

Rise

Sunday, Easter 7, Year B

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

May 9, 2021

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The ancient people believed in a certain bird that had quite long lifespan. This bird we know as the Phoenix. This bird was prevalent in ancient mythology and even makes its way into the pantheon of church symbols.

The Christian church has acquired many different symbols throughout her history to tell the story of her husband, the Savior, Jesus the Christ; Everything from a lamb to a rooster. From the cross to seashells. The symbols were used to tell the Gospel to people who were used to hearing stories, making connections, and then were able to use those symbols to remember and retell the story to others.

St. Clement of Rome, who died in 99_{AD}, is the first Christian to use the Phoenix as a Christian symbol. He writes, *"Let us consider that wonderful sign [of the resurrection] which takes place in Eastern lands, that is, in Arabia and the countries round about. There is a certain bird which is called a phoenix. This is the only one of its kind, and lives five hundred years. And when the time of its dissolution draws near that it must die, it builds itself a nest of frankincense, and myrrh, and other spices, into which, when the time is fulfilled, it enters and dies...Do we then deem it any great and wonderful thing for the Maker of all things to raise up again those*

*that have piously served Him in the assurance of a good faith, when even by a bird He shows us the mightiness of His power to fulfil His promise?"*¹

From then on, the phoenix has been a mainstay in representing the teachings of Christianity; especially the resurrection.

A bird, rare and extraordinary, who would die and rise again.

But, isn't the phoenix a wonderful symbol for the feast of Pentecost, as well?

The blessed Holy Spirit who descended on our Lord on the day of His baptism, now descends on the holy disciples, and all who were gathered with them, with a rushing wind and tongues of fire.

A dove, with fire.... I don't know, it sounds a lot like a phoenix to me ☺

After all, it is this gentle dove, the Holy Spirit, that kills us, buries us, and brings us back to life through the waters of Holy baptism. It is this bird of fire that strengthens us and encourages us through Word and Sacrament; emboldening us, like the apostles, to proclaim God's salvation, Jesus death and resurrection for the payment of sin, to a world that, also, is dead.

Once the fire of the Holy Spirit lands on them, St. Peter leaves the safety of the locked doors of the upper room, steps out into the street, and begins to proclaim

¹ Clement of Rome. (1885). [The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians](#). In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Vol. 1, p. 12). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company.

the very thing that had caused them fear; the good news of the Messiah, the deliverance of mankind, the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

And, he takes us, the hearers of his preaching, back to the prophet Joel in the Old Testament, *“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; 18 even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.*

19 And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; 20 the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

21 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:17–21).

Jews had come from all over to celebrate the the feast of Pentecost; a feast that celebrated the first wheat harvest of the year. But, it also commemorated the first harvest in the Promised Land after their ancestors’ 40 year exile in the wilderness after leaving their lives as slaves in Egypt.

Those first Jews to enter the Promised Land had been born in exile. Their parents, who had been in Egypt had all passed away. They had relied upon the graciousness of God to eat. He had given to them quail and manna.

Now, for the first time in their lives, they were settled in one place. They had planted their fields. And, now, they were gathering the produce that their work and God's grace had provided.

Pentecost was a commemoration of God's bounteous love and precious care.

So, Jews would come back to Jerusalem, fifty days (which is what Pentecost means) after the Passover and celebrate another feast day in the holy city.

But, now, Peter tells them of another seed that was planted; Jesus. He, after His death, was planted in the ground. He then emerged from the ground. And, now, the harvest was beginning.

See how the phoenix fits so beautifully here. When its life comes to its conclusion, it prepares its nest with frankincense and myrrh (used in ancient, even Jesus', burials). Then, it enters and dies. Then in fire, it is reborn. Very representative, not just of Jesus' death and resurrection, but also of the hopes of the disciples, and the life of the church.

St. John the baptizer tells us, *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (Matt. 3:11).

And, today, here is the beginning of that baptism. The same baptism that you received. The Word, the Holy Spirit, the water, all come together to kill you, bury you in that water, and bring you back to life. You, too, are symbolized in the phoenix. And, we, every day, by that same Holy Spirit, by our repentance, die to sin, and are resurrected to new life through Christ's death and resurrection. This is exactly why we make the sign of the cross. It takes us back to our baptism.

So, each day, when we repent and return to God, we are going through the life cycle of the phoenix.

Perhaps this is a strange way, using the phoenix, to preach and teach this text. But, I hope that it brings to you much to contemplate. It is the reason the church has given to us such symbols; to help us to remember, teach, and carry with us the Word of God and the teachings of the Apostles.

The phoenix reminds us of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord on our behalf. It reminds us of the work of the Holy Spirit; at Pentecost with the Apostles, but also through Word and Sacrament, as He continually comes to us, killing us with the Law of God and raising us through the Gospel and forgiveness.

Die, people of God. Die to sin. Die to self. Die to hate. Die to pride. Die to selfishness. Die to works of the evil one. Die to petty revenge. Die to gossip.

Then, rise, people of God. Just like Jesus, the holy phoenix of God. And live. Live in faith toward God and in love toward one another. Live a life of peace. Live a life of forgiveness.

Your Lord has told you, *"I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly"* (Jn 10:10b).

Rise, people of God. Rise.

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.



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