

**Easter 6 Year A 2008**  
**John 14:15-21**  
**The Spirit of Scripture**

It is sometimes said that the Holy Spirit has a hard time in Christian theology. To a certain extent, this morning's gospel reading doesn't help. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." This Counsellor, according to Christian tradition, is the Holy Spirit, indeed he is so described in one verse of the fourth gospel. According to this reading, the Spirit is the one who follows Christ as another advocate, counsellor or paraclete (the Greek word is *paracletos*, advocate or comforter). He is an advocate because he will plead the church's case, he will represent the church's life and doctrine against the world. He is, in part, a kind of defence lawyer. He is also, however, a source of comfort, for he will convict the world, and lead the church into all truth, bringing to remembrance all that Christ has said to them.

However, what happens if we look at the passage rather differently: "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another advocate, to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because

it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." That last sentence – he dwells with you and will be in you could also be translated he remains with you and will be among you. Is there anything which explicitly rules out the idea that this advocate is, like Jesus, a human being? Remember that his coming follows Christ's departure, that he will bring to remembrance all that Christ has said, and that he will lead the church into all truth. Could it be that the author of these texts, the evangelist, is putting words into Jesus' mouth to describe his own ministry, as the leader of the church community and the guardian and transmitter of the traditions of Jesus' own life and work. Might it be the case that the original paraclete is not the Holy Spirit but the author of the fourth gospel, engaging in a little theological autobiography?

What are the implications of this reading? First of all, we should point out that the original context or intention of a Biblical text is not finally determinative of its meaning. None of the authors of what we call scripture intended us to be reading their texts two thousand years later. The Bible is the Bible because the church makes it so, and the continual engagement with the text which the Christian community undertakes in every generation is what works out the meaning of scripture. I choose the word carefully because "scripture" has come to be a theological term, one which is useful for noting the distinction between looking at a Biblical text as one among many ancient documents, and responding to it

as authoritative and normative for Christian life. Jewish and Hellenistic theological texts are what are studied by historians. Scripture is what we as Christians must read, mark learn and inwardly digest.

The suggestion I have offered – that the paraclete might be the evangelist – is one among many. These various scholarly debates and possibilities of interpretation concerning the paraclete throw up some significant questions about the relationship between the work of the spirit and the text of the Bible. Christians have no doctrine of dictation. If anyone ever tells you that scripture was dictated by God, you can inform them that they are a Muslim. However, it is part of Christian teaching that scripture is inspired by God. In a sense, of course, everything is inspired by God, in that all that is created has life breathed into it by the Spirit, the giver of life. But Scripture reflects the activity of the Spirit in a particular way, not because it is the Word of God himself – that Word is the person of Jesus Christ – but because it is a unique and primary witness to that Word through which we encounter God in the person of Christ.

Traditional artistic images, such as Caravaggio's St Matthew, show us an angel on the shoulder of an evangelist telling him what to write. This is an imaginative construction. The work of the Spirit in inspiring the evangelists is impossible to pin down – the work of the Spirit makes them gifted storytellers, sophisticated theologians and quirky historians; it also preserves and transmits their texts so that – especially in the case

of the fourth gospel – the work of different authors and different communities can be brought together in what ends up as a single document. This inspiration is highly practical, and it is worked out in the life of the church. Here we have a very important point: the work of the Spirit is not something abstract, it is something which has real effects in real people and real situations. The inspiration of the Bible is something concrete, in that it appears in written texts, but also something which is alive and ongoing, because the church's continual reflection on the texts of scripture is also "inspired", that is, it is something which takes place in the power of the spirit who leads the church into all truth.

The Bible is not an idol. We restrict its power if we try to set it in stone and recreate, archaeologically, a supposed perfect and original sense which, even if it existed, will always be inaccessible to us. What we have is the text, and it is the text which ought to concern us. What gives life to the text is the church's acting out of scripture – in prayer and worship, in mission and evangelism, in service and pastoral care, in the study and teaching of theology. All these are activities of the church, and hence they are all activities of the Spirit.

And this brings us back to the paraclete, for the works which he will perform – presenting the church's teaching, bringing Christ to remembrance, leading those who follow into the truth of God and convicting those who oppose that truth – all those works are the works of

the Spirit. If the original paraclete was indeed the fourth evangelist, this makes no difference whatsoever to the fact that the work of the Spirit is what gives life to the church, to this particular church here and now, to the particular church of the fourth gospel there and then, and to the whole church across time and place and in heaven and on earth. Scripture and church cannot be separated, and both depend on the Spirit for their life.

Our lives, as Christians, are lived in the church and under the authority of scripture. But that authority only exists because the church makes it so, and the church only exists because the spirit dwells within us. There is, in other words, no point separating and opposing scriptural and church authority – as some have simplistically characterized the Reformation. Rather, authority in Christianity comes from God the Holy Spirit, and our task as disciples is to discern that authority in order to follow it. If we want to meet God we should attend to the places where he has sought us – in the person of Jesus Christ, witnessed by the scriptures and proclaimed by the church. If we would follow Christ we must be led by the Spirit, led into the truth which is the person of Christ himself. Our advocate and our comforter is the presence of the living God.

Fr Peter Groves