



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter St. James 1:17-21 & St. John 10:11-16 Fr. William Klock

May 2, 2021

Our lessons today continue to carry us through the Easter season. In our Gospel we see the story moving us gradually from the events of Holy Week and Easter to the Ascension and to Pentecost and in our Epistle St. James points us to the practical outworking, to the implications for the Christian life of what Jesus was explain to his disciples.

Our Gospel today isn't the easiest passage to understand, but it helps to have a sense of where the Jewish people were coming from in the First Century. There were times when Israel prospered and flourished, but most of her history involved difficult times, whether that was her slavery in Egypt, internal conflicts, conflicts with her pagan neighbours, or her exile to Babylon. Through these difficult times, God's people cried out to him, whether it was the nation as a whole crying out for God to give them justice in the face of wicked enemies or the righteous within Israel crying out for God to judge the wicked kings or priests or false prophets in her midst. God's people pleaded for their day in God's court. They knew he was the just Judge, they knew his promises, and they knew that if and, more importantly *when*, they had the opportunity to stand before him, he would hear their case, that he would hear their evidence, and that he would judge rightly—that he would find his people (or the faithful remnant among them) to be in the right, that he would vindicate them, and that he would punish their enemies and set things to right. Through the Psalms and here and there in the Prophets we get glimpses of the heavenly courtroom and hear Israel pleading with the Lord to let her stand there and to hear her case. And things

were no different in Jesus' day. The people pleaded with the Lord to hear their case against the Romans, or against the corrupt Herodians, the Romans' puppet local rulers, or against the men who had corrupted the priesthood and the temple. This desperate longing for God's justice is what Jesus draws on in the Upper Room as he speaks to his disciples, preparing them for what's to come. Let me read part of our Gospel to you again and see if you can hear it.

But now I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. 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. 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.

Jesus is telling his friends that he's going to have to leave them and this leaves them with all sorts of questions. The Messiah was supposed to set everything to rights, but how is that going to happen if he leaves? And now Jesus is saying that the problems are going to continue. His people will face rejection and persecution. But he also promises that they *will* know the vindication that Israel had always longed for. This is, in fact, just the reason why he's got to leave.

You see, they thought that the Messiah would be the one standing as their advocate when they had their day in God's court. That he would be their lawyer—to put it in our terms. They expected Jesus to be their Perry Mason. If he were to leave, who would make their case? But Jesus is going to do something even better. Jesus will send the Helper. The Greek word is *parakletos*. Jesus is referring to the Holy Spirit, but the word he uses here refers to one who will stand as a mediator or intercessor or an advocate. The Spirit will stand before the Judge

like Perry Mason to make the case. But here's the critical thing: Jesus the Messiah will be the one in the dock. He will be the one on trial. And this is why Jesus had to leave them. He was arrested, falsely accused, and unjustly executed. The world issued a verdict against Jesus: he was a false messiah, he was in the wrong. But by raising him from the dead, his Father overturned that verdict and declared that he is, indeed, the Messiah. And the disciples were overjoyed to have him back—but then he had to leave again. Why? They need their Messiah with them, so they think, to set things to rights. But, no, he's got to leave again. Why? Because his vindication is not complete. Jesus' vindication is completed in his ascension, as he returns to the Father to sit as his side as Lord of all.

And so Jesus will be raised from the dead and he will ascend to his throne. And this these things will be Exhibit A and Exhibit B when the Spirit makes his case in court. The Spirit, Jesus says, will bring the evidence to convict the world of sin. First, the Spirit will hold up the world's rejection of Jesus himself and its continuing pursuit of its own values and agendas as evidence. Second, the Spirit will bring evidence to convict the false justice of the world. Most translations make this already difficult passage more difficult by translating *dikaioisyne* as "righteousness" when "justice" suits the passage far better. The world believes itself to be just or in the right. We see this supremely in the false conviction and execution of Jesus. But the world's verdict on Jesus was overturned that first Easter and God's verdict in regards to Jesus is confirmed at his ascension. Third, the Spirit will bring the evidence to show that the world's judgment or condemnation of Jesus and his people is wrong. Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension reveal the defeat of the "ruler of this world"—of the satan, of sin, and of death. In short, what the Lord has promised and what Israel had longed for is about to be fulfilled in and by Jesus himself and will be known by those who have united themselves to him in faith. Brothers and Sisters, here's the wonderful thing here. Jesus is the one who will stand in the dock to face the judge. The Spirit will make his case.

The judge will find him—from our perspective today, *had already* found him—to be in the right. And then we find out that Jesus invites us sinners to join him in the dock as the Father issues his verdict. We have done nothing. Jesus has done it all. But when we by faith step into the dock and identify ourselves with Jesus, his vindication becomes our vindication. He reality becomes our sure and certain hope. Jesus exhorts his friends in verses 14-15:

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.

“He will take what is mine and declare it to you.” But, Brothers and Sisters, it’s more than the verdict in favour Jesus that the Spirit declares and passes on to us. Let’s look at our Epistle again. Again, this is James 1:17-21.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

The work of the Spirit that Jesus describes in the Gospel is not limited to the heavenly courtroom or to esoteric knowledge about Jesus. This should be obvious if we remember Israel’s story. Her relationship with the Lord had always been meant to work out in her life and her life was meant to be a witness to the world of life in the presence of God. If the Spirit will come alongside Jesus’ people to see them vindicated in the heavenly court, and if the Spirit is to give them understanding into just what it is that Jesus has done by

his death and resurrection, St. James knew that the Spirit will also cause the life of God to well up in this new Israel that is rooted in Jesus. James is well-known for his stress on the works that necessarily accompany faith. God doesn’t merely save his people from sin and death, he saves them to be his stewards.

It seems likely that when today’s Epistle was chosen to be paired with our passage from John 16, an association was meant to be made between Jesus’ promise of the Spirit and James’ statement that “every perfect gift is from above”. While James does not speak directly of the Spirit, the gifts from above that he does address are those conferred by the Spirit and his exhortation here closely parallels Jesus’ exhortation in the Gospel. James speaks first of the wisdom God bestows on those who ask (v. 5) and then, after urging his readers to stand firm in the face of persecution (v. 12), he reminds them that God is not the source of our temptation (vv. 13-14). Just the opposite, in fact: God only sends us good gifts. In our fallen state, our disordered desires lead us to sin and sin to death, but God has spoken his “word of truth”—his *logos*, surely a reference both to Jesus and to God’s word in a more general sense—to bring about a work of new creation in us. If we in Jesus, the new creation that has begun in him is beginning in us as well. Even as we face trials and struggle against sin, the firstfruits of God’s new world are manifest in our lives.

But Friends, this leaves us with a choice. Will we pursue sin or will we pursue the life of God? In the heavenly court we have been declared by God to be in the right, because we have united ourselves to Jesus in faith. His vindication is our vindication. The Spirit has given witness on our behalf. But woe to the one who names Jesus while manifesting anger, filthiness, and wickedness. Try as we might to claim the vindication of Jesus for ourselves, a life characterised by wickedness rather than the Spirit reveals any such claim to be superficial. As James will write in 2:20, faith without works is dead. Brothers and

Sisters, when we are united with Jesus the Spirit not only makes the Father’s verdict that Jesus is in the right our verdict, but he also does a work of transformation—of regeneration and renewal in us that gives evidence of that verdict. The evidence that we have taken hold of Jesus in faith is God’s new creation welling up in us as we manifest the fruit of the indwelling Spirit and produce good works. And so, even as we grasp Jesus in faith, we also pray in faith as we do in our Collect today, for grace—for grace that will rightly order our sinful and unruly hearts, for grace that we will love what he commands, and for grace that we will desire what he has promised.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the many and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*