

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter

10th May 2020 at Saint John's Church in Savannah

let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: ²⁰For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. ...receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

In Eastertide we celebrate the changeless good will of God, *the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness neither shadow of turning* – a good will that abides in perversity, recklessness, selfishness and rebellion, a good will that prevails in the face of sin and death, to set all things to right. Through the cross and resurrection of his Son he has opened the door to righteousness and life for all those who believe in him and in the gospel. For as St. James says in today’s epistle lesson: *Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.* As we receiving the gospel word of truth of Christ’s death and resurrection, we are reborn to God, who in Christ becomes a Father to us also. Just as Christ is the “first fruits” of the Church’s resurrection, the part that represents and precedes the whole, so believers are *a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.* As we are born anew by the word of truth, as we share consciously and lovingly in changeless good will, “loving what the commands and desiring what he promises” (Collect), his righteous will begins to come to fulfilment in us. In and through us the whole creation begins to find its destiny in the worship of God, in the knowledge and love of God.

Today’s gospel lesson speaks about the work of the Holy Ghost in that new birth. It’s a very rich passage, so let me highlight just four points it makes.

First, the Spirit only comes when Jesus has departed, and because he has departed from the world to the Father. The Spirit is the spoil of Christ’s victory, the gift of the ascended Lord to his church (Ephesians 4), the first fruits of our redemption.

Second Jesus calls him the Paraclete, a Greek word which means generally someone who is ‘called alongside’ to help. Traditionally it is translated as Comforter, because of the spiritual strength and security he imparts, but the word Paraclete can also be translated with the specific sense of Advocate - someone who pleads our case, or represents our interests before a judge. Just as we have *an advocate* who represents us *with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous* (1 John 2:1), so Christ has an advocate who represents him to the unbelieving world, and to the believing disciples – *the Spirit of truth*, whom he sends into the world to bear witness to him.

Third, in the unbelieving world, the Spirit’s work is that of constructive criticism – he comes to *reprove* or “convict” it, to prove it wrong about sin, about righteousness, and about judgment, in relation to Jesus. By the Spirit’s ministry, the world will learn its sin in not believing in him, of his righteousness now vindicated by his going to the Father; and of the judgment God has passed not against Jesus but against Satan, the prince of this world. It’s an outline of the preaching of the

Apostles in Jerusalem after Pentecost, in Acts 2 and 3, when they confronted the people of Jerusalem with convicting witness to the truth – and they do repent, and believe, and are baptized; for the Spirit convicts the world not for the world’s condemnation, but for its salvation. If you are going to know the comfort of the Gospel – the deep security and peace of God’s changeless good will toward sinners, revealed in his Son’s cross and rising – you are first going to have to get uncomfortable about yourself. Indeed that is a sure sign of the Spirit at work in you, is that you are going through the painful business of rethinking yourself, your priorities, your perspective, in light of the Gospel itself, in relation to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It’s a kind of charter for the church’s own preaching of the gospel in the world – a kind of constructive criticism - not for the world’s judgment but for its salvation – not out of anger, but out of love. Of course if you are going to give constructive criticism, you better be receiving it yourself, and so Christians ought to be the most self-critical, the most humble and honest and rigorous in their own self-criticism, of all . In a sense, the Spirit’s convicting work never stops, even after we believe, and start to experience the comfort of the Spirit. For the *Spirit of truth*, Jesus tells us, has a ministry among believers too - he comes, Jesus says, to *guide you into all truth* and, when he comes, he *shall glorify me*. The Spirit’s work is to open our eyes to the glory of God’s changeless good will manifested in Jesus, in his death and resurrection, that we increasingly transformed by him, and grow up into his likeness, *as the first fruits of his creatures*, aligning our wills with his, loving what he commands, and desiring what he promises.

Now in this process of being reborn to God, there is an active role for us to play - we are to receive with meekness the *engrafted word, which is able to save your souls*. It is paradoxical that James is urging us to receive the saving word, since as believers we have already received it – it’s already been *engrafted* into us. But the Christian life is not a matter of having received the word once, but of continuing to receive it, of renewing our reception of it, with an ever deepening and enlarging grasp of its meaning and implications for faith and for life. Such ongoing, every deepening receptivity, requires in us an attitude adjustment. James says: *let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*. There is an important insight in these verses – if you are quick to anger, quick to speak, you will not be quick to listen to human beings or to God. If you are not able to receive constructive criticism – then it is unlikely you can hear the Spirit’s criticism either, it is unlikely you can receive the word of God. If you want to receive the word which is able to save your souls – you need to receive it with meekness – the virtue that moderates and controls anger.

Now the Bible tells us that God is wrathful, and that Jesus gets angry – and this anger is not sinful but righteous anger, it is the wrath of love, of his changeless good will, upholding the integrity of the beloved against all that would harm it. Anger in itself is no sin for it is the natural response of love to all that which threatens the integrity and well-being of the beloved. And there is, as we have recently been reminded, a place for righteous indignation, at grave injustices, such as we have recently learned of in Georgia. As such anger plays an important place in the healthy soul - because we don’t all have nerves of steel – it is anger that helps us do the right thing in the face of adversity

Yet for all this, James says, *the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God*. How can this be? Well, it's right there, in our loves. If anger is zeal for the integrity of the beloved, the problem is, that our loves are disordered, excessive contrary to reason, to justice, to charity – and so our anger is often disordered, excessive - contrary to reason, to justice, to charity, to God's good will. That's why Paul says, *be angry, and sin not* (Eph 4:26). Righteous indignation itself may fall over into self-righteous anger, anger prized for its own sake, anger as proof of our moral superiority, the anger that unleashes the furies of hell. For Scripture speaks of the righteous wrath of God, and Christ, and of his saints – but it also speaks of Satan's wrath, born of frustrated pride, envy, malice, and despair. The anger of Satan is anger prized as a right and a sign of moral superiority - self-certain self-righteous anger cherished, cultivated to the point of destruction – and it *worketh not the righteousness of God* – it does not fulfill his changeless good will, it does not set the world to rights.

Here then is the most down-to-earth takeaway - are you open to constructive criticism? Can you hear what someone says to you that is constructive criticism? If you, you might be willing to hear the Spirit speaking to you the word of truth, who calls you to repentance, to faith, to obedience, to righteousness and life eternal. *Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, ... receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.*

Come down, Creator Spirit, find
A harbour in thy people's mind;
With grace celestial consecrate
The heart of clay thou didst create.

Thy very name is Comforter,
The highest gift the skies confer
The flow of life, the fire, the love
The unction poured from God above.

Thou finger stretched from heaven's throne
Whose touch is sevenfold benison;

*Thou promise of the Father, rich
In sudden dower of golden speech;*

Infuse our soul with kind desire,
Our senses light with shining fire;
Confirm with lasting hardihood
The cowardice of flesh and blood.

Bring peaceful hours, and banish far
All enmities that augur war.
With such a guide to go before
No hurtful thing can harm us more.

Make through thyself the Father known,
Reveal the person of the Son,
And grant a constant faith, to see
Their Spirit equally in thee. Amen.

(*Veni, Creator Spiritus*, transl. Austin Farrer)

“Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth”. [Cf Matt. 27.48].

James 1:17-21

¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. ¹⁸ Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. ¹⁹ Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: ²⁰ For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. ²¹ Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

John 16:5-15

⁵ But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou? ⁶ But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. ⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. ⁸ And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹ Of sin, because they believe not on me; ¹⁰ Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; ¹¹ Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. ¹² I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. ¹³ Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. ¹⁴ He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. ¹⁵ All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you.

Isaiah 54:11-55:5

¹¹ O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted,
behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours,
and lay thy foundations with sapphires.

¹² And I will make thy windows of agates,
and thy gates of carbuncles,
and all thy borders of pleasant stones.

¹³ And all thy children shall be taught of the LORD;
and great shall be the peace of thy children.

¹⁴ In righteousness shalt thou be established:
thou shalt be far from oppression; for thou shalt not fear:
and from terror; for it shall not come near thee.

¹⁵ Behold, they shall surely gather together, but not by me:
whosoever shall gather together against thee shall fall for thy sake.

¹⁶ Behold, I have created the smith that bloweth the coals in the fire,
and that bringeth forth an instrument for his work;
and I have created the waster to destroy.

¹⁷ No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper;
and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn.
This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,

and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD.

55 Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters,
and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat;
yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

² Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread?
and your labour for that which satisfieth not?
hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good,
and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

³ Incline your ear, and come unto me:
hear, and your soul shall live;
and I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
even the sure mercies of David.

⁴ Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people,
a leader and commander to the people.
⁵ Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not,

and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee
because of the LORD thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel;
for he hath glorified thee.

