

Whitsunday A 28/05/2023

According to the dictionary, an advocate is “a powerful and influential person who defends or maintains a cause or proposal on our behalf.” Someone working for us and on our behalf can be very beneficial when we are in some kind of difficulty or trouble. Someone working for us and on our behalf in life with integrity has value beyond description. In other words, a strong human advocate can save us from dire situations in which we might find ourselves.

Whether or not you will ever need a competent Advocate to represent you in a trial, you do need a competent and strong Advocate for life. That is what is being offered in our Gospel. In another place Jesus says, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father — the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father — he will testify about me” (John 15:26).

This testimony of the Advocate, much more than the testimony and defence by a dedicated, strong, and tough barrister, is a matter of life and death. The Holy Spirit, our Advocate, makes the difference between eternal life and eternal death by leading us to faith in Jesus.

The Holy Spirit testified to the apostles about Jesus Christ. At the time of Pentecost, there were eleven apostles. Judas, the twelfth apostle, had committed suicide after his betrayal of Jesus. On Pentecost Day, a harvest festival for the Jews, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles and other believers and the church of Jesus Christ was born. The Advocate confirmed the meaning of what had happened to Jesus and the apostles became the pillars on which the emerging community of God, called the Church, was built.

The Holy Spirit testified to the early Christians about Jesus Christ. Using Peter’s amazing, confident speech on Pentecost about the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Advocate brought 3,000 people to faith. How? By convincing them of “sin, righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8-11). Convinced of sin? Yes, they were. Peter helped them understand their sin and need for a Saviour. He knew his own need for forgiveness of sin. He had denied even knowing Jesus outside the high priest’s home. He knew that where there is no repentance for sin, there is no new life. Peter could preach about sin and forgiveness because he knew the experience first hand. So did the other apostles who had deserted Jesus in his hour of need. Peter understood the need for people being convicted of their sinfulness and the need for repentance. Thousands were turned around that day. They were turned back to God.

Convinced of righteousness? Yes, they were. Peter’s sermon converted the people who heard the gospel. The people saw that Peter was right. More importantly, they saw that Jesus was right. He was the promised righteous one, the Messiah, the fulfilment of the longing of the people of Israel. Convinced of judgment? Yes, they were. Peter described the generation in vivid terms with the clear implication that those who did not turn away from the sinful tendencies of their society would have to face the judgment of Almighty God. He said, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40). In other translations, the word “corrupt” is translated “crooked” (RSV), “perverted” (Phillips translation), and “wicked” (TEV). That’s judgment on sin in the present age with the promise of ultimate judgment in the hereafter. The Holy Spirit testified to the apostles.

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us today. How? Through the preaching of the word. Every sermon needs both law and gospel in it. We all need to hear both judgment and grace. In times gone by there was so much law in the preaching and teaching of our churches that there was a great imbalance.

Today, the imbalance is in the opposite direction. Sermons tend to go lightly or not at all into that dangerous zone of punishment for sin. For many, the Ten Commandments have become the Ten Suggestions/General guidelines with an understanding that these ten were related to how things were years ago and have little or nothing to do with us today. For example, contrary to popular belief, God's last name is not "Damn." Unfortunately, idolatry appears repeatedly, whether or not we have golden calves. That's bad news.

Of course, the gospel of grace for sinners is good news. Of course, God is more willing to forgive than we are to ask for forgiveness. Of course, the undeserving prodigal son was welcomed home by his loving father and God is better than any human father could ever be. Yes, yes, yes. But without getting in touch with our true guilt followed by repentance (the prodigal's turn around to face God) there is no forgiveness. Grace is free, but it isn't cheap. It cost Jesus his life.

The sin, righteousness, and judgment theme of the Bible encourages and enforces the possibility of new life in Christ for people today. Because God made me in his image, he gave me the power to resist him and his ways. To be made in God's image means that I have the freedom to resist or accept what God has done for me, to ignore my Creator, or love him in response to his love for me. My sin is to use my God-given freedom to turn away from the God who loves me. It is like God has written a check for a million dollars, but I have the freedom to sign the back of the check or never sign or cash it. Who would be so foolish as not to endorse the gift? Yet many do just that.

In John 16:13 Jesus says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth." In other words, the Advocate justifies us before God and sanctifies us as well. As sanctified sinners we are called to share faith with others. That's called witnessing. Every Christian is not an evangelist (only *some* as Ephesians 4:11 says), but *every Christian is a witness* (Acts 1:8). Evangelists are called to *declare the gospel*; witnesses are called to *share the gospel*. That may seem like a small distinction, but it is an important one.

Our job as Christian witnesses isn't to convert people. Only the Holy Spirit can bring a person to faith in Christ. Our job is to provide the context for people to come to faith by being invitational, welcoming and inviting people to come to worship, a study, or a social activity at church where they can meet us. Our job is to introduce or re-introduce them to Jesus and his Church by words and deeds, to be good neighbours and proud of our faith. Not to keep our light under a bushel. So that hopefully they will see what they are missing in our community. People want something real, something to take home to the street where they live- we can be more and more a part of that for them in this very Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.

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