

*Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Have you ever done it? How would you do it?*

During the communist regime of USSR, a little company of Russian peasants met for worship, knowing full well that their gathering was illegal, and that if they were discovered they would be dragged before the tribunal and would face very severe penalty. While their worship was proceeding, suddenly the door was flung open, and there entered an agent of secret police, followed by a body of his men. 'Take these people's names' he commanded; and the names were written down, thirty of them. The commander warned them that they would be summoned to the tribunal. Then he left. But one little old man in the group stopped him at the door and said, 'There is one name you have not got.' The agent looked at him in surprise, 'You are wrong,' he retorted, 'I have them all!' 'Believe me,' said the old peasant, 'there is one name you have not got.' 'Well, I'll prove you wrong,' exclaimed the agent impatiently, 'we will count again!' So every name was called and there was response. There were thirty. 'You see?' cried the secret police, 'I told you I had you all, thirty in total.' But still the peasant persisted. 'There is one name you have not got.' 'Who is it, then?' demanded the official. 'Speak out – who is it? Where is he hiding?' 'The Lord Jesus Christ,' was the answer. 'He is here!' 'Ah', sneered the officer, 'that is a different matter.' He took his men away thinking that the old peasant was senseless.

I cannot find anything better than this wonderful story to explain what John 14. 12-21 tries to tell us about the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst. However, I am afraid to say, our understanding of the presence of the Holy Spirit is at times rather wishy-washy as though one can recognize his presence quite plainly. This terrific story and today's gospel remind us, it is the Holy Spirit who makes us certain of Christ's presence now. The defective understanding of the Holy Spirit is that we highlight the presence of the Spirit in the world at the expense of the presence of Christ. The New Testament reminds us the presence of the Spirit does not in any way go beyond the triumph of Christ.

Often we hear Christians say ‘If only Jesus had been there with us, it would have been so much easier. He would have explained everything to us, and told us what to do.’ Or they say, ‘If Jesus had been here, he would have done differently to what you have done.’

I say this is a common misconception. Why?

First, would you really have done differently if you had been with his close friends? We know from the gospels that some betrayed and denied him. Even the beloved disciple ran away in the garden. Would you be above Peter that you would have stayed with Jesus all the way to Calvary?

Second, in today’s gospel reading, we are told that Jesus has promised to be ‘around’ with his people from that day to this day. In fact, he’s promised that it will be easier, not harder, for them when he is no longer physically with them. His people will be able to do things they couldn’t do when he was physically present.

But how will he be around now? That is where the Holy Spirit comes in. Jesus has promised to send his own spirit, his own inner life. In v.16 he says that the father will give us ‘another helper’. This ‘helper’ is the spirit.

It is difficult to find the right English translation for this phrase. The word is Paraclete, which is a legal term for an advocate called into defend someone on trial. There are quite a few English translations. I’ve translated it ‘helper’. Of course, the spirit comes to give us the strength and energy to do what we have to do, to live for God and witness to his love in the world. But it has two other meanings as well.

We sometimes come across the spirit is described as ‘comforter’. How do we understand the Holy Spirit as ‘comforter’? It doesn’t simply mean the Holy Spirit is here to cheer us when we are down and out. When the Spirit is spoken of as the ‘comforter’, He gives us extra strength to meet special need.

One can think of the situation of a tragedy, the bereaved is deeply distressed and what they really want at that critical moment isn’t words of

advice but just friends' presence, hugging them, standing beside them. Outwardly nothing has changed. The tragedy is still a tragedy, yet other human support changes the bereaved to cope with disasters. That is exactly what the Holy Spirit will definitely do to God's people in times of need.

I have already mentioned Paraclete can also be translated into 'advocate'. An advocate stands up in a law-court and explains to the judge or jury how things are from his client's point of view. The advocate pleads the case. Jesus assumes that his followers will often find themselves, as he found himself, facing official persecution. But Jesus also saw the situation, as his OT knowledge informed him, in terms of the heavenly law-court with God as the judge. In that court, God's people can be assured that their case will be heard, because the spirit will plead on their behalf.

As a result of this promised spirit, Christians are in a better situation even than the followers of Jesus during his lifetime. That seems remarkable. Why is it so the case? The gospel story tells us when Jesus was not around with his disciples, they couldn't do very much. Not so with us. With the spirit we will be able to do all kinds of things.

Jesus said when he 'goes to the father' – in other words, when he defeats the power of death through his own death and resurrection – then all sorts of new possibilities will be opened in front of his followers. The works Jesus has been doing are the evidence that the father is at work in him. Jesus said to his followers that they will do even greater works than these! That is to say Jesus' followers will continue to make God the Father known in their witness. When we say we see the spirit working in such situation and place, we are in fact saying God the Father is also working there and then. If we don't see God the Father working we cannot claim to have seen the genuine spirit.

We may wonder whether we can really do even greater works than Jesus. Jesus said so with a remarkable promise about prayer. 'Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it.' (V.14) Nowadays, we take great care to guard our name being used in credit-card fraud and cyber crime. Hence everything is in password with a disguised name. Not so with Jesus' name. There is no secret password.

Praying in Jesus' name means that, as we get to know who Jesus is, so we find ourselves drawn into his life and love and sense of purpose. In other words, in our lives, we see what Jesus saw, we do what he did. In John's gospel we know what Jesus saw in his own miracles, the glory of God; and he achieved in his own life the glory of the Father manifested all over the world. When we pray in the name of Jesus and with our main objective in life to glorify God, Jesus promises us, anything we ask, he will do it. I suspect very few of us have actually asked Jesus for anything yet.

Today's gospel reading reminds us, God the Father dwells in believers, the risen Christ dwells in his followers, the Holy Spirit dwells in people who live in the new creation. While Jesus was with men in the flesh, however inspiring a Teacher and Companion, he was still external to his disciples. He was Emmanuel, God with men. He could not be in men until He had been glorified by His death, resurrection and ascension. Once He was glorified, John's gospel tells us, the Spirit could be given to his followers.