

John 14:15-21

21.05.17

Spirit of truth, Advocate

For a second week running we find ourselves in this 14th chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus is addressing his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem. In just a few hours he will be arrested, tried and executed and what we mustn't miss is the emotion and poignancy of this passage. There is some tricky and quite complicated theology embedded in these verses – typical of John - but we must not let that blind us to the very human dimension. And perhaps the dominant word that hangs over the passage is 'vulnerability', for it is this that primarily defines the disciples.

Think about it. Here is Jesus holed up in this room, knowing that he is a wanted man and that very soon he will be taken from his disciples. He knows that they still don't really understand him. They haven't fully grasped who he is and what his ministry is all about. And he knows too that they will face exactly the same hostility and rejection that he has faced – disciples can only expect to be treated like their master. And so Jesus is trying desperately to prepare the disciples for his departure, trying to coach them for the coming time when he will no longer be physically present with them. And you might imagine the flickering lamps in that upper room, as the darkness descends, and they become a sort of metaphor for the faith of the disciples, so vulnerable, so easily snuffed out, so easily overcome by the darkness that threatens. And Jesus' reassurance to them comes in the form of a promise that they will not be left alone. They will not be abandoned. They will not be as orphans. He will come back to them, not as they've known him previously but in a new and actually deeper and more intimate way. He will come back to them and will be present with them in one who he calls the Spirit, and this Spirit will ensure not just their survival but their flourishing. By this Spirit these disciples will be united with Jesus, even in his absence, in the just the same way that Jesus is united with the one who he calls Father. So there is a deep communion here between the disciples and Jesus and, through Jesus, with the Father and in that tight bundle of life the disciples will be carried and blown out into the world. And there they will do far greater things even than Jesus did when he was with them physically. And as Jesus speaks to this little band of disciples he seems not just to be addressing them but addressing us too, his followers, his church, in the

centuries that will follow. making the same promises, giving us the same assurances.

So we have the promise of the Holy Spirit and I want to consider this morning two descriptions, two titles that Jesus gives that Spirit. The first is ‘the spirit of truth’, as Jesus refers in verse 17 to ‘the spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive.’ And Jesus returns to this description in the next couple of chapters of John where he speaks of the Spirit who will bear witness to Jesus and lead the disciples into all truth. Jesus of course cannot tell the disciples all they need to know now, in that upper room. Indeed he cannot foresee all the eventualities that future generations of believers will encounter as they try to follow Jesus in a changing world. He cannot anticipate or prepare them for the challenges they will face. But he is reassuring them that they need not worry – they will receive the Spirit of truth to guide them and to lead them. And we have to pause here and to wonder – well, how did they fare? How did future generations of Christian believers rate as carriers and proclaimers of truth – the truth about Jesus, the truth about God, the truth about salvation?

Well, you might say that initially they did pretty well. The Christian movement, after all, had to negotiate the transition from being a small Jewish sect to being a universal faith that embraced Jew and Gentile alike, and that was no easy task and it met with resistance. But the Spirit of truth guided them and truth prevailed, praise God! But as we go further into Christian history we find things a little less encouraging. After the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted in the fourth century, the Christian faith became in due course the prescribed faith of the empire, and suddenly the church lost its vulnerability. No longer gathering in upper rooms for fear of the empire they became the empire, seated in the centres of power. And suddenly reluctant converts are being baptised at the point of a sword. Is this the Spirit of truth in action? Jesus says here in our passage, ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments...’ Is this church at the heart of the empire that wages war in the name of Jesus being faithful to his commandments?

Then we might jump ahead to that stain on the history of the church known as the Inquisition. In its several manifestations the Inquisition wreaked pain and terror on countless numbers of people for over three centuries - and to what end? Well, ironically, in the cause of enforcing truth and the rejection of heresy. Apparently the Spirit needed the assistance of instruments of unspeakable torture in order to maintain truth. Jesus speaks of the Spirit of truth

as one whom the world cannot receive – in other words who defies the way of the world, who is alien to the ways of the world. But here the ways of the world and the ways of Jesus’ followers seem combine just fine – no problem. And it was left to Pope John Paul II, on March 12th 2002, to finally apologise for the use of violence in pursuit of truth and for wrongs inflicted on Jews, women and some minorities. And we might recall the Church’s conflicts with science and the hounding of Galileo by the Inquisition and his forced recanting of his view that it was the earth and not the sun that moved. And perhaps it may be some posthumous consolation to him that on 31st October 1992 Pope John Paul II expressed regret for the handling of the Galileo affair and formally conceded that the earth moves round the sun. Thank goodness that somebody did, and better late than never. And we could think of other times when the church has hardly been a beacon of truth, for example with the issue of slavery that finally came to a head in the nineteenth century, with Scripture-toting advocates on both sides of the argument.

Or to return to a theme I picked up on last week, this year, with its 500 hundredth anniversary of the great movement known as the Reformation, following from Martin Luther’s protest against the corruptions of the mediaeval church, we are reminded of how easily we corrupt our faith, resisting the Spirit of truth and failing to love Jesus by honouring his commandments. In our complex and changing world it seems that the narrow path of truth is one that we find it exceedingly difficult to follow. And so we wonder where is the spirit of truth in all this, the Spirit promised by Jesus?

Well, maybe this is where we must turn to that other description that Jesus gives of the Spirit in our reading from John’s Gospel, namely ‘Advocate’. As Jesus says, ‘I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.’ The word advocate here can mean ‘helper’ but it has a particular sense of coming alongside in order to support and sustain. It is a word that is familiar in a court setting, where it has the sense of pleading someone’s case – including a guilty party. In other words it has strong overtones of loyalty and of sticking with and standing by, representing those in need of help. And this is where it is significant that Jesus refers to the Spirit as *another* advocate for he is the first and primary advocate. Jesus is the primary advocate in whom God draws alongside a world trapped in untruth and in desperate need of help. And as Jesus departs physically from his disciples he promises this second advocate, the Spirit who will continue his work. And

given the history of the church's relationship with truth, and its embarrassing relationship with Jesus' commands, thank God for the Advocate who sticks with us and pleads our cause. Precisely where we might have reason to give up on the church and to wash our hands of it – well, the Spirit of God stands by it.

And we could think of any number of ways in which we might be grateful for this assurance that the Spirit is our Advocate who stands by us in loyalty and commitment. As we face an increasingly secular world that marginalises the faith and the church we fear the day when once again we might be like that little group of disciples huddled in that room in Jerusalem, so vulnerable and fragile. Well, thank God that we have an Advocate! And when we hear of Christians today being persecuted and harassed and murdered in Nigeria or Egypt or wherever – well, thank God we have an Advocate! And there is the personal dimension too. John who wrote this Gospel in his later New Testament letter returns to the theme of the Advocate when he talks about sin. 'If anyone sins', he says, 'we have an Advocate with the Father...' In other words we have a defence counsel in our guilt. And we can be very sophisticated and clever, disdaining all talk of sin and judgement, but the fact is that there are those things in our lives of which we are ashamed. There are those things which trouble our conscience, things which haunt us and which we wish we could erase. Jesus says here that if we love him we will obey his commandments but we know all about those times when we don't obey his commandments – we don't love him. Well, thank God we have an Advocate! Indeed this goes to the very heart of the Reformation and what triggered Luther's protest 500 years ago. The problem was that with all the Roman Church's mechanisms and protocols for forgiving sins the pure grace of God had been lost. 'How can I get me a gracious God?' cried Luther. And the answer that he rediscovered? Thank God we have an Advocate! And in all those moments when we are vulnerable on account of what life and the world throw at us – a medical diagnosis or a redundancy notice or a relationship breakdown or a betrayal by someone we trusted – thank God we have an Advocate! Thank God for our Advocate who takes our part and stands with us.

Here is the Gospel. God comes to us in the Spirit, closer to us than our breath, that Spirit by which God would lead us into all truth. But we resist. We distort the truth. The truth is not in us. Thank God therefore that the Spirit is not just Truth but Advocate also – one who stands by us not only in our

vulnerability but also in our shame. Through that Spirit we are in Christ and he is in us – and to him be the praise and the glory forever. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
God of majesty and power,
far above us and far beyond us,
unknowable and hidden in holiness
we praise and honour your holy name.
And we praise and bless you, loving God,
who has drawn near to us in Jesus Christ,
coming among us and revealing yourself to us,
walking alongside us.
And we praise and worship you, living God,
who comes even closer to us through your Holy Spirit,
mingling with our spirits –
not just God with us but God within us.
And we praise you for this Spirit who
helps us in our weakness.
We praise you for this one called Advocate
who takes our part and upholds our cause,
for we confess our failure to love you,
our disobedience to your commands,
our resistance to your rule.
And we praise you that you reach out to us
in grace and forgiveness,
standing by us even in our guilt.
So, come Holy Spirit.
Come upon us afresh,
Renew us in forgiveness and raise us up to new life,
that we may live out the truth faithfully.
We pray in Jesus name, and join together
in the words he taught us, saying...