

Paraclete; Holy Spirit Come
Sermon by Rev. Alan Stewart
Sunday 17 May 2020

The three hardest things to say:

'I was wrong.'

'I need help.'

And 'Worcestershire sauce'.

Fermented condiments aside, for me the hardest thing always is to ask for help.

You see, I like to pretend to myself and others that I'm stronger than I am, project an image of self-sufficiency; make like everything's OK even when it isn't. Maybe it's a male thing; it's definitely a pride thing.

There's no doubt that we're living through especially difficult and stressful times, and, like me, you probably have your good days and your bad; mostly, I'm guessing, a combination of both; a mix of the anxious and the carefree; of feeling one moment energized and the next; running on empty.

But, actually, hard as these times are, they have brought with them, I think, a new vulnerability. When someone asks me how I am now, I feel I have a new permission to be more real, more honest about how things really are.

This morning, we eavesdrop once again into an extract of Jesus' farewell speech with his closest friends. We can't begin to imagine

the stress he's under at this moment; knowing what he knew - that betrayal, arrest, torture and death awaited. And, yet, typically and selflessly, he invests this precious time and energy not in meeting his own needs, but in preparing his friends for what is to come.

Somehow, he seems to know that each and every one will scatter and deny and hide themselves away, and that they'd hate themselves for it. So, he spends all this time in mentoring and supporting and reassuring; and over and over again, he talks of this mysterious Spirit; this secret weapon who would continue to be their strength, whatever happens. In this particular translation, he refers to the Spirit as their 'advocate' or their defense lawyer.

The Greek word he uses is **Paraclete** and it's rich with meaning. It *can* be translated Advocate, but it can also mean Helper, Comforter, or, my favourite; the 'One who comes alongside'.

Even when he physically won't be there, Jesus is saying, 'I won't leave you orphaned, I'll come alongside you, through the Spirit'. In other words, 'you won't lose me; through the Spirit, there will be no distance between us'.

Now, as then, we need more than ever that reassuring company of the Spirit. And, this morning, I just briefly want to suggest four good reasons why.

If we return to that idea of the Spirit as advocate or defense, we need the Spirit to defend our minds. Often, our very worst critic is the one inside our own heads; that enemy within that so quickly condemns and pulls us into negative and spiraling thoughts. This inner critic thrives in times like these, in moments of stress and isolation. It drags us into unhelpful introspection where too easily

we overthink, too quickly we feel condemned or overwhelmed.

The Spirit, as advocate, however, is the one who shields us from this inner-negativity; the Spirit is the one who speaks in our defense against our own self-prosecution.

A moment, then, to reflect on our own experience of that inner critic and our need for the Spirit as advocate.

So, come Holy Spirit; override the harsh and negative and hopeless voices within, speak your kindness; reassure us that we are worth loving; that we are not alone; and that through you, we can know a freedom from all that would drag us into self-abuse and self-indulgence. Amen

In these times of loneliness, of not always having that usual comfort of touch, just to know that the Spirit is also our Comforter is for me great comfort. There is so much sadness in the world at the moment; people grieving losses of many kinds.

And in all this sadness, and loss, and disappointment, and absence of intimacy; the Comforter sits alongside; unembarrassed by our tears, not fixing, not speaking, no trite platitudes; just holding, just being there, alongside; with us and for us.

So, another moment to reflect on our own losses, and our need for the Spirit as Comforter.

Come, Holy Spirit, may we and all those who need your comfort this day, sense those invisible arms that have never stopped

holding.

Thirdly; recent surveys seem to suggest that more people are praying through this pandemic. I don't know if that's true; I know some people have also stopped praying. But what I do know is that the list for prayer gets longer by the day. And sometimes I just don't have any words; sometimes I just feel numb.

So, the third thing I need to say about the Spirit is inspired by elsewhere in scripture, from a verse in Romans 8.

²⁶ 'In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself prays for us with sighs too deep for words.'

When we can't pray or don't know what to pray, the Spirit prays; for and through us.

A moment to consider all those we are praying for, or to allow the Spirit to prompt and surface names or faces of those who need our prayers in this moment.

Come, Holy Spirit, pray when we can't.

The fourth and final thing I want to say, very briefly, is inspired by an ancient and very famous Psalm. The Spirit 'restores my soul'; restores equilibrium, balance; replenishes all that is lost; lifts me up to see the beauty and the wonder and the kindness and the grace that is everywhere.

**The Spirit - our defender, our comforter, our intercessor,
the restorer of our souls.**

Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

