

The Paraclete

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the sixth Sunday of Easter, May 12, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

On the night that he was betrayed Jesus said to his disciples, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor [paracletos] to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth."

In ancient times, if you helped someone in need, you were called a *paracletos*, a "paraclete". A doctor or a nurse at the bedside of a patient is a paraclete. A preacher who preaches words of encouragement is a paraclete (cf. Acts 2:40; 1 Cor. 14:3). A lawyer defending someone accused of a crime is also a paraclete. An advisor to a king is a paraclete. The paraclete counsels the king of military and political decisions.

Jesus Christ is our paraclete, a present help in time of trouble. Sometimes we speak of his help in the language of medicine: he's our Great Physician; sometimes we use the language of law: he is our Advocate or Lawyer with the Father; and sometimes we use the language of preaching: Jesus is the Word, the encouraging Word of God. The Second Person in the Holy Trinity, the eternal Son of God, became a human being in Jesus to counsel a world that had lost its way. He came to bring life; he came not to condemn, but to save; he came as a paraclete, a helper.

But there's where the difficulty lies. Because our text from John 14 arises out of a context - a context of anxiety. The ministry of the earthly Jesus is drawing to a close. The

paraclete is leaving the scene. He's saying goodbye to the disciples. He's returning to the Father. And in the face of his imminent departure, the disciples can't help but wonder, "Well, now what are we going to do with^{out} our paraclete. What are we going to do if Jesus leaves us?"

Does God give help only to take it away when we need it most? If the paraclete leaves our side, if God in Christ turns away from us, if his support is pulled out from under us, as happened to the disciples when Jesus was crucified and, later, when he ascended into heaven, then how can we go on? Into this situation of anxiety over the future, a future seemingly bereft of help, Jesus brings this word of promise:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor [paraclete], to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth.... (John 14:16-17)

Who is this Spirit, this Holy Spirit?

According to the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit plays the very same role and does the very same things that Jesus himself did (5:30; 8:16, 42; 13:3). Jesus is sent by the Father; so is the Spirit (14:16; 15:26). Jesus as the One who reveals God to us is recognized only by those who believe in him and not to the world in general (1:10, 12; 8:14, 19; 17:8). The same thing is true of the Holy Spirit (14:17). The Gospel of John tells us that the Son of God teaches and leads us into truth (14:16-17; 8:32, 40-42, etc.). That's also what the Holy Spirit does (14:26; 16:3). John tells us that the Son doesn't speak on his own authority (7:16-17; 12:49-50), and neither does the Spirit

(16:13). The Gospel of John tells us that the Son bears witness to himself (8:14) and convicts the world of sin (3:20; 7:7; etc.). The Holy Spirit also bears witness to Jesus and convicts the world of sin (15:26; 16:8).¹

The Holy Spirit does *today* in the life of the church and in the lives of Christians what Jesus did in his earthly ministry. And the Holy Spirit does it as God with us and for us forever.

With this insight, the Gospel of John helps us to understand the crisis among the disciples when Jesus told them he was going away. The departure of Jesus is not the end of God with us and for us: "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another [paraclete], to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth...." The Holy Spirit is for us what the earthly Jesus was for his disciples: a paraclete from God, a helper, a counselor, an advocate, a comforter - one who comes to our aid and defense in time of trouble.

The departure of the earthly Jesus now becomes the occasion for the sending of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit does not come to do away with Jesus or his teaching. The Holy Spirit only comes to magnify Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit helps us to remember and obey his teaching, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ sent at his request (14:16) and in his name (14:26). The Holy Spirit comes to help us in ways that don't draw our attention away from Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit only seeks the will and the way of the Son of God.

Who is the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who enables us to love. The Holy Spirit enables us to love truly and tell the truth lovingly.

There's a Southern proverb that goes this way: "Always tell the truth; but don't always be telling it." In other words, the truth is a greater burden than most of us can bear. We need all the help we can get to be both truthful and loving at the same time. We need a paraclete! And the promise of the parting Jesus is that there is a helper on the way who can enable us to live both truthfully and lovingly.

Years ago a tourist was exploring a market street in Damascus, Syria. He watched as a bicyclist balanced a crate of oranges on his handlebars. Suddenly, a man appeared carrying a large piece of baggage on his back. He was so bent over with his burden that he didn't realize he was walking right into the path of the bicycle. Smack! Well, the oranges went rolling down the street, the baggage was dropped, and a war of words broke out between the two men as a crowd gathered. Then the bicyclist moved toward the man who had been carrying the baggage with a clenched fist. Just then, a tattered little man slipped out from the crowd. He took the raised fist in his hands and kissed it. The cursing stopped. The two men relaxed. The crowd murmured approvingly. People began picking up the oranges. And the little man, who helped the healing to happen, melted back into the crowd.²

There are times in life when we, also, need some quiet counsel and advice and help? when unintentionally we collide

with others or find ourselves in conflict with friends or parents or children? We don't always know what hit us, but we know we're in a mess. And when the oranges go rolling down the street, we know we need a paraclete, a present help in time of trouble.

And the promise of Jesus comes to us right at the point of our need. For there is a Holy Spirit who comes from God - the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of love, the Spirit whose kisses open clenched fists, the Spirit who helps us pick up the pieces, reshoulder our responsibilities, and who gets us back on the road once more.

Jesus promises, "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another [paraclete], to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth...."

Come, Holy Spirit!

Let us pray: Holy Spirit, as we are together in one place, believing in God's love because of Jesus, and needing again the resources to live our lives well: make us sensitive to your presence within us; give us the skill to detect your activity in the world around us; help us to attempt what we know to be good, sure of your power at hand to help us: and bring us the joy of communion with God the Father. Amen.

¹See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A commentary*, trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (gen. ed.), R.W.N. Hoare, and J.K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 566-67.

²Kenneth W. Morgan tells this story, which I have paraphrased, in his letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 30 January 1991.