

Sermon Pentecost 2009 I believe in the Holy Spirit
Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15
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“I believe in the Holy Spirit...” affirms the Apostles’ Creed.
To this the Nicene Creed adds its affirmation that the Holy Spirit is:

“...the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets”.

One of the Spirit’s functions as ‘Giver of Life’ was visibly represented
in our reading from Ezekiel where, in a vision, the prophet is
commanded to preach to dry bones.
The message he is to give begins,

“Dry bones, I am going to put breath into you...and bring
you to life”

And this is what happens when the prophet begins to preach God’s
message, the dry bones fit themselves together, are covered with
sinews and flesh, and the breath or wind of God brings them to life.
To the Israelites who were exiled in a foreign land, who despaired of
ever returning home, and who questioned God’s faithfulness, this
message
is intended to renew their hope and trust in God.

The Holy Spirit has many functions: he renews, inspires, animates,
comforts, stirs up and perfects.
But the function of the Holy Spirit upon which I wish to focus today is
that of *convicting*.

As we heard in our first reading from the Gospel According to John,
“When the advocate comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin,
justice and judgement...he will guide you into all truth.

John believes that one of the major functions of the Holy Spirit, here
called the advocate: is to convict.
To convict is to prove someone guilty or wrong who claims to be
without guilt or not in the wrong.
Now, we might think that this is rather negative function: convicting of
guilt or wrongdoing.
And, indeed, whenever someone accuses us of doing something
wrong our natural reaction is to be defensive or to deny it.
However, admitting our actual wrongdoing or wrong attitude is an
essential element in our growth and maturity: this has long been
recognised by the Catholic Church in its practice of personal
confession in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.
Jesus does not say that the Holy Spirit will send everyone on a guilt
trip; rather he says that the Spirit will bring the truth and light of Jesus
to bear on the way the world understands three specific concepts—
sin, justice and judgement—and in so doing will expose these
understandings as misunderstandings.
The Advocate, says Jesus, will demonstrate that the world is wrong in
its understanding first, of sin; second, of justice; and third, of
judgement.

So what is wrong, first, with the world’s understanding of sin?
Jesus says: the world is wrong about sin because it refuses to believe
in me...”
The word ‘believe’ here, means much more than assenting that such
and such is the case.
To believe, in the biblical sense of the word, means to put one’s faith
and trust in something or someone.
To put one’s faith and trust in someone is to make a commitment to
that person, a commitment like that a husband and wife make to one
another in marriage.
It is far more than mental assent; it deeply involves the whole of one’s
self, such that one is changed by the commitment one makes.
Jesus’ accusation that the world refuses to believe in him is saying
that the world refuses to make a commitment to him by trusting in his
life, death and resurrection by which it can be saved.
This is why the primary sin is always unbelief: for unbelief leads us to
mistrust God and trust in self instead.

Self then becomes the central point of reference for everything and we judge everything according to whether it conforms with or threatens our sense of self.

We have our own standards and ideals, influenced by our upbringing and culture, and we regard ourselves, and others, as sinful when we, and they, transgress these standards and ideals.

Some of us are harder on ourselves; others are harder on others when these standards and ideals are transgressed.

But either way, self is firmly at the centre of everything.

The revolutionary message of Jesus in John's Gospel is that *God* is at the centre of everything and will come and dwell at our centre through the ministry of the Advocate when we repent of our belief in the sole sufficiency of self and believe instead in Jesus.

This revolution in belief is like the difference between an earth-centred and sun-centred understanding of the solar system.

Prior to Copernicus and Galileo everyone believed that the earth was at the centre and the sun and the planets revolved around us.

But the Copernican revolution challenged this view by theorising that the Sun was at the centre and our planet earth revolved around it.

A self-centred and human-centred view of life would have us believe everything revolves around us.

By contrast, Jesus' view is that everything revolves around God and that this is what he and the Advocate have come to help us understand and live accordingly.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit convict us of the truth that we are creatures of God, made for communion with God, but we can have communion with God only by repenting of our unbelief and egotism.

Jesus says, secondly, that the world is wrong about justice or righteousness because I go to the Father when I pass from your sight. The judgement that the world will pass on Jesus will ultimately lead to his shameful death on a cross.

According to the religious leaders, Jesus is a sinner and a blasphemer; according to the secular leaders, Jesus is a revolutionary and troublemaker.

Both find it expedient to put Jesus to death.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries were looking for a Messiah who would condemn sinners and vindicate the righteous.

Jesus scandalized them because in his preaching of the kingdom of God he justified sinners and condemned the righteous.

The prostitutes, publicans and tax collectors were welcomed and affirmed by Jesus because they realised their need of God's grace.

The scribes, Pharisees and priests were condemned by Jesus because they assumed they were righteous already.

The Holy Spirit, as Jesus' Advocate, continues Jesus' ministry of convicting as sinful those confident in their own righteousness; and justifying as righteous those despairing of their sinfulness who put their trust in Jesus to save them.

Jesus says, thirdly, that the Advocate will prove the world wrong about judgement because the Prince of this world stands condemned.

In John's worldview the Prince of this world who holds the world in captivity is Satan: whose name means "the accuser".

Satan accuses all those guilty of sinning, and claims them as belonging to his dominion of death.

However, in the letter to the Hebrews the writer claims that Jesus, by his death, has broken the power of him who had death at his command, the devil or Satan. (Heb. 2:14)

Those who put their trust in Jesus death and resurrection are put beyond the accusations of Satan: we will be judged, but the righteousness we claim is by faith and trust in Christ.

But those still under the power of the Accuser judge on his basis: they accuse others while excusing themselves.

Satan's long monologues in Milton's *Paradise Lost* are, arguably, an extended exercise in self-justification.

Satan believes he has been misunderstood and God is at fault.

Satan always accuses others while excusing himself.

The conviction that the Advocate or Holy Spirit brings cuts through this self-deception and helps us to judge self realistically and honestly.

However, this realism and honesty is often painful, and many cannot stand such self-scrutiny.

In order to evade this self-scrutiny we deflect it by accusing others.

While I have been, along with many others, outraged that some Members of Parliament on a basic salary of £65 000 should be

feathering their nests by claiming unwarranted expenses, I also have been asking myself whether I, in their position, would have been completely scrupulous in my own accounting?

I hope I would have been, but I'm not completely sure.

Clearly the system of MP's expenses was open to abuse, and was abused by some.

However, I would urge caution if we wish to use the European Election this week as an opportunity to register our disenchantment with the major parties.

If we wish to make a protest vote, then let us put the minor parties under the same scrutiny as we would the major parties.

Let us examine their policies and read between the lines.

Having myself gone onto the UKIP and BNP official websites to read their policies, perhaps someone after worship could explain to me why two parties whose stated policy is to withdraw Britain from the EU are fielding candidates for the European Parliament?

I am frankly puzzled by this.

And if any are considering voting for candidates of these two parties I've named: I would ask you to consider the implications of their stated immigration policies.

There are many spirits alive in our world with their particular purposes; but only the Advocate or Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth if we will let him.

That does not mean that deciding for whom we will cast our vote will be a straightforward decision.

But if the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus active in the world today then our vote should be cast by considering the political issues in the light of Jesus' teaching and example.

The Holy Spirit as Jesus' Advocate not only convicts us of what is wrong; he also convicts us of what is right and necessary.

Let us be guided by the Spirit's conviction of what is just and good and not allow scaremongering to appeal to unwarranted anxiety or vested interest.

Let us celebrate Pentecost and demonstrate our belief in the Holy Spirit's action today by praying the ancient prayer 'Come, Holy Spirit' and pausing to be guided by his inspiration and conviction.

Amen