

This week and last our readings have been exploring the nature of God. Last week in the Gospel Jesus began to describe a theology where God is divided into Father and Son. In the continuation of that gospel, in today's readings, Jesus introduces a further division of God into Spirit or Advocate. The choice of the word "advocate" is important because the function of the Advocate is to plead in support of someone. The Advocate is asking someone in authority, like a judge, to give or grant a person what they are asking for or needing. This part of John's Gospel, through until the passion narrative, has many examples of Jesus speaking to the Father on behalf of his disciples and asking the Father to grant them protection or guidance. We read those prayers of Jesus during the Maundy Thursday vigil, as if they have been spoken in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus knows he's going to leave his disciples through death, resurrection and ascension.

Whilst Jesus has been with his disciples, gathering them around him and teaching them, he has been preparing them also for spreading his gospel through the early church, which they must build. He knows that he will be physically leaving them and *he* is the Advocate for them, with his Father God. But when he is no longer there, they will have nobody as an advocate anymore. That is why the Spirit of God must come to the disciples and live inside them. Then, the Spirit will plead for them, with God, to be given what they need to live the life of a disciple in the future.

This is a developed theology and would be part of the evidence dating John's Gospel later in the early Christian period, perhaps? Today, we recognise these ideas as we build up towards Trinity Sunday when we think about God as Father, Son and Spirit. It would all have been very difficult for the disciples to process at the time and it may be only many years later they managed to make sense of it in their own heads? But the point about the Spirit living within us is that God's laws, or commandments, will be set "in a heart of flesh" as prophesied by Ezekiel (chp 36). The disciples will not need to learn the laws because they will intuitively follow them through Jesus' boiling down of the enormous tomes of law, written by the Pharisees, into his famous summary of the law:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' (Matthew 22)

The life in the Spirit of God is one where the disciple lives in tune with God or, as Jesus says repeatedly, at "one" with God. This is possible because the Spirit of God in the heart leads people to live by the law of love and that means that they will automatically choose the life of righteousness in all their decisions. But, when they make mistakes because of human weakness, the Spirit will plead with God on their behalf and teach them to regain the path to righteousness.

St Paul, in Acts of the Apostles, spends his time going around building churches (not with bricks and mortar, as he says) but preaching the risen Jesus Christ to people all around

the Mediterranean. Some people listen readily, but others are very difficult crowds to preach a sermon to. St Paul learns what all preachers experience, that some congregations simply don't want to hear what it is you feel God is saying to them!

Paul has many near death experiences (which is, fortunately, rare for preachers in our own country today!). When he ends up in Athens, which is a centre of intellectual debate and where people love to argue about philosophy and theology all day long, Paul realises that he is facing another tough crowd. Before his speech, or sermon, he has clearly been wandering about the place called the *Areopagus*, which was a centre of temples, cultural places and the High Court of Athens. He tells the people that he noticed lots of Gods commemorated by statues in silver and gold and stone but also an altar "to an unknown God." There is no statue, and so Paul sees his opportunity to tell people about God and the coming judgement on all who do not follow Jesus, once he has been proclaimed to them. Paul is appealing to the Athenian's interest in the Nature of the Divine.

Of course, they are interested. Some of them want to hear him on another day, so that they can go away and process some of what he has said. Some people don't like it at all and reject his message as soon as they hear about resurrection from the dead. Paul is trying to reach people who use their heads to grapple with the nature of God, rather than their hearts. Paul has reached across religious and cultural boundaries so that new nations can hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, as Jesus has told the apostles to do at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

The Greeks know all about Wisdom and that is something that the early Christian church will identify with the Spirit of God too, as it tries to link up a religion of thinking about God with your head, with a faith based on loving God with your heart. Indeed, St Paul appears to be part of this effort to find points of contact with Greeks and the new faith of the Christians, in a Jewish Messiah figure, when he is in Corinth. There, Paul preaches that God's wisdom is superior to what we humans think of as wise. Because, God's wisdom is his Spirit present on earth and inside of us, if we will be open to him.

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*¹⁹ *For it is written,*

*'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'*

²⁰ *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world (I Cor 1.18-20)*

Whatever the nature of God, if we don't love him with our hearts and love our neighbours in the same way, because we see them as also being full of the Spirit of God, then we will be very far from God. The only way to get close to God, Jesus tells us, is by having the Spirit of God in our hearts and allowing it to let us love him and to love others, as we love ourselves.