

the Sunday Readings



Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." (John 14:15-16)

6th Sunday Easter (a) **6th Sunday of Easter**

another advocate¹ *life in the spirit/Spirit of Jesus – Part VI*

introduction

John reports from Jesus' lengthy farewell talk that preceded his passion and death. The reading is used to prepare us to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. Jesus calls the Spirit, '*another Advocate*' and by so doing he implicitly refers to himself. The term '*Paraclete*', that is, '*Advocate*', means '*being with*', or being *the defender (the one who intercedes for another)*. This is who Jesus is. Someone who is at his friends' side, representing and defending them. John also calls Jesus Christ, '*Advocate*' in one of his letters.²

The season of Easter will shortly conclude with our celebration of the feasts of *Ascension* and *Pentecost*. Today's gospel directs us to celebrate the new presence of Jesus through his spirit/Spirit.³ The Father who is Love, sent Jesus – love incarnate – and now Jesus is going to send *the spirit of Love; the spirit/Spirit of Jesus*. Following in *the spirit/Spirit of Jesus*; keeping his WORD – is the proof of our love and of our true discipleship. One of the major themes of John's gospel is that it is only possible to come to GOD through Jesus. Jesus is the WORD, the Son, the revelation of GOD in our history. There's no other way to GOD except by, '*keeping his WORD*'.

first reading: Acts 8 : 5 – 8, 14 – 17⁴
Samaria]

[Philip in

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them.(5) The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did,(6) for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. (7) So there was great joy in that city.(8) . . . Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of GOD, they sent Peter and John to them.(14) The two

¹Cover Image: This is the Glory of the Holy Spirit above the Chair of St Peter in St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. Created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the 17th century, it marks the place where the Church remembers Peter's role as teacher of the universal Church. The alabaster window glows with natural light, forming a radiant sunburst around the dove of the Holy Spirit. Surrounding it, angels and clouds seem to surge forward, as if heaven itself is breaking into the basilica. The message is deliberate: the authority of the Pope and the Church is not meant to come from power or personal-ity, but from guidance from above. This is Baroque theology — not written, but built.

²1 Jn.2:1

³'*spirit/Spirit*' – in Eastertide there is a focus on the intimate harmony between the holy Spirit of GOD and the human spirit informed by GOD, We attempt to represent that harmony, by using the expression: '*spirit/Spirit*'. The empowering that results from Jesus' apprenticing work, when he informs his disciples with his *spirit*, or *power to be life-giving*, as he is empowered by GOD's Holy Spirit. His disciples assimilated his *Spirit* and they go on to accomplish in their practise (see the readings from the Book of Acts for this season) the empowering to be life-giving which Jesus exhibited in his teaching and practise.

⁴The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit.(15) (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the LORD Jesus)(16) Then Peter and John laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.(17)

Acts reports the persecution of the church in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen. Samaria is evangelised by refugees from Jerusalem. The Samaritans had entertained their own hopes about the Messiah.⁵ Israelite unbelief and persecution forces the Christians of Jerusalem to move outward. The movement started among the Hellenists who provide the first missionary personnel, including Philip. Philip impressed the Samaritans by his preaching and healing work. Their understanding is transformed and they find new courage.⁶

Earlier, Jesus had forbidden his apostles to preach in Samaritan towns.⁷ After the resurrection, while speaking about *the reigning of GOD*, the risen Jesus enjoined the apostles not to leave Jerusalem but to await there, for what the Father had promised.⁸ If the promise concerned the conversion of the Israelites, it went unfulfilled and could explain why the apostles alone remained in Jerusalem.

When Paul visited Jerusalem for the last time,⁹ he didn't meet any of the apostles. Most of them were probably dead by then. Persecution of the Christian community in Jerusalem followed Israelite resistance to their beliefs. After *ch.8* in *Acts* there is no mention of mission work among the Israelites in Palestine. Unbelief among them is now contrasted with the acceptance of belief among Gentiles (v.14).

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that '*Samaria had accepted the WORD of GOD*' the community in Jerusalem felt a responsibility for the new community and sent Peter and John to complete the recognition and acceptance of the Samaritan community into the group of believers, by enabling them to receive the spirit/Spirit (v.17). The Samaritans are transformed with new-found courage and understanding. The writer (of *Luke/Acts*) attributes this effect, '*to the holy Spirit*'. Then apostles Peter and John, '*lean hands on*' them to show that the community, founded by Philip, has the same spirit/Spirit as themselves. The '*leaning of hands*' is linked here with receiving the Spirit.

Current Catholic experience of the Sacrament of Confirmation, or the Pentecostal Baptism in the Spirit are neither confirmed nor denied by this gesture. Both the latter understandings are recent in the history of the Christian community. *Luke/Acts* shows the early Church extending a gesture on people who

⁵The Samaritans were related by ties of kinship and religion to the Israelites, but they lived separately and were considered heretics by orthodox Israelites.

⁶Cf. *Ac.6:1,5*

⁷*Mt.10:5*

⁸*Ac.1:4-5*

⁹*Ibid. 8:1b*

were popularly regarded as heretics. The significance of the gesture is the kind of people on whom the gesture is extended. The radical, new, non-exclusive, spirit/Spirit-filled community of belief extends to unlikely subjects (unlikely from a traditionalist's viewpoint) by this first missionary effort.

response: Psalm 66 : 1 – 7, 16, 20

[praise for God's goodness to Israel]

*Make a joyful noise to GOD, all the Earth;(1)
sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise.(2)
Say to GOD, "How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power,
your enemies cringe before you.(3)
All the Earth worships you; they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name." (4)
Come and see what GOD has done:
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.(5)
He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There we rejoiced in him,(6)
who rules by his might forever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations -
let the rebellious not exalt themselves.(7) . . .
Come and hear, all you who fear GOD,
and I will tell what he has done for me.(16) . . .
Blessed be GOD, because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.(20)*

The speaker proclaims thanksgiving on behalf of a transformed community, which has complained, experienced rescue, and now gives public thanks. The Exodus event comes immediately to the speaker's mind and mouth (v.6). A community that has complained and then experienced rescue, now gives thanks publicly for the transformation. The Israelite's most fundamental memory is of their liberation by the LORD GOD (vv.5-6) and the speaker affirms their liberation from 'the gods' of other nations. If other nations concede this, they concede the delegitimation of their own gods. It's a triumph of the power of liberation over the power of control. The speaker has no interest in how the community got into trouble. The accent is on the release and restoration which is worked by GOD (v.7). No amount of imperial control can finally deter this GOD! The song affirms the new ordering. It is a well-being that permits life. It derives from GOD's power and action. Israelite life is not now at the mercy of other hostile powers. The LORD's secure place of well-being, over-rides any threats. As the community experiences this, people take it as their personal assurance for living trustfully.

second reading: 1 Peter 3 : 15 – 18

[suffering for doing right]

. . . But in your hearts sanctify Christ as LORD. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;(15) yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good

conduct in Christ may be put to shame.(16) For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be GOD's will, than to suffer for doing evil.(17) For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to GOD. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.(18)

The writer urges the Christians who suffer as resident aliens in Asia Minor, to do what is right in the midst of their difficulties (v.13). But such a recommendation causes hardship and many of the recipients of the letter will not accept this advice (vv.15-17). The Christians are on trial. The writer calls them to be accountable in a hostile environment. They are exhorted not to defend their virtuous actions, but their hope (v.15). The voicing of their hope will confound their critics (v.16).

By his suffering and death, Christ the righteous One, saved the unrighteous (v.18); by his resurrection he received life in the spirit/Spirit which he communicates to believers through the baptismal bath that cleanses their consciences from sin. Just as Noah's family was saved through water, so Christians are saved through the waters of baptism.¹⁰ They need not share the fear of sinners. They should rejoice in suffering because of their hope in Christ. Their innocence will disappoint their accusers (vv.13-16).¹¹

The link between 'doing right' and 'hoping' is crucial for a vulnerable community. Christian action is grounded in, and powered by, the hope generated by Jesus' bodily resurrection. This hope affirms that *the power for life-giving (sanctifying grace)* will finally prevail. Christians are to enact that life-giving grace in a world that is arranged in deathly ways. Such hope makes Christians difficult to tame. They are empowered by the reality of Christ. The writer ends with a summary of what Christ has done (v.18) which affects, guides, authorises and empowers Christ-like conduct.

gospel reading: John 14: 15 – 21

[the Promise of the Holy Spirit]

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.(15) And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.(16) This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.(17) "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.(18) In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.(19) On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.(20) They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."(21)

In continuing his farewell talk, Jesus declares that they love him by obeying his commandments. Already they know that these commandments are only one – the

¹⁰Cf. 1 Pt.3:19-22

¹¹See Mt.10:28 & Rm. 8:35-39

new commandment. Jesus is love incarnate. He is the new commandment. To live his message of love is to love one another. Jesus doesn't call this spirit, the spirit of Love, but '*the Spirit of Truth*'. In the Israelite Scriptures, the holy Spirit is *the spirit of the LORD GOD*, and that is the same as saying *the spirit of Justice and true Freedom*. *The Spirit of the LORD* spoke through the prophets proclaiming the truth. *The Spirit of GOD*, or *the spirit of Justice*, is *the Spirit of struggle* that is present in people. Its also *the spirit/Spirit of Jesus*. Worldly ones who practise injustice, don't see or recognize this spirit/Spirit (v.17b). When Jesus came into the world, it was full of falsehoods, myths and deceptions because it was full of injustice. Somewhere John says that Truth is the same as Love.

In John '*the world*' means the same as '*the system*' or '*the unjust society*'. Jesus says those who belong to the system, can't receive the spirit/Spirit. Jesus implies a continued or permanent presence of GOD's Spirit (v.18). '*The Paraclete*' is this presence (v.16) while Jesus is absent. The *spirit of Truth* is a paraclete, carrying on the Earthly advocacy work of Jesus, in and through his disciples. The real gift of Jesus after the resurrection was the union with him that didn't depend on his bodily presence to all his followers (vv.19-21). In the period after the resurrection, Jesus' life is the source of the Christians' life as a community. When life in Jesus' spirit/Spirit has been received by his followers, they will recognise that it is a life mutually shared by Father and Son.

The condition for sharing in the indwelling of the Father and the Son in our lives, is keeping Jesus' commandment. This is loving him. It is really repeating the earlier verse (v.15). Love and keeping the commandments are two different facets of the same way of life. The one who loves is the one who practises the truth and commits no injustice. GOD is Truth and Love is Truth. But what happens is that many of us know the Truth, but we don't practise it or we don't obey the Truth out of fear. We obey a lie. If we obey Jesus' commandment we have to disobey the commandments of the worldly ones. Jesus promises that those who follow his commandment to love, will be able to understand (v.21).

for sharing: ¹²

¹²Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind

- *Like the early Christian community in their relationship to the Samaritans, we too can discover meaning in the historical changes that at first appear confusing. Comment on Acts 8 : 5 – 8, 14 – 17*
- *For Christians material hardship and suffering has positive value in relation to Jesus' suffering – it leads to GOD. Comment on 1 Peter 3 : 15 – 18*
- *The acceptance of Christian responsibility to extend Jesus' work in our world, supposes we have come to terms with his departure. We don't waste time trying to restore a time which is past. Comment on John 14 : 15 – 21*

prayer:¹³

*Faithful GOD, Who love us in Christ Jesus,
send Your Spirit of Truth to dwell within us,
that we may always reject what is false,
live by the commands of Christ,
and be true to the love You have shown us.
Grant this through Jesus Christ,
the resurrection and the life,
Who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
GOD, now and always. Amen.*

review:¹⁴

For John the evangelist, there is only one gift of the Spirit – the knowledge of the Truth that is Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the sign of victory of life and truth over the power of death and all forms of unreasonableness, self-deception, bigotry, prejudice and pedantic legalism. For Christian disciples, Jesus embodies the undying spirit of Truth, or holy Wisdom (Sophia). In the tradition of the Israelite and Christian scriptures, the gift of truth or wisdom, holds together reasonable knowledge of the world, with a passionate trust in GOD. We, on the other hand, are tempted to establish quick certainties, rather than to submit to patient observation and expectant

without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

¹³The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

¹⁴The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.

uncertainties. The Spirit of Truth that Jesus confers – implies that there is a, not-knowing; a waiting to know; a patience about what is yet to be discerned, and a respect for not knowing that must be honoured and not crowded out.

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