

# Sixth Sunday of Easter



## John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples: <sup>15</sup>“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

### COMMENTARY

**15:** “If you love me...”: this is not really a true *conditional* sentence, since Jesus doesn’t seem to doubt the disciples’ love for Him. It has more the sense of “Since you love me...” or “Being that you love me...”; He takes this for granted, and makes it the *springboard* for His moral teaching. In our modern world, we often see true love as “freeing,” in the sense that it doesn’t impose obligations or make demands. And yet here Jesus seems to make clear that *true* love for Him will be revealed in *respect for*, and *obedience to*, what He has commanded. It is a love that has to go beyond mere sentimentality or words, and must be made concrete in terms of the way His disciples live their lives (John 15:14 “You are my friends [Gk *philoī*, those who love me] if you keep my commandments”). It is not enough to say “I love you, Lord,” if that love makes no difference in the way we act, if our lives are not somehow transformed, challenged or changed by that profession. A love that stays on the level of thoughts and words only is not *really* love at all—it must be incarnated on a deeper, personal, practical level (see Matt 7:22). Christian faith can never be merely *theoretical*—and this obviously has implications on every level of our life, especially in terms of our commitment to social justice and the transformation of our society more and more according to the ‘template’ provided by the Gospel.

The two Greek verbs used here are *agapaō* (related to *agápē*) and *tēreō*. As has often been observed by scholars and preachers, *agapaō* is a more demanding, self-sacrificing kind of love, traditionally associated with the Christian ideal—it is more than just “If you like me” or “If you respect me” or “If you care about me”. It implies a committed love that is willing to “pay the price”. Here, in the context of the Last Supper, Jesus is summoning the disciples to a daring kind of love. *Tēreō* has the sense of “to obey, to maintain, to hold firm to; to protect, keep inviolate”—it is a word closely connected with perseverance, patient endurance, “hanging in through the rough times”. It involves resoluteness, firmness of purpose, a clear vision of what one is pursuing. These are words that hint already that obedience and love will not always be *easy*. Jesus is calling us to an adventure, to take a risk on the future with confidence in Him.

**16:** Jesus seems to be suggesting a chain of events here: love for Jesus leads to faithful obedience; faithful obedience leads to Jesus’ asking the Father to send another Advocate. There is a sense in which the sending and presence of the Spirit is directly related to the love we have for Jesus, and our striving to obey Him. Note also Jesus’ identification of Himself here, as the heavenly intercessor on behalf of us before God: “For there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human” (I Timothy 2:5).

“Advocate”: the Greek word here, *Paraklētos*, is the source of our English word “Paraclete” (note: NOT “Parakeet,” as I have heard it pronounced on more than one occasion!). The Greek term is a compound word, made up of the preposition *para* (beside) and the past participle *kletos* (called, summoned; from the verb *kaleō*, ‘to call’). In ancient Greek and Roman courts, the paraclete was someone (roughly the equivalent of a defense lawyer) “called alongside” you, as your defender and spokesperson before the court (the Latin word *advocatus* is an exact translation of the Greek: *vocatus*, ‘called’ + *ad*, ‘toward, alongside’; hence the terms for lawyer in French [*avocat*], Spanish [*abogado*], etc.). The paraclete gave you encouragement, offered advice as to how to act and what to say, and “advocated” (lobbied) on your behalf with the legal authorities; it was someone who had your best interests at heart. Jesus’ use of this term to refer to the Holy Spirit conjures up similar images: the Spirit is the one who will encourage and strengthen us, who will guide us as to what to say and do, who will defend us from judgement, will speak on our behalf, and seeks what is best for us. The Spirit is the one we can (and should) “call alongside us,” to enable us to live out our Christian vocation faithfully. The Spirit accompanies us, and will never lead us astray. “*Parakletos* has been translated Advocate, Counselor, Comforter<sup>1</sup>, and Intercessor, but each of those expresses only one facet of *parakletos*. The original readers of this Gospel would have heard the full richness of its various meanings” (Richard Donovan, SermonWriter.com). It is perhaps interesting that, in one of



the most-beloved ancient Jewish texts (“The Sayings of the Fathers”), a rabbi named Eliezer ben Jacob says: “He who performs one divine commandment gains for himself one advocate [=*paraklētos*], and he who commits one transgression acquires for himself one accuser” (Mishnah, *Avot* 4:11). The presence of the “advocate” is linked directly to obedience to the commands of God’s Law.

“...he will send you *another Advocate*”: Jesus’ wording here is perhaps somewhat unexpected: He is not simply saying He will ask the Father to send *an* Advocate, but *another*, a second Advocate. And the obvious implication is that the *first* Advocate, the first *defender and guide*, has been *Jesus*, whose work the Spirit will continue and deepen<sup>2</sup>. This is the insight in the First Letter of John, which says: “if anyone sins, we have an advocate [*paraklētos*] with the Father: Jesus Christ the righteous” (I John 2:1). We are not used to thinking or speaking of Jesus in these terms, but this seems to be the way the New Testament authors understand Him. Jesus is our *defender*, the one who “pleads our cause,” the one who is “there beside us,” speaking to the Father as our representative. Jesus is the first, the original “Paraclete”.

“to be with you forever”: The Spirit’s role is not something temporary or transitional, but is *permanent* and *for all time*. Just as Jesus has been “with us” (Immanuel), so the Spirit will accompany us in all circumstances, even if this presence is an invisible, spiritual reality that is not as readily evident as the physical incarnation of God in Jesus. In every generation, and at every moment, we can call upon the Spirit with confidence, trusting in this promise.

On a certain level, Jesus is hinting here at His upcoming Passion: the Spirit will be the Paraclete who is able to be with you always, whereas a time is coming when I will no longer be able to be with you [at least in the way you have come to know me]. He contrasts the Spirit’s *presence* with the seeming *absence* of Jesus that they will shortly experience.

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<sup>1</sup> “Comforter” [Heb *Menachem*] is one of the names or titles that certain ancient Jewish rabbis associated with the Messiah. When he comes, he will comfort and console the Chosen People in God’s name (Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Sanhedrin* 98b).

<sup>2</sup> “The word translated *Comforter* is used in the New Testament five times. In four instances it is applied to the Holy Spirit—John 14:16; 26; 15:26; 16:7. In the other instance it is applied to the Lord Jesus—1 John 2:1: ‘We have an advocate (Paraclete—Comforter) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.’” (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*)

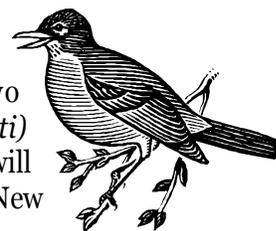
**17:** “This is the Spirit of truth<sup>3</sup>, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him”: the Spirit is the *source* of truth, *bears witness* to the truth, *promotes, reveals and inspires* truth. “Whom the world cannot receive”: literally “is not able to receive”—as if “the world” and “the truth” were diametrically opposed, as if “the world”<sup>4</sup> were fundamentally “untrue” or false (such a dichotomy would not be unthinkable in Johannine thinking, where things tend to be quite black-and-white, true-or-false). The world is blind to, and ignorant of, the truth that comes from God—it embraces its own brand of truth. It is not particularly interested in the truth that God offers. The verb translated as “see” here (Gk *theōreō*) can also have the meaning of “to understand, to grasp, to experience, to pay attention to or notice”—in this case, it is not so much a *culpable* ignorance, but results from the fact that “the world” and God’s truth are on two very different levels; the world can never *hope* (on its own) to penetrate God’s truth, which far surpasses it and requires a Spirit-given understanding. Or the world simply does not *notice* or *pay attention* to the Spirit of truth—it passes by, largely oblivious to what the Spirit might be saying or doing.

The disciples, however, understand the Spirit’s work, because the Spirit accompanies them and dwells [literally “remains”] within them. Without this accompaniment and in-dwelling, human beings cannot hope to comprehend the Spirit and its activity.

**18:** “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you”: here, Jesus uses the tender, intimate language of a family which is afraid of losing its beloved parent-figure (the English word “orphan” comes from the Greek word *orphanos*, which is used here)<sup>5</sup>. But no, Jesus says; He will not abandon those whom He loves, will not leave them defenceless, or alone. Although it may sometimes *appear* or *seem* that way, it is not the case. They will have the “abiding” gift of the Spirit, and Jesus Himself will come to them, in a new, different and even more powerful way.

“I am coming to you”: the verb here is in the *present* tense, not in the *future*, as we might expect: does this imply that the “coming” is already beginning as He speaks, or is He speaking of the future (i.e. “I will *come back* to you”)? The phrase can be read in both ways (and John perhaps *intends* it both ways!). It can also be understood as referring to three possible “moments”: (1) with reference to the time when Jesus will come to them as the newly-risen Lord; (2) with reference to the giving of the Holy Spirit, through which Jesus will reach out to them in a new, more powerful way; (3) with reference to His Second Coming at the end of time. “Every phase of his promised coming is embraced in this assurance: ‘I am coming to you’ ” (F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, p. 303). Interestingly, the use of the *present* tense here suggests, in Greek, a *continual, ongoing, unbroken* form of “coming”.

**19:** “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live”. The grammar of this verse allows of two somewhat different interpretations. The word translated “because” here (Grk *hoti*) also has the meaning of “that,” and so the verse can also be translated as “you will see *that I live*, and you also will live” (this is the reading adopted by the New



<sup>3</sup> Presuming that Jesus is originally speaking in a Semitic language here (Hebrew or Aramaic), this construction “the X of Y” is often used where modern languages would use an adjective. If this is the case, here it would mean something like “the true Spirit” or “the authentic Spirit”—perhaps in opposition to *other* spirits who were false or lying, who were offered by charlatans or in various pagan religions, and which did not come from the Father?

<sup>4</sup> It’s important to note that this is not an “anti-world, ‘the flesh is bad’ ” ideology, as some have suggested; for John (as for Paul), “the world” frequently means “the world apart from God, the world as unredeemed”. It is a reference to everything in the world that is *wrong*, rather than a blanket condemnation of the world and the physical *per se*, as certain later heretical groups (like the Gnostics) will propose.

<sup>5</sup> “The original word, ὀρφανός, is by some derived from ὀφθαλμός, *obscure, dark*, because ... an *orphan* (one deprived of father and mother) is little esteemed, neglected, and is obliged to wander about in obscurity and darkness.” (Adam Clark, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant commentator). Just a few verses earlier (in 13:33), Jesus had referred to the disciples as “little children,” speaking with the loving tenderness of a father-figure about to depart on a difficult voyage. In Jewish rabbinic literature, students often speak of the death of their beloved rabbis as leaving them “orphans” or “fatherless”.

Jerusalem Bible (English and French) and the French TOB translation (“vous me verrez vivant”). Is Jesus promising that they will see Him *again*, or that they will see Him *alive*, or will finally grasp the reality of the Resurrection? Good arguments can be made for both understandings.

Again, we need to ask ourselves: what does Jesus mean by “the world” here—and again, it seems to be the “unspiritual, unredeemed, unbelieving” world, rather than the entire physical universe or the whole of humanity, as it might seem at first glance. “will no longer see me ... you will see me”: again, the use of the verb *theōreō*, which often means more than simply visible sight: you will *see* me, but you will also *experience* me on a deeper level, will *understand* me, will finally *penetrate* into the reality of *who* and *what* I am. The disciples will be blessed with a particular grace, which will enable them to see and grasp that which many others will not. Note also the contrast: the disciples are *different from* “the world” (and are *expected to be* different from “the world”); we must always be careful about the degree to which we compromise with “the world,” so as not to water down the truth of our faith.

“Because I live, you also will live”: Jesus’ new and unending life will become the *source* and *cause* of new and unending life for us as well. There is a strong bond which Jesus is drawing between Himself and His followers, such that what *He* experiences, they will experience also; there is an organic unity, so that *Jesus’* life flows into the life of those who belong to Him. “The same [life] which is in the *head* is in the *members* also; indeed, it is not so much they that live, but Christ that lives in them, and therefore their life can never be lost” (John Gill, Protestant Biblical commentator)

**20:** “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you”: again, Jesus stresses the unity of Himself with the Father, and says that His followers will be initiated into that union, will be united to Christ in a way analogous to His union with the Father (Jesus will delve deeper into this relationship during His “high priestly prayer” in John 17:20-23). To be “in someone” suggests an intimate bond that cannot be severed, a relationship of permanence: “in His bosom, in union with Him, partaker of the same nature, perfections and glory with him, and equal to him” (John Gill)

Note also the use of the Divine Name, “I AM,” by which Jesus seems to be stressing again His equality with the Father, since a name in the ancient world was considered the “essence” of something. To share a *name* is to share an *identity*, an *essence*.

**21:** “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them”: “The first two lines of 21 restate 15 in inverse fashion and show that love and keeping the commandments are but two different facets of the same way of life” (Raymond Brown, *Anchor Bible: John*, p.646)

Again, as He said in the beginning, Jesus stresses the necessary link between *true love of Him* and *obedience to what He has commanded*. These cannot be separated; the idea that Christian faith can somehow be severed from the demands of Gospel morality and behaviour is entirely foreign to the words of Jesus. Real faith and real love are revealed most fully in a commitment to live out what Jesus has asked of us, to put our faith and love into concrete action. We must “walk the talk,” and “put our money where our mouth is”. Indeed, as St. John Chrysostom so aptly put it 1650 years ago: “There would be no need for sermons, if our lives were shining; there would be no need for words, if we bore witness with our deeds. There would be no pagans, if we were true Christians.”

“Those who love me will be loved by my Father”: because of the intimate, total bond between Jesus and the Father, the love Jesus’ followers have for *Him* is equally love shown for *His Father*, a love that the Father will reciprocate abundantly.

“I will love them and reveal myself to them”: there is an almost mystical quality to these words of Jesus: a person’s love for Jesus will be rewarded, not only by Jesus’ love for that person, but by Jesus’ *self-revelation*: they will be blessed with a profound understanding of Him, will enter more deeply into the mystery of *who* and *what* He is.

“Christ does not *begin* to love his people when they begin to love and obey him; their love and obedience to him *spring from* his love to them, which was from everlasting. But this phrase signifies a clearer discovery of his love to them, which surpasseth all knowledge” (John Gill)



People translating the New Testament into the Karre language in equatorial Africa were having difficulty coming up with a word to translate *parakletos*. How could they describe the Holy Spirit? Then they noticed porters walking in a line along a path, each carrying a heavy burden—except for one person. That one person was carrying nothing. When they asked why, they learned that the man carrying no burden was expected to help anyone who became too exhausted to carry his own burden. They called him, “The one who falls down beside us.” And that gave the translators their term for *parakletos*—“The one who falls down beside us.” (as quoted by Sermonwriter.com)

Do not pray for more of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, and is not in pieces. Every child of God has all of Him—but does He have all of us? (Julia Kellersberger, in *The Presbyterian Journal*)

St. Augustine tells us that in order to see truth, “The mind should be cleansed so that it is able to see that light and to cling to it once it is seen. Let us consider this cleansing to be as a journey or a voyage home. But we do not come to Him who is everywhere present by moving from place to place, but by good endeavor and good habits.” Such good endeavor is so easy and yet so difficult: we have his commandments—now let us *keep* them. (Scott Bader-Saye, in *The Christian Century*, April 2002)

Our faith, nurtured in this great paschal season, tells us that God-made-flesh is God-with-us, never abandoning us and always filling us with life. It should be a great comfort to all of us, who share in the pain and suffering of ordinary life, to know that the Spirit of Jesus is with us always. It should be especially comforting to know that Jesus will not leave orphaned all those whom the world casts aside: the poor and homeless, the racial and ethnic minorities, the sick and dying, the prisoner and the refugee. (Gerald Darring, online at the Web site of the Center for Liturgy, St. Louis University)



*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,  
Because He lives, all fear is gone;  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living,  
Just because He lives!*

*(Hymn lyrics by William Gaither, © 1971)*