

The Christian Church is the oldest institution with a continuous history in the world. Since the day when it was founded empires and nations have risen and fallen, but the church has continued to grow and spread.

It has had its ups and downs. At the moment it is experiencing a falling away because of the secularization of society and because of the cheap fantasy that masquerades as Christianity primarily on the airwaves. But the falling away has happened many times before, and it has always proved temporary. Every falling away has been the prelude to revival. Indeed, we can confidently look forward when practically everything we are familiar with in this modern world will have passed away but the Church will not only exist, it will be stronger. The Church is here to stay. That being the case, and this being Pentecost and the birthday of the church, we may ask ourselves what it is that explains the permanent character of the Church. What makes it last?

1. It has a unique spirit.

When Luke said that the Apostles on the day of Pentecost heard the sound of a mighty wind, he was suggesting something that is much plainer in Greek than in English. A Greek reader would see immediately that there is a connection between the word spirit and the word wind. In Greek

they are two forms of the same word. So Luke was saying, in the first place, that the uniqueness of the Christian Church is that it is filled with the spirit that comes from God. The permanence of the Church cannot be explained in human terms. The people who formed the Church were not equipped to turn the world upside down; they were plain people with no education to speak of, they had no influence, and they had no money. The difference that set them apart from their contemporaries was of the spirit.

How would you feel if you were told you were expected to convert mankind to a new religion and a new way of life? Your immediate reaction would be that you didn't feel equipped to do such a thing. That probably was the first reaction of the apostles. But when they became conscious of the fact that they were not alone but were partners with God, they were filled with a new spirit. They were no longer frightened, they did not shrink from the opposition of the Roman authorities. And when they overcame the opposition they realized that theirs was not a victory of men but of God.

The first answer to "What makes the Church unique?" is that it has a unique spirit. It is not a human enterprise; it is a venture in which people allow themselves to be used by God. We sometimes talk of the coming of the spirit as the breathing of the gentle breath of God upon us...and I daresay that that is a mild and gentle experience. But Luke, as he

told about the beginning of the Church, said that the measure of the spirit of God that was breathed into these people was no gentle breeze, it was more like a tornado.

2. The spirit of Jesus

The second answer to the question: "What makes the Church unique?!" is it is on fire with the spirit of Jesus. Luke said that the apostles had visible flames on their heads. That is hardly to be taken literally; it is simply an unforgettable way of describing something that set the early Christians apart. They had lived with Jesus, and that experience had kindled within them a fire that could not be put out. They were aware of Jesus' influence on their lives.

When they needed to select another to replace Judas so that their number would remain at 12, they laid down two requirements. "The person whom we choose", they said, "must not only be a witness to the resurrection, he must also have known Jesus as we know him". When Peter healed the lame man at the gate of the temple, he said: "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise and walk. Peter's power was the power of Jesus Christ. The authorities recognized it, too. Not long after Pentecost, Peter and John were arrested. To the astonishment of their judges they gave an extremely good account of themselves. They stood up and spoke boldly. Luke remarks that the authorities, when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, were astonished, for these were ignorant and unlettered men.

But then they realized that Peter and John had been with Jesus. That explained their power.

St Paul tells us the same thing about his ministry. "I no longer think of myself as accomplishing anything", he writes, "It is no longer I who live; it is Christ Jesus who lives in me". They all say the same thing. The success of the Christian mission from the first is to be explained because the people who carried it out were on fire with the spirit of Jesus.

3. Its message is needed.

The third thing that Luke tells us is that when the apostles went outside and began to talk to the passers-by they discovered to their amazement that two things happened: first, that people stopped and listened; and second, when they stopped and listened they understood.

That again is an unforgettable way of saying something about the victory of the Church. The Christian gospel is a message for which all people are waiting, and it is a message that makes sense to them no matter where they come from or what language they speak. There are no barriers of race or language or color or culture over which the story of Jesus cannot leap.

It makes as much sense to the Greek as it does to the Jew; to a Roman as to the Greek. It makes sense to a German, to

an Englishman, to a Chinese, to an African, to an American. This is not a story which belongs to part of mankind; it is a universal story...it is the universal gospel. We have only to tell it and people will listen; and what is more, they will understand. Human hearts are by nature, ready to respond.

But we belong to a tradition of what I will call religious reticence. We are hesitant about the things that mean most to us; and we are reticent about religion as a matter of principle because we believe in religious freedom. But have we not carried our religious reticence too far?

It is perfectly right to respect the privacy of others with regard to things that mean most to them. And it is right to respect their own way of worship. But we are wrong and we betray the great commission which Christ gave us if we make a secret out of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is a message which all people need to hear, have to hear from us, and a longing to hear...even though the cultural accumulation of reticence may cover up that longing.

We are always preaching some kind of gospel, you know.

We preach the gospel of progress, and are finding that that gospel has betrayed us for it is leading us up the road to certain destruction.

As a nation we preach the gospel of military might and

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the gospel retail house of armaments. And it perplexes us that people really don't want to hear that kind of gospel. In fact, world-wide, it embarrasses us when another gospel, equally false, preached by the communists, seems to win more adherents than our military gospel. Other peoples of the world have had enough of that kind of gospel.

We preach the gospel of success...so much so that a person's worth is determined by the yardstick of society's success.

Well, there are other gospels we preach. The fact is we are going to witness to some kind of gospel. And we are false to ourselves if these be the only gospel we preach... for there is this other gospel more fundamental to our way of life and the life of all children of God than any other others - that is the gospel of the God who made all men equal. He sent his Son into the world that all people might be saved....redeemed, might be called away from their sin, and turned to him clothed with a new life.

Make no mistake about it....that is the fundamental gospel upon which our lives rest and it is a universal message.

It is for all the world, and all people can understand it. Let us as Christians get on with the business of preaching that gospel. It is the only one which has the power to bring life and joy and peace and power.

What is the key, the secret, of success (if I may use that term) of the Christian Church? (7)

It is that it is an enterprise in which God and men are partners; and its spirit is the spirit of God. It is an enterprise of people whose hearts have been touched by Jesus and set on fire. It is an enterprise that needs only to the the story of Jesus in order to bring new life and new hope to those who are waiting to hear the gospel of the love of God.