

Sermon for Sunday 22 May 2022 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

Pete Postle, Reader

May all I think and say, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

I was recently reading an article about Gnosticism (with a silent 'G' at the front if you want to look it up). It's sort of a post-Jesus idea that developed between the fight between spirituality and materialism. I'm not going to dwell on that particular sect, but it sort of reminds me of what a melting pot of ideas, sometimes conflicting ideas, that the early Church was. So much so that a second century Bishop, Irenaeus of Lyon, effectively set in motion the debate that was to lead to our canonical, Orthodox, New Testament.

The three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, spell out the truly Orthodox version of Christ's mission. John, though, which we heard today, takes a much more spiritual approach, more in line with Gnostic thought in fact, and today's reading from John is just such. John brings us Jesus's promise of the Holy Spirit, which he calls another comforter, or counsellor, or advocate, depending upon the version of the Bible you are reading. What exactly is meant here?

Firstly, in modern parlance, you should perhaps forget the word comforter, which is the one used by Wycliffe, in the first translation of the Bible into English. The meaning that Wycliffe intended was of someone who encourages or strengthens, rather than consoles, someone who will fight your case alongside you, rather than just providing sympathy. Now, John's Gospel was originally written in Greek, and the Greek word that the various writers are trying to translate here is *paracletos*, from which our word *paraclete* comes, and it means 'called in aid'. That is then translated into Latin, which is one we have tended to use ever since, and that's more explicit - *advocatus*, hence *advocate*.

The title of *advocate* gets us closest to the traditional Jewish picture, to, in fact, their understanding of the final judgement. According to this tradition, each of us would be brought before the judgement seat of God, and would find the counsel for the prosecution was the devil, but there would also be a counsel for the defence, who would call on favourable witnesses and influential friends. Such a person was this *paraclete* or *advocate*, and hence developed the concept of Jesus as *advocate*, arguing your case before your Father in heaven.

Here, though, Jesus is promising an *advocate* to help us find God in this life, this world, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, will be with his disciples and us, if you read on in John, forever. It's not that Jesus is lost to his disciples; he'll be forever with his Father, and his Father, and Jesus, forever with us. But there has to be an end to Jesus's earthly presence, to his earthly companionship, his conversation and teaching. The world, says Jesus, meaning the natural world of things without acknowledging God, pays no attention to the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, promises Jesus, the Spirit that is both the essence of truth and the Spirit that imparts truth. Truth, that is, as the objective reality of what really is, undistorted, completely understood, and truth as a quality of the mind where it becomes sincerity, as a desire to know what complete reality is and to be able to discard any conflicting detail that may obscure

that reality. Way back, oh 20 odd years ago, I think, I wandered (I think that's the most accurate description) into studying Christianity with just such an aim of finding the truth. I was a pompous little devil at the time. My thoughts and actions all seem pretty pretentious and self righteous now, but yet I find I can still defend my motivation.

Most of us here were brought up as children schooled in Christianity, and that meant putting 'C of E' where the form asked for 'religion'. In an age where obedience and respect for authority was expected and accepted, church-going is what your parents did and what you did. Later on, in my adolescent years, I began to think, what if I'd been born in India? I'd probably have been a Hindu instead of a Christian, and since I had an inbuilt fear of upsetting authority, I would have remained a Hindu. What if I had been born in Northern Ireland, would have been Protestant or Roman Catholic? The answer, I knew with a sinking heart, was that it would have depended entirely what my parents were. Thus I waded into a deeper study of my own faith, and convinced that I would be prepared to change that faith if the truth determined that I should. I found a sentence the other day that puts it well - it is quoted by William Temple in a passage where he's making the point that one must not confuse the question 'Is it true?' with the question 'Is it Orthodox?'

The quote he provides is from Samuel Taylor Coleridge - that's him of the Ancient Mariner, but here, from a book called 'Age to Reflection' and where Temple quotes, 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity, and then by loving himself better than all.' Well, my search has brought me into contact with such people as Archbishop William Temple, and William Barclay would seem to have trodden the same path as me, but with infinitely more skill, care and insight. And also someone called Hans Kung - he was alive till a very few years ago - a German theologian of towering stature, who has the intellectual power to question all and everyone.

But most importantly for me is that all they have searched for is truth and all have remained Christians. So three quotes to finish with - this from Temple: 'By the word of God, that is to say, by Jesus Christ, Isaiah and Plato, Zoroaster, Buddha and Confucius uttered and wrote such truth as they declared; there is only one divine light and everyone in their own way is enlightened by it.' This is Kung: 'We must learn again to spell out the question. Who is Jesus? Everything else is a distraction. We must measure ourselves against Jesus, not measuring against our churches, dogmas or devout Church members. Their value depends entirely on the extent to which they point away from themselves and call us to follow Jesus as Lord.' And this is Barclay: 'However splendid forms of worship are they are, are useless if men don't find through them the way to God.'

Amen.