him advice about attaining the 'eternal goods'; here he names the four main virtues of human excellence identified by pagan philosophy and what Christian tradition, acknowledging their importance in the formation of a Christian character, has called the four 'cardinal virtues': temperance, fortitude, justice and prudence. To stir Gregory to their attainment Basil urges his friend to study the holy Writings. Does regular Bible reading figure for you?

'A most important path to the discovery of duty is also the study of the divinely-inspired Scriptures. For in them are not only found the precepts of conduct, but also the saintly lives of men, recorded and handed down to us, lie before us like the living images of God's government, for our imitation of their good works. And so in whatever respect each one perceives himself deficient, if he devote himself to such imitation, he will discover there, as in the shop of a public physician, the specific remedy of his infirmity.' (Collected Letters of St Basil, Letter II to Gregory)

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, you inspired the sacred writings to be vehicles of your presence with us, to train us in the ways of righteousness and truth: inspire us to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that we may be more fully conformed to the image of the Spirit-filled Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

DAY FOUR (May 13) - Prayer: Constant Remembrance of God

With his skills in communication it's no wonder that St Basil was a committed letter writer. We have four volumes of his letters so that, joining the company of Cicero and St Augustine, we know more about Basil's life and relationships than about any other ancient writer. Many of his letters concern the spiritual and ascetic life practiced so convincingly by his sister Macrina and to which Basil too committed himself whole-heartedly. In the same letter of 358 to his friend Gregory Basil shares what he has discovered about the spiritual disciplines enabled by the Holy Spirit. He notes, for instance, that the performance of daily tasks need not keep us from the practice of piety, that the Holy Spirit can enliven us to a sense of God's ever-presence, helping us to prayer without ceasing, a chief way in which are 'temples of the Holy Spirit'.

'Prayer, again, following such reading finds the soul, stirred by yearning towards God, fresher and more vigorous. Prayer is to be commended, for it engenders in the soul a distinct conception of God. And the indwelling God is this--to hold God ever in memory, His shrine established within us.' (Collected Letters of St Basil, Letter II to Gregory)

Prayer:

Holy Spirit of prayer and supplication, of penitence and praise: enliven my prayer; warm it by your presence within me so that I may become a living flame of love and temple to your glory, not just now and then but each day and at every moment. Amen.

DAY FIVE (May 14) - Words Matter

Although the ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 fashioned what we know as the doctrine of the Trinity into creedal form, and while there was increasing acceptance of the assertion that Jesus the Messiah was of the same divine nature (or 'substance') as God the Father, the question remained: what about the Holy Spirit? So the flash-point of theological controversy shifted to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit or pneumatology. That was the point where St Basil made his mark. But he couldn't make his mark without thinking in somewhat new terms about the Trinity of Persons we call 'God'. His starting point was not something abstract; rather it was the long-standing worship tradition of the Church. The way to resolve the controversy about the Spirit's divinity, he argued, was to consider more thoroughly the words the Church uses in her worship. It's a reminder that words matter, and that we must take care not just to preserve but to understand aright what the words used in worship mean and don't mean. Don't you sometimes wonder? What words or phrases seem especially important to you or not, and why?

'Lately while I pray with people, we sometimes finish the doxology [i.e. giving glory] to God the Father with the form "Glory to the Father with the Son, together with the Holy Spirit", and at other times we use "Glory to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit". Some of those present accused us of using strange and mutually contradictory terms.' (On the Holy Spirit, ch. 1, 3)

Prayer:

Spirit of the triune God, you inspire our ministry of praise and anoint our lips with words worthy of Infinite Majesty: may my heart, as well as my lips, be tuned to the fulsome harmony of your truth, revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

DAY SIX (May 15) - Glorify Him!

For St Basil the forms of doxology offered to Father, Son and Spirit carry an important theological message: *equality of honour implies equality of nature*. To that end St Basil often quotes the command at the end of St Matthew's Gospel: 'Go, therefore, baptize in them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28.19). In so far as the Church's doxology to the Father has included as well the Son *and the Holy Spirit*, that means that the Spirit is equal to the Father and the Son *and so equally divine*. St Basil seems to have been the first theologian to draw on liturgical tradition to make a doctrinal point. He grasped that the tradition of worship through the ages carries messages and meanings yet to be recognized, explored and drawn into the Church's explicit and public understanding of the Good News.

Notice too that the creed we recite most Sundays is not (as we commonly call it) the Nicene Creed, that is the creed settled on by the Council of Nicaea (325) but the so-called Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (what a mouth full! Let's stick with 'Nicene Creed' -- we can say that). It was the First Council of Constantinople (381) that paved the way for the form of the Creed the great churches of the Christian world all use. What this creed affirms about the Holy Spirit is largely due to St Basil's theology of the Holy Spirit. It does not declare the Holy Spirit 'of one Being [or substance/nature] with the Father' but instead employs Basil's view that equality of honour implies equality of nature:

'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father,¹ who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.'

Prayer:

Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of truth, everywhere present and filling all things: come and abide in us. Cleanse us from all impurity and of your goodness save us! Amen.

¹ The western church later added the phrase 'and from the Son', which the Council did not endorse.

DAY SEVEN (May 16) - The Purification of Spiritual Sight

St Basil was interested in the interface between pagan culture and Christianity. The influence of the former appears in varied ways in St Basil's thought and in his view of the spiritual life. Here's an example. Among Basil's favourite scriptural verses was verse nine of psalm 36: 'For with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light'. He also took inspiration from Plato's² idea of moving from darkness and shadows to true perception. The psalm text and Plato's idea of gradually clearer perception were key in his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in believers. God knows our eyes are accustomed to dim shadows, so God uses them first. Then God shows us the sun's reflection in water to spare us 'from being blinded by the pure light' (*On the Holy Spirit*, ch. 14,33) Here are passages from his *On the Holy Spirit* in which he describes what he means. How accustomed is each of us to 'the pure light'?

'[The Holy Spirit] is the source of sanctification, spiritual light, who gives illumination to everyone using his powers to search for the truth--and the illumination he [the Spirit] gives is himself³...He shines upon those who are cleansed of every spot and makes them spiritual through communion with himself...Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others'(ch. 9,23).

'[I]f we are illumined by the divine power and fix our eyes on the beauty of the Image [Jesus] of the invisible God [the Father], and through the Image are led up to the indescribably beauty of the Source, it is because we have been inseparably joined to the Spirit of knowledge..[T]he Holy Spirit works within the purified soul giving it the ability to see (ch. 18,47; ch. 26,61).'

Prayer:

Enlightening Spirit, enable with perpetual light the dullness of our blinded sight!

² His dialogue *Republic* and the analogy of the cave in chapter 7.

³ Remember, the Greek word 'spirit' is neuter ('it') but the reality is personal when applied to the Holy Spirit.

DAY EIGHT (Day 17) - The Spirit of Ascension

St Basil's doctrine of the Holy Spirit is integral to his understanding of the triune God whose engagement with humankind is both a descending and an ascending movement. The descending movement ↓ is the self-revelation of the Trinity to humankind: originating in the Father who is the Source, manifested through the Son who is the Father's Image and then communicated in and through the Holy Spirit--a communication made abundant after the Son's Ascension with the Pentecostal Gift Jesus had promised to his disciples (see Luke 24.49, John 16.7ff., Acts 1.8). The ascending movement ↑ is equally important since without it the redemption work of the Son would be ineffectual: Christians ascend *through* the Spirit *to* and *into* the Son as members of his mystical Body, and ascend *through* the Son into the presence of the Father.⁴ Basil puts it like this:

'The way of the knowledge of God ascends from one Spirit through the one Son to the one Father, and conversely the natural goodness and the inherent holiness and the royal dignity reaches from the Father through the Son to the Spirit' (On the Holy Spirit, ch. 18, 47).

Prayer:

O God the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: we beseech you leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

⁴ Notice how our main liturgical prayers are addressed to the Father *through* the Son.

DAY NINE (May 18) - Spirit-Bearers

It should be no surprise that St Basil was insistent that the words of worship and sound doctrine go hand-in-hand. Nowhere was this link more important than in the Eucharist. Working with material from the Syrian Christian tradition Basil made adaptations which survive to this day in the Eastern Orthodox Church as 'the Liturgy of St Basil'. In the Great Thanksgiving prayer Basil's strong understanding of the place of the Holy Spirit in God's engagement with believers is highlighted. The Roman Catholic and churches in our Anglican Communion have adapted this prayer and, in fact, we use it at St Helen's on some major festivals like Easter. Here is a portion quoted in a beautiful book entitled *The Mystery of Sacrifice* by Evelyn Underhill:⁵

'We pray and implore Thee, O Holy of Holies, in the good pleasure of thy bounty, that thy Holy Spirit may come upon us and upon these gifts lying before thee, and bless, hallow and make this bread to be the Precious Body of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ; and that which is in this cup to be the Precious Blood of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, which was poured out for the life of the world. That thou wouldst unite all of us who are partakers of the One Bread and of the Chalice to one another in the communion of the one Holy Spirit....'

And then as taken into our Anglican tradition:

'Lord, we pray that in your goodness and mercy your Holy Spirit may descend upon us, and upon these gifts, sanctifying them and showing them to be holy gifts for your holy people, the bread of life and the cup of salvation, the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ....'

Holy Spirit, as I await the great feast that celebrates your coming in power on those gathered in the upper room, enable me to join my prayer to the invocation of your presence upon the gathered church and upon the gifts of bread and wine she sets upon the altar, that I may become a more worthy Spirit-bearer in the world; I ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

⁵ Subtitled 'A Meditation on the Liturgy' (London, 1938), pp. 56-7.

ON PENTECOST MORNING (May 19) before receiving Holy Communion

A word of inspiration from our own Bishop Lancelot Andrewes (1555-1626) who was deeply indebted to the theology of St Basil:

'...I will show you a way to say '*Receive the Holy Spirit*' to all, and how all may receive it. And that is by '*Receive My Body*'. For '*Receive My Body*', upon the matter, is '*Receive the Spirit*', in as much as the two never part, not possible to sever them one minute. Thus, when or to whom we say '*Receive My Body*', we may safely say with the same breath '*Receive the Spirit*.' (Pentecost Sermon 9, in *Works* (L.A.C.T.), vol. III, p. 256)

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