



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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**The Fourth Sunday after Easter:
Judgement and Justice
St. James 1:17-25 &
St. John 16:5-15
Fr. William Klock**

May 7, 2023

I don't like the news. Watching it or reading it. I don't like it. I try to pay attention to the top headlines via the Internet so that people don't think I live under a rock, but otherwise I don't like the news. Occasionally I tune the Apple TV to Global when I'm making dinner and it seems that it's just one injustice after another. And in the mornings while I eat breakfast I go online and my custom homepage lists headlines for me—and even when I prioritise the subjects that really interest me, there too, it's one evil after another and injustice piled on injustice. If there's a bright side, at least the injustices that makes the headlines make the injustices I experience seem fairly insignificant. People getting scammed, people being hurt and taken advantage of, maybe the worst are the people trampled by the government—the very institutions that are pledged to protect them. And so often there's nothing they can do. I remember the story of a Pakistani elder from a few years ago. Somehow he mistakenly ended up on a US government “kill list”. He'd repeatedly been the subject of drone attacks that endangered not only him, but his friends and family around him. And there was nothing he could do. He even managed to travel to Britain where he hoped he could get a hearing and somehow find justice. The world is filled with this sort of thing.

And then you turn to the Psalms. At Morning Prayer this past Friday Psalm 26 was appointed, a psalm where David cries out to the Lord for justice and for vindication:

**Vindicate me, O LORD,
for I have walked in my integrity,
and I have trusted in the LORD
without wavering.
Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test my heart and my mind.
For your steadfast love is before my
eyes,
and I walk in your faithfulness.
(Psalm 26:1-2)**

Or consider Psalm 43, which opens with very similar words:

**Vindicate me, O God, and defend
my cause
against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!**

David was feeling crushed by the weight of injustice, but he knew he was in the right and so he cried out in desperation to the Lord to hear his case and to vindicate him. Like the man who mistakenly ended up on the kill list of a superpower too big to care. Like the man who gets injustice from the very police charged with seeing justice done. Like the man seeking justice, but forever finding himself tied up in red tape and surrounded by uncaring bureaucrats. They know they're in the right. If only there were a righteous judge to hear my case, they think, then I would receive justice.

This was the national theme of Israel. It started in Egypt when the Israelites were slaves. They cried out to the Lord, he heard them, and he sent Moses to deliver them and then Joshua to lead them as they defeated the Canaanites and took possession of the promised land. There's even an entire book of the Old Testament called “Judges”. It's the history of the time between Joshua and Saul, the time between Israel's conquest of Canaan and Israel's demand that God give her a king like the other nations. Over and over during the period of the Judges this or that Israelite tribe as overrun and oppressed by their enemies—often the very people the Lord had told them

to destroy when they entered Canaan, but whom the Israelites had not destroyed. Judges has a pattern: Foreigners oppress the Lord's people, the Lord's people cry out for deliverance, and the Lord sends a *judge* to deliver the people from their enemies. In the Old Testament that's what judges do—they act on the Lord's behalf to vindicate his people and to deliver them.

But it didn't end when Saul was made king. Nearly the entire history of Israel from the Judges to the time of Jesus shows this same pattern. Whether it was the Assyrians or the Babylonians or the Persians or the Greeks or the Romans, Israel kept finding herself overrun by foreign empires and armies and living under their oppressive rule. Some of the psalms that cry out to God the Judge came out of just this kind of oppression. The Israelites knew that their God was good and that he was just. He had vindicated their faithfulness in the past and they had faith he would vindicate it again.

When the Israelites envisioned justice they often described it in terms of the law court, where the plaintiff and defendant would go before a judge, each would make his case, and the judge would decide between them. To “go home justified”—do you remember that's how Jesus puts it in the parable of the Pharisees and the tax collector?—to go home justified was to have the judge decide in your favour and to confirm your righteousness—to vindicate you before the face of your enemy. And so the Israelites envisioned themselves bringing the Babylonians or the Greeks or the Romans or the Herodians to court for oppressing them. The Israelites had never done anything to deserve this, they thought, and so they expected the Lord, the just Judge, to vindicate them and to rule against their enemies. One day the Judge would deliver them again just as he had so many times in the past.

But, of course we know if we've Israel's story, that she often wasn't as innocent as she thought. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel turned this court scene back on Israel. Israel had it backwards. It wasn't Israel that should be bringing her case against the pagan empires before the Lord, but that the Lord should be bringing his own case against rebellious and unfaithful Israel. The Babylonians or the Assyrians were actually the Lord trying to get his people to wake up to their sins and to repent and to be faithful to him. Needless to say, the prophets weren't very popular when they said these things.

But there was hope too. Those same prophets rebuked Israel on the one hand, but they also gave the people hope. Someday the Lord would rule in favour of his people and against the pagan nations that oppressed them. God would vindicate his people and rule that the nations were in the wrong.

This is how the Jews thought about themselves and about the world and it's the narrative that makes sense of our Gospel this morning about Jesus sending the Holy Spirit. Today's Gospel, like last week's, is a small portion of what's often called Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" from John's Gospel. It's a long discourse that Jesus gave to his disciples between the end of the Last Supper and his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and it's full of this back and forth between promises of persecution for his sake and exhortation to keep the faith. Our passage today comes immediately before last week's. Today's passage begins at John 16:5, but if we go back to verse 1, Jesus says to his disciples:

"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.

But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you."
(John 16:1-4a)

Jesus by this point has already explained to them that fairly soon he's going to be leaving them. That was bad news enough. But now he tells them that after he's gone, persecution is coming. The unbelieving Jews will throw them out of the synagogues. Some of Jesus' people will even be martyred for their faith. And they'll be tempted to throw in the towel and give up on Jesus. In verse 6 Jesus says, "Because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart."

But in truth, Jesus' leaving isn't actually a bad thing. They shouldn't be too quick to mourn. He goes on in verse 7:

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

The Helper Jesus promises to send is the Holy Spirit. John uses the Greek title *parakletos* and you'll see it translated in different ways: helper, comforter, advocate. The Greek word literally means one who is "called alongside". Jesus uses it in the legal sense of one who will act as an advocate in court. And here Jesus takes his disciples back to this heavenly court scene that was such a major theme in Israel's history and self-identity. But this time it's the disciples, Jesus' followers, the new Israel in the place of the plaintiff and the world—the Gentiles and unbelieving Israel—pitted against the Church. Jesus is leaving. The disciples don't like that idea, but it's actually a good thing, Jesus says. Once he's taken his heavenly throne, Jesus can send the Holy Spirit to come and plead his people's case before the Lord and when he does so he will vindicate his people, he will see that they are sent home justified by

proving that it's the world in the wrong.

Jesus says that the Spirit will prove the world in the wrong on three counts. Look at verses 8-11:

And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

So first, the Spirit will convict the world concerning sin. Sin at its heart is rebellion against God. It's a refusal to trust in God's goodness. Adam and Eve sinned when they believed the serpent's lie that God was holding out on them and ate the fruit God had told them not to eat. You and I were never created to determine good and evil for ourselves. We're finite beings. We can only see so far and know so much. God intended for us to trust in his perfect goodness and to obey him. The Father sent his Son, Jesus, to provide forgiveness and reconciliation and get us back on track walking in trust, but again the world chooses to rebel. The "world" rejected Jesus and murdered him and the world continues to reject him even today. And the Holy Spirit will expose all of this in the heavenly court.

Second, Jesus says the Spirit will convict the world concerning righteousness. Some translations read "justice" instead of "righteousness", which fits the law court scene better. In biblical terms to be declared righteous or justified is to have the court decide in your favour. Jesus says that the world is convinced that it is in the right. The world sits in the courtroom sure it will win the case. The Jews believed they were in the right to kill Jesus and then to persecute his followers. Caesar truly believed that he was lord and so he persecuted

those who insisted instead that Jesus is Lord. Even today people and governments persecute and kill Christians because they see us as a threat to their security or to their values. And even if it's not out-and-out persecuting Christians, the world often sits smugly in its sins. Today we see the world declaring various sins to be virtuous and condemning Christians and anyone else who says otherwise as being intolerant, bigoted, or judgemental.

But Jesus says that again the Spirit will convict the world. And the Spirit will do this by pointing to Jesus—the same Jesus rejected and murdered by the world, but now risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of his Father. The world was convinced it was in the right when it passed sentence on Jesus, but in the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus God himself has overruled the world's unjust judgement and vindicated his Son. And if God has vindicated Jesus, he will also vindicate all those who follow Jesus in faith.

Finally, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world concerning judgement. In its rebellious spirit, the world thought it could condemn Jesus and it continues to think that it can condemn us. Again, the world is convinced of its own righteousness. But in his death and resurrection Jesus has proved the world to be in the wrong. Not only has God overruled the world's false judgement on Jesus (and not only *will* God overrule the world's false judgement on us), but by his death Jesus has defeated the power of sin and in his resurrection Jesus has defeated death itself. Sin and death are the powers the devil has used since the beginning to enslave humanity, but Jesus has broken the power of both. The devil has been defeated by Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, because we have the Holy Spirit as our advocate we can face suffering, we can face the rejection and hate of the world for the sake of Jesus and continue to live in

faith that the Judge of all the earth will do what is just. Again, in Jesus' resurrection the unjust verdict of the world was overturned and Jesus was vindicated as the one in the right. And as he was vindicated in his resurrection so shall we one day be vindicated in ours.

But as I've said before, the point of all this isn't for us to simply hunker down inside the church and wait for Jesus to come back. He's given us work to do in the meantime. God's people have always had work to do. The Lord came into the darkness of the world when it was utterly lost in paganism and he chose Abraham to be his representative to be a light in that darkness. He blessed Abraham so that Abraham could be a blessing to the world—so that the world could once again know God's goodness, repent, and return to him. That mission became the mission of Israel and, since by faith you and I are grafted into Israel, Abraham's mission has become *our* mission. And Jesus doesn't stop with the Holy Spirit vindicating us in the heavenly court. The Holy Spirit, Jesus says, will speak to us.

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13-15)

Jesus is the Word and the Spirit will make him known to us. In our baptism Jesus pours the Holy Spirit into us and it's the Spirit who then unites us with Jesus, who regenerates our hearts and renews our minds, changing our affections and giving us understanding. The Spirit makes the Word known to us. He unites us with Jesus, the Word Incarnate. He

breathes out the Word written—Holy Scripture—through the Prophets and Apostles and through Jesus. Through the Spirit the Father makes himself known to us, calls us back into his fellowship, and sends us out to do the work of his kingdom. But that's just it. If we are in Christ we have the Spirit and all of this *should* transform us. This is why in our Epistle St. James exhorts us:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22)

And he goes on a few verses later to say:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

Brothers and Sisters, the world is a mess. It's a mess because of sin. We've all contributed to it. Jesus has set in motion the process through which he will make all things new, through which he will redeem his Creation and he calls us to be part of that. But notice—and this is vitally important for us to realise: Jesus doesn't redeem us to remove us from the mess. Just the *opposite*, in fact. Jesus redeems us so that we can go right back into the mess and start cleaning things up. The Word isn't something we merely *hear*; it's something we're called to *do*. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. To bring justice and righteousness to those most desperately in need of it. To make all the sad things come untrue. He ate with tax collectors and sinners—with people who weren't just suffering from the mess others made, but the very people at the heart of a lot of the mess-making. James warns us not to get back into mess-making ourselves, but he also tells us that like Jesus we need to be in the thick of it working to

make things right and working to point the world to the *one* who is making all things right. The world will hate us. Jesus promises it. We will probably suffer for being light in the darkness, but Jesus calls us to walk in faith, trusting that the God who raised him from the dead will act justly and righteously with us too. Being justified ourselves we are to go into the world, as the Lord said through the prophet Micah: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” We’ve all *heard* the good news. Brothers and Sisters, we need to ask ourselves what we’re doing to be faithful stewards of the good news and the grace of God? What *are* you *doing* with it? The Spirit has equipped and empowered each of us. What can you do to make Jesus known in practical ways, to proclaim good news, to be light in the darkness, to help others who are still mired in the mess made by human sin?

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we live in a world that often hates us. Let us never be afraid to be doers of your Word. We have been justified by Jesus. Remind us that we have no reason to fear the world’s accusations. We live in hope of life. Give us courage to stand up to the darkness and to be ministers of your light and your grace and your mercy. As we have been rescued from our bondage to sin and death, give us courage to go into the world with the good news that others might be freed to know your grace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.