

The Advocacy of the Holy Spirit

Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Pastor Palmer proclaimed to us last Sunday that God's heart for mankind is love, and not wrath or condemnation. The Gospel text for this Cantate Sunday shows us again the pure love of God for us sinners. On the night when He was betrayed, knowing that He was about to face torture and death, Jesus was still considering and providing for the spiritual well-being of His disciples – the same disciples He knew were going to betray Him. He took time to give them words of comfort, to strengthen their faith for the trials that were coming, and, through the words which they would be inspired to write, to strengthen our faith as well.

The nature of that comfort will be the subject of this sermon, but I want to begin by explaining the context of Jesus' words to His disciples. Just a few verses before our reading, Christ told His apostles about the suffering that they would endure after His death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father:

“Because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you . . . If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you . . . They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering religious service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.”¹

The world was going to persecute the disciples for their faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is always accompanied by persecution, because our faith is completely irreconcilable with the principles of this world, and the world hates it. Faith looks upon God's Law and sees His righteous and perfect will for creation, which all of us have transgressed and, in doing so, earned His holy wrath; the world sees only a set of outdated rules meant to stifle our self-expression and keep us from reaching

¹ John 15: 19-20, 16: 2-3

our potential. Faith looks on this present age and knows that it will pass away, to be followed by eternal life; the world laughs at the idea of eternity, and believes that happiness in this life is the only good, even if that happiness has to be achieved through evil means. Faith looks upon the crucified Christ and knows Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the victorious conqueror who triumphs over Satan through the cross; the world sees only a naked man hung on a tree, without power, without friends, ignominiously defeated and cut down in His prime. An ancient Christian document² proclaims that there are only two ways: the Way of Life and the Way of Death. These could also be called, the Way of Faith and the Way of the World. These two ways will never meet. As long as this world is ruled by sin and the devil, it will always hate and persecute those who hold the faith of Jesus Christ.

Jesus knew this. And He knew also that His disciples, weak and sinful as they were, as you and I *are*, could never withstand the coming trials on their own strength. And so He promised to give us another Advocate, the Holy Spirit. He says in verse 7:

*“It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you.”*³

The word that I’ve translated as “advocate” is the Greek word *Paraclete*. The word literally means, “a person who is called to one’s side,” and is often rendered in English Bibles as “Helper” or “Comforter.” Both translations can be appropriate, but in this section of our reading “Advocate” better captures Jesus’ meaning. An Advocate was a legal assistant, a person who pleaded someone else’s case in court, or defended them from accusation. Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to

² *The Didache*, written in the 1st or 2nd century.

³ John 16:7

be our Advocate, speaking on our behalf against the slander of the unbelieving world, and protecting us from its assaults.

The Holy Spirit accomplishes His work of advocacy in two ways. First, He “convict[s] the world concerning sin, righteousness and judgment.” The world is always trying to accuse us and to discredit the faith, but the Holy Spirit turns the tables: instead of allowing the world to convict us, He convicts the world. He does this through the preaching of God’s Law, which condemns the world’s evil – including the evil of our own sinful flesh, which is part of this world and would gladly cause us to abandon Christ and be punished eternally. Jesus speaks of three charges which the Spirit brings against sinful humanity:

1. He convicts the world concerning sin, because they do not believe in Christ. Unbelief is the source and fountain of all sin. We sin because we do not believe God when He says that His will, expressed in the Law, is good for us. We are strengthened in our evil intentions because we do not believe that God will punish sin. Our only hope is in the atoning death of Christ, which covers over all sins, including the sin of unbelief. Whoever refuses to believe this is under God’s condemnation, and the Holy Spirit makes this known to them by causing the preachers of His Church to proclaim God’s wrath against all unbelief.

2. The Holy Spirit convicts the world concerning righteousness, because Christ went to the Father, and we see Him physically no longer. When Jesus was dying on the cross, the world was convinced that it was being vindicated in *its* righteousness. The Pharisees believed that their system of salvation by works of the Law had triumphed over Jesus, who both revealed the Law’s true requirements and offered salvation freely to all who believed in Him. The crowds saw that Jesus, who preached a spiritual Kingdom, was murdered, while Barabbas the insurrectionist, who sought to achieve a kingdom of this world through violence, went free. The Romans thought that they were asserting Caesar’s honor and rights

against Jesus the King of the Jews, and proving the might of Rome's gods over the God of Israel. But Jesus, whom the world crucified, was raised by God and given all power and authority at His right hand. God declared Christ righteous, and in so doing showed the world's righteousness to be nothing but filth and shame.

3. Finally, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of judgment, because the ruler of this world was judged. The ruler of this world is the devil, who was defeated and judged through Christ's crucifixion. By dying for the sins of the world, Jesus stripped the devil of any claim that he had on sinful human beings. Jesus took away the devil's power to accuse us in the sight of God. As Paul says in Colossians: "[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities" – that is, the demons – "and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ]." ⁴ This shame is not only for Satan, but also for the world, since all unbelievers are in rebellion against the Lord and follow the devil as their master and god.

The Spirit, then, convicts the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. And insofar as we still have our sinful natures, we too need to hear this message of conviction – which is why our pastors so frequently preach against our sins from the pulpit. But for us who have been made new in Baptism, the washing of regeneration which God has granted to Valhalla, our new sister, and to all of us – for us, the Holy Spirit accomplishes another work, which Jesus describes in our reading:

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come." ⁵

We must be careful with these words, because some have used them to defend all kinds of false teaching and lying prophecies. Muhammed used them to

⁴ Colossians 2:15

⁵ John 16:13

justify his blasphemies against Christ, and Joseph Smith did the same. Many false prophets have used them, saying, “The Spirit has given me the further truths that Jesus promised, He has spoken to me the things that Jesus couldn’t say.”

But Jesus interprets His own meaning in the next verse.

*“He,” that is, the Spirit, “will glorify me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine, therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”*⁶

The Holy Spirit testifies to Christ. He glorifies Christ, and speaks about Him constantly. Whenever you find a teaching that is contrary to Christ’s doctrine, the doctrine that He proclaimed and that He gave to His apostles, you can know that that teaching is false, and from evil spirits rather than the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, whenever anyone speaks the truth about Christ, and preaches Him according to His own Word, you can know that that person is speaking according to the will of the Holy Spirit.

With this in mind, we can behold the work of the Holy Spirit through the ages, right down to our own time. It was the Holy Spirit who taught the apostles the meaning of Christ’s words, so that these confused and terrified men were transformed into prophets and preachers speaking God’s Word to the nations. That same Holy Spirit protected the infant Church against the encroachments of pagan Rome, and led the bishops at the Council of Nicaea to confess the truth that Jesus is God, of one substance with the Father, as we find that truth in the Creed which we have just spoken together. He guided the Church into confessing the full truth of the unity of Christ’s human and divine natures, the truth we confess whenever we say the Athanasian Creed. Through the Middle Ages, even as the false doctrine of works-righteousness was creeping into the Church, the Spirit was still present, preserving the Gospel in the Sacraments, the liturgy, the readings, and the

⁶ John 16:14

preaching of faithful priests. And when Luther and his colleagues rediscovered the fullness of the Gospel, the glorious message that we are justified before God through faith in the sin-covering sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it was the Holy Spirit who led them to it and who protected them in all their trials. He gave our spiritual fathers discernment to know the Word of God, enabling them to walk the path of truth and confess the doctrine of Christ in its purity.

You are the heirs of all that the Holy Spirit has done in the Christian Church for the last 2,000 years. He has given you the Word of God in rich abundance. You have it in your Bibles, the very words He inspired through the prophets and apostles. You have it in the Sacraments, which are visible words speaking to you of God's mercy, and His power to save sinners. You have the Word in the Creeds, which express the true faith of the Church at all times and in all places; in the liturgy, the Divine Service which has been prayed by the faithful for centuries; in your pastors' preaching, as they proclaim God's Word to you from this pulpit. You have the Word in the writings of the saints who have gone before us, and in the resources that Catalina makes available to you for study and devotion.

These are not dead things. If you have thought of them as such, despising the presence and power of God in His Word, and looking on the Word with the eyes of your flesh, abandon that false opinion. The Gospel, the message that Christ has defeated sin and cleansed you from its stain, making you new in Him, is "the power of God unto salvation."⁷ Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is present with all His power. He has provided you with God's Word so that it can be your defense against temptation, your comfort in trials, and the sword with which you war against the devil and your sinful desires. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit gives you Christ and all His grace, and the Father with His omnipotent

7. Romans 1:16

power; through the Gospel the Holy Spirit leads you into God, who is Truth. The truth of the Gospel, which was in God before the world began, which the Father has given us by the Son, and the Son has spread abroad through the Holy Spirit, can enlighten all the darkness of your mind, and cuts through the lies and confusion of the unbelieving world.

Know, then, that in the Gospel you have a certain protection against the world and the devil. Their accusations are silenced by the verdict of righteousness which God has passed on you in Christ, which the Holy Spirit announces to you through the Word. Their threats of violence are shown to have no weight, for God promises you who believe that He will raise you from the dead and exalt you over your persecutors. Even the lies that your flesh tells in order to entice you to sin are nothing, mere vapor and shadow compared with the light of Christ shining forth in His Word. The Holy Spirit has given you all of this as His gift and treasure. So when your strength fails in the face of temptation and the world threatens to subdue you with persecution, flee to the Gospel, and to the Holy Spirit who is present with the Gospel as your Advocate and Helper. Although you are powerless, He is mighty, and He will grant you the victory.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.

April 24, 2016

Fifth Sunday of the Resurrection, Cantata Sunday

Isaiah 12:1-6; James 1:16-21; John 16:5-15

Aidan Clewing

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