

When the Advocate comes

Readings: Acts 2:1-21, John 15:26-27 & John 16:7-15

How many of you like to watch a court-room drama? Or a murder mystery? Or read detective novels?

They're addictive aren't they?

There's so many of them on TV and in print. We can't seem to get enough of them. You know the basic story (they're all roughly the same), the bolshy detective with a heart of gold, wrestling with their personal demons (it's normally drinking, a past tragedy, or marriage problems isn't it?). They encounter all kinds of obstacles, including an angry police commissioner, a media back-lash or the case becomes too personal, but they carry on anyway, putting all other concerns aside (including their career and proper police procedures) They pursue their case until they finally reveal it was that guy we vaguely saw at the start but never suspected. We can only hope that if we ever find ourselves in hot water that such a person step up to see justice done for us, no matter the cost to themselves. Of course the real world isn't like that, but in our gospel reading today we are promised something even better, even though it has some potentially uncomfortable ramifications for us.

Let's set the scene first eh?

The events in our gospel reading are recounted by John as happening sometime in the build-up to Jesus's death and resurrection. This part of John's gospel doesn't have a lot of "narrative" or story telling. It's more of a collection of things Jesus said, with some basic context around it. It's sometimes called the "farewell discourse" and seems to have occurred during the last supper. Reading through it, its pretty clear that Jesus is preparing his disciples for the horrific time to come. A little like how they do in A & E when they have to do something unpleasant to you. They always tell you first don't they? I think it's so you don't scream and run off down the corridor, assuming something has gone wrong. "I'm sorry, but this is probably going to really hurt", they say before they wrench something, or stab you with something or bend something the wrong way. It doesn't help with the pain, but at least it's not a complete surprise. Jesus knew what was about to happen, and I think deep down the disciples kind of knew too. Maybe not the full ramifications, but they knew something bad was on the horizon. Jesus is doing his best to make sure they are prepared for it. He's also trying to give them the big picture so they can see that even though it's going to look like everything has gone wrong, it's all part of the plan. If you read this later part of John, much of the language reminds me of how a mother speaks to her children when she knows something unpleasant is on the horizon.

There's a real urgency there, and a lot of reassuring that things will be OK.

As Jesus's days on earth came to an end, more and more time was spent preparing the disciples for a future quite different than that for which they had hoped. Jesus would be put to a shameful death, and in His absence, the disciples would find themselves the object of the world's hostility towards the Savior of men. So as a means of reassurance, Jesus promises the coming of the paraclete:

"When the paraclete comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have

been with me from the beginning. Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement"

So who, or what is a paraclete?
[hilarious picture of a parakeet]

Oops, that's the wrong bird isn't it?
How about this one?
[lovely picture of a dove]

Actually. Seeing as how it's pentecost, lets mix our metaphors and see if we can go for a dove on fire!
[utterly bizarre picture of a dove on fire]

You've gotta love the internet!

Right, enough playing. Let's get back to the sermon shall we?

This word paraclete, literally translated, means to call along-side, but it's a bit of a weird word. It's not common outside Jewish Greek writing, and in the bible, it's not used much outside John's gospel. So we don't have lots of examples of how the word was used to make sure we understand what it actually means. And you can tell this by the number of ways it's been translated in various bible translations:

[huge list of words from different bible translations]

Somewhere in the middle of all that, I imagine, is the real meaning of paraclete.

But we do have some other clues. John is using the word to mean someone who speaks up for you in court. Parakletos, the greek word is derived from a word that means call to one's side, so it corresponds exactly to the Latin advocatus. Which is why in some bibles it's translated as advocate. Both were jobs in the Greek and Roman justice process, but there is a difference between a Roman advocatus and a Greek parakletos:

In a Roman court, an advocatus pleaded your case for you, but in a Greek court you had to plead your own case, but you brought along your friends to influence the court by their moral support and as witnesses to your value as a citizen.

So, not exactly like a barrister - although we refer to them as advocates too don't we? But more like the support person that you take with you to your disciplinary meeting, or to an employment dispute. In New Zealand, this the role of a support person:

"The support person is there to provide "wise counsel" and be an advocate for the employee. The employee may not be able to think clearly without assistance from someone who is "on their side". The support person enables the employee to be heard effectively, which is an important requirement of natural justice."

Well, that maps out pretty well to the job of the paraclete as sent by God, especially when we think of the poor disciples facing the future without Jesus. I'm going to follow the translations that use the word Advocate mostly, for the purposes of this sermon because I think it captures the court-room, legal aspects that John was going for. But as we have already seen, Advocate doesn't quite capture it either. The Spirit's job is to testify on behalf of the Father and the Son. To remind the disciples of what Jesus has said - ie. helping them think clearly and providing wise counsel while they got on with their job of testifying for Jesus. They were commanded to do this because they were eyewitnesses of what he had said and done. Another way I have seen it put is that the Holy Spirit will maintain the cause of Christ in the world, notwithstanding the opposition it meets with.

So maybe Champion is a better translation.

Seriously, there has been so much debate and so many words written over the meaning of this one word. Whole books, websites, commentaries and two thousand years of thought and reflection. And I have to be careful because I **love** all that stuff. I like the arguments, and getting right down into the nitty-gritty of it all. Solving the problem. It's important to get these things clear if we are to understand what Jesus, through John, was trying to say.

But!

Before I get too carried away, this passage is not, primarily, a theology lesson is it? It's about assistance in a time of need. Jesus wasn't trying to hammer out a water-tight description of who or what the Holy Spirit was! He was with his friends, and he knew what was coming. He cared deeply for them and wanted to reassure them that it would be OK. I'm not doubting the truth of what Jesus was promising here, just observing that this passage wasn't intended as a university lecture on the nature of the Holy Spirit. So we can't read it like one.

Jesus was going away - and in the most brutal, shameful and horrific way. He wanted his friends to know that he wasn't going to leave them alone. "I will not leave you orphaned" he says earlier in the gospel. Someone was coming to care for them in the way Jesus has up to now.

The promise of such an advocate may have been cold comfort for the disciples at the time, knowing that Jesus was going to leave them, and it was looking increasingly unlikely that he was going rise up, overthrow the Romans, kick them out of Judea and rein victorious. Cold comfort indeed.

But it must have been of huge comfort later on because by the time John recorded it, early Christians were being constantly dragged before the courts. Jesus's promise of someone who would speak out on behalf of the father and the son and convict the world of its sin must have provided a bit of comfort to terrified Christians wondering what would happen to them if they said the wrong things. The world has it wrong about sin, and justice and judgement. And the Advocate would guide them in all truth, speaking out in support of Jesus and his followers.

One aspect that struck me while I was reading this, is that the Advocate isn't actually OUR advocate.

The advocate was sent to represent Jesus and HIS interests in the world. It doesn't rule out the Spirit acting on our behalf, just that he's first and foremost Jesus's advocate. What a privilege we have, having access to Jesus's own defence council! Very few of us can afford the best lawyers to defend ourselves in court, but Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be there when we need words to say. It's just another of the ways that God exceeds our expectations and looks after us so much better than we really deserve.

So, the Spirit is the advocate employed by the Father to advocate on behalf of the Son. Part of the Spirit's role is to make sure the disciples remember what Jesus taught and to speak truth when the disciples needed it. But the Advocate is also there to convict the world. Awesome news! We have a champion who will take on the world on God's behalf!

Jesus says that the Spirit will convict the world on three counts. While we're getting all legal this morning, allow me read it out in a court-like manner:

"The advocate will present evidence sufficient to secure a conviction on an indictment containing three counts:

On the first count, that the world stands accused of treason (sin), in that it did wilfully and with malice aforethought levy war against the sovereign God;

On the second count, that the world stands accused of acts contrary to God's justice, in that it did murder God's lawfully appointed representative; and

On the third count, that the world stands further accused of treason, in that it did adhere to the sovereign God's enemy who had been subject to sentence following conviction of crime."

The world has sinned by rejecting the ultimate act of love and sacrifice, and the ultimate attempt to bring us back into a relationship with God. And the Holy Spirit's job is to make this known to the world, and to eventually overthrow the corrupt, selfish, careless, cold-hearted ruler of the world. God wants to bring us all back into the fold. Susan preached a few weeks back about how God just wants to gather us all up like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is another act of incredible love by a God that longs for us to be with him. We literally are our own worst enemies, us humans. When I look at some of the stuff on the evening news, or in our prayer sheets, the fact there is someone here fighting God's corner in the crazy, messed-up human bits of our world is fantastic news indeed.

So, as 21st century Christians, does the coming of the Advocate feature in our lives? We aren't the direct eyewitnesses to the life and work of Jesus, like the disciples were, so do we still have a role to play? Can we relax and consider ourselves off the hook on this one?

You know the answer already. Jesus commands his disciples to "also testify because you have been with me from the beginning". The disciples were there and knew what was true, so were commanded to speak up in support of Jesus and his message. Well, we know what is true too, and just because we weren't direct eye witnesses doesn't let us off from speaking up and advocating for the truth. We are called to be advocates just as much as they were.

So what does it mean if we're an advocate, or character witness for Christ? It's an interesting way of looking at what we are called to do isn't it?. I imagine that we need to look very carefully at what Jesus said and the things he did while he was here if we are to represent him accurately. Jesus promised that by keeping in touch with God, through the advocate we will be reminded of what he said. The Holy Spirit will take what Jesus says and pass it on to us, and even declare to us the "things that are to come". Maybe that means we'll know things that haven't happened yet, or maybe that just means he will prompt us to think through the consequences of certain events or actions. So we need to pray a lot to make sure we are still plugged in.

And I think as witnesses for Christ we need to be advocating for the sort of people Jesus stuck up for. And we must be careful of when 'the Spirit' leads us to adopt attitudes, or do things, contrary to the best evidence we have of Jesus' own practice. If this happens we can be sure it's not 'the Spirit of Truth' but some usurper. As often as not, we're the usurpers!

Jesus spent a lot of his time talking to people, both out in the world as he travelled and even taking on the establishment in pursuit of truth. He worked with the sick, disadvantaged, outcast or marginalised people, the ones that aren't powerful and needed someone to be on their side. He challenged the rich and powerful - showing them in some cases that they were loved, but that they had their priorities skewed. He spent time with his friends teaching them and empowering them to carry on his mission. He was counter cultural and single-minded in the pursuit of God's Kingdom.

Can we do stuff like that? Are we already doing it? I know for a fact that there are a lot of people in this church who really do a lot of this advocating stuff. We're a very caring bunch up here on the hill. But I also wonder if we sometimes require a nudge or two from the Holy Spirit to show us where we're needed.

What does it look like to be an advocate for Christ?

There's a comedy series from the UK called Rev. I absolutely love it!

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It's about an Anglican vicar called Adam Smallbone. He has a big, falling down church in London with hardly any parishoners and the parishoners he has are all pretty eccentric and tend to make his life difficult. He constantly struggles with finding enough money, attracting new people and being pulled between worldly concerns and God's priorities. The series itself captures the struggles of being a Christian in the world and it's so funny and accurate and thought-provoking that it blows me away to see it in a mainstream sit-com!

This one episode sprung to mind when I was thinking about being Jesus's witnesses in the world. In this episode Adam's church has been shared, then eventually taken over by a big, flashy modern church from a neighbouring suburb while their own building is being renovated. One of Adam's parishoners, a no-hoper homeless guy called Colin, has done something horrid to a respected member of this other church's staff. The vicar from the larger church confronts Adam and is asking Adam what he's going to do about it. Will he be forced into throwing his parishoner out of the church? The conversation goes something like this:

"I want this man barred from this church. Pip is a vital part of our congregation"

To which Adam relies:

"Well, Colin isn't vital to anybody... Except God. And if God loves you, then he loves Colin just as much. Colin's presence here is a blessing."

Perfect! An awesome reply! Being a champion for people that God loves. Especially those people that aren't vital to anybody, even if they don't deserve it. That's exactly what being an advocate for Christ looks like! Isn't that what Jesus did for us?

Unfortunately for Adam, the big church leaves, taking their money and congregation with them, leaving him back where he was. But the message was very clear. People matter to God a lot more than money and the prestige of a big congregation. In the eyes of the TV scriptwriters, Adam won that particular situation by speaking up for Colin even though in worldly terms it didn't pay off.

Rev is not written by Christians and isn't particularly aimed at a Christian audience. How did this end up on the air? Do we possibly have, in a BBC sit-com, a small example that the Spirit is continuing to work in the world, advocating for Jesus and convicting the world of its sin?

And now that unsettling question I promised you back in the beginning. As advocates for Christ, are we prepared to go in to bat for the people that Jesus advocated for? Those people that aren't vital to anybody, like the blind guy on the side of the road. Or who don't deserve it, like the prostitutes he ministered to or the tax collectors he went to dinner with. Or the wealthy, powerful people who found they were empty inside. Or shunned like the lepers who had been kicked out of their community. Or vulnerable, like the women who was about to be stoned to death. Jesus specifically stopped and spent time with them, ministered to them and offered them freedom. In the case of the women who was going to be killed, Jesus went in to bat for her, took on a hostile crowd and won her case!

Can we show people who don't feel valuable just how much they are valued by God? That no matter what they've done, or what their circumstances, God loves them and wants to set them free? There things we can do individually, and as a church, to support God's people. It might, for instance, influence where we choose to spend our money. Or maybe how we choose to spend our time. It might even send us out into the world to take on a case. To argue God's side, just as Jesus did.

I think I can relate to the disciples hearing this for the first time. Slightly panicked! What a job to be handed! But we can also take comfort from Jesus's promise that we're not required to do it by ourselves. The Advocate, or the helper, or the comforter or the counsellor, or whatever word works best... God sent them to be with us for just this task. What hope for the early Christians who so desperately needed a champion. And what hope for our world today that still so obviously needs a champion to push forward God's plan.

Our Acts reading related the dramatic story of the arrival of God's promised helper and we celebrate it every year as a the birthday of the church. It's that important to us. The Holy Spirit is still here and working in our world. Thank God for that!

I'm going to finish with a prayer that I have used before. I find it immensely powerful and a real challenge:

Lord,
Let us open the clenched fist and extend the open palm,
Let us mourn till others are comforted, weep until others laugh,
Let us be sleepless till all can sleep untroubled,
Let us be meek till all can stand up in pride,
Let us be frugal until all are filled,
Let us give until all have received,
Let us make no claims till all have had their due,
Let us be slaves till all are free,
Let us lay down our lives till others have life abundantly.

Amen