

The Third Sunday of Easter (Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 3:13-15, 17-19
<i>Response</i>	Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O Lord!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 4:2, 4, 7-8, 9
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 2:1-5a
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 24:35-48

The third Sunday of the Easter season for year B brings us to a passage in 1 John — another passage from 1 John — that uses a title we don’t usually apply to Jesus, and that is the title of Paraclete or Advocate. We hear those words, we tend to associate it with the Holy Spirit. But in 1 John 2:1-5, we see the same term used for Jesus. So let’s hear what the letter of John has to say:

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says “I know him” but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected.¹

Okay, we’ll stop there...or the lectionary stops there. Let’s just highlight a few elements of this passage. The first thing you might want to notice here is the kind of letter that John is writing. It’s really a letter of moral and spiritual exhortation. So he says:

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin...

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Notice there the language John uses to describe his audience. He doesn't call them brothers and sisters in Christ. He calls them little children. So there's a sense of spiritual paternity on John's part as an apostle to those to whom he's addressing the letter. And we'll see this in the letters of Paul as well, in 1 Corinthians 4. When he's writing to Christians who *he* baptized, whose Church he founded himself, he actually refers to them as his children, as his spiritual children.

And that's what John is doing here. And his principal concern as a spiritual father is that his children not commit sin. However, as a good father, he also knows his children, and he knows their weaknesses, and so he also adds:

...but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous...

Now the Greek word here for "advocate" — *paraklētos* — is the same word used to describe the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John. And the word is — it's unusual — or it's difficult to translate into English...or at least it *seems* to be difficult to translate into English. Because you look at the different translations, everyone's got different words. Sometimes you'll see the Holy Spirit the Paraclete — they'll just transliterate the Greek word. That's called a loanword, where you just take it over from one language and bring it into the other without any glossing of any definition.

Other translations will say the Holy Spirit the Comforter. Still others will say the Holy Spirit the Advocate. You'll get these different...one recent translation says the Helper. I don't like that one. Not that I don't need help, but it's just...the most accurate translation of it into English, I think, is probably advocate. It's a Latin root, *advocātus*. It literally means someone called to your side. That's what the Greek word means too. *Para* is "beside." *Klētos* is from the Greek word *kaleó*, that means "to call." And so an advocate is someone you call to your side in order to speak on your behalf. So you can think of your defense attorney...would be an advocate — someone who stands beside you and testifies on your behalf. So it's legal terminology. It *can* mean comforter, because the word *paraklētos* can be used to describe comfort, like when Jesus says in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)

Paraklētos there is the Greek word. It's the verb there. Because to have someone come to your side and be an advocate on your behalf is comforting. It brings comfort. I'm sure if you've been in a trial or in that kind of situation, to know you have someone, an advocate, on your side is a comforting thing. So it's got a range of meanings, but in this case, as a title — and especially in 1 John 2 — the best translation is probably advocate, because it's explicitly describing Jesus as someone who intercedes for us, who advocates on our behalf, so that if we've sinned, he can intercede for us with the Father for mercy and for forgiveness.

So what's fascinating is what you end up with then is if you look at the Gospel and the letters of John together, there are in fact *two* paracletes. One paraclete is the Holy Spirit, but the other paraclete is Jesus Christ. And this is something you see over and over again in the letters of John — the Spirit and the Son go together. Their missions are the same mission. They speak, in a sense, almost with one voice. It's very powerful, the parallelism if you walk through the Gospel of John — the parallels between Jesus and the Spirit, between their mission on Earth.

Irenaeus himself (who I've mentioned in other videos), he actually calls in one of his writings — I think I'm getting this right — he refers to the Spirit and the Son as the two hands of the Father. They always work together in the world.

In any case, so John here is trying to remind his readers that if they sin, not to lose heart, because Jesus Christ is their Advocate with the Father. And then he goes on to talk about the Paschal Mystery. He says:

...and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

And what does this mean? He's the "expiation." That's not a common word in English; we don't use it a lot. It's actually a difficult term in Greek to translate. The word is *hilasmos* — *hilasmos* in Greek. It occurs only here in the New Testament, and so in order to understand it, you actually have to go back to the Greek Old

Testament, known as the Septuagint. And this is another clue that John — the first letter of John — is either written for Jewish Christians or it's written by a Jewish Christian author, thinking in Semitic ways, thinking in Jewish ways. Because the term *hilasmos* in the Jewish Scripture is the term used for the sacrifice of atonement that would be offered up to atone for the sins of the people.

Let me give you an example. In the book of Numbers 5:8, in the Greek translation, we read these words:

But if the man has no kinsman to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for wrong shall go to the Lord for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement...

...literally “the ram of *hilasmos*,” same Greek word...

...with which atonement is made for him.

So when John refers to Jesus as the *hilasmos*, He *is* the expiation for our sins. He's literally saying, “He is the atonement” or “He is the sacrifice of atonement for our sins.” So he's calling to mind there the very Jewish understanding of the Crucifixion as not just a Roman execution but as a sacrifice...and not just any kind of sacrifice, because you could offer sacrifices of thanksgiving. You could offer sacrifices of peace, peace offerings...fostering relationship and peace with God. But the sacrifice of atonement is one in which the blood is poured out in order to reconcile a sinner to God. That's what atonement does. It's actually one of the only theological terms that is an Anglo-Saxon root — at-one-ment, literally. Atonement is to be made at one with God. Most other theological terms are either Greek or Latin roots, so this is kind of an interesting English word. In any case, John here you could translate:

...and he is the [atonement] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

So he's trying to remind his readers that if they do sin, even though they're in Christ, that they do have a method of redress...a method of reconciliation, which is Christ Himself, the atonement. However, he says:

And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. (1 John 2:3-5a)

So notice, as soon as John recognizes that someone may sin after coming to faith, and that there's a method of atonement for that — which is Jesus Christ Himself and His intercession — he also wants to make sure that no one erroneously infers from the possibility of atonement that you're not bound to keep the commandments, that you're free to break them. No, he says anyone who says he knows Christ but doesn't keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth isn't in him. But to those who love God and keep the commandments, the love of God is going to be perfected in them, brought to completion in them, brought to its fullness in them precisely through obedience.

So for John, it's not like obedience is over here and love is over here. No, no, no. Obedience and love go together. That's the way we express love for God...is through obedience to His commandments.

Alright, then one last thing about this that is very Jewish (I can't help it) but very important — is the last line of that verse. It's not in the lectionary, but I'm going to read it anyway. At the end of verse 5, it says:

By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:5b-6)

What does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean that you have to walk in the same way that Jesus walked literally, that your stride has to match Jesus. It's a Jewish way of actually referring to the manner of life that you live. So in contemporary Catholic circles, if we talk about keeping the commandments, of vices and virtues, we'll tend to call that moral theology. It's about morality. How do we keep the mores of

a particular culture or religion? Or we'll call it ethics. What is the *ethos* of a particular culture, of a particular religion? And how do we abide by that *ethos* through the keeping, the practice of ethics?

But in ancient Judaism, they didn't use either of those terms. They use the term called *halakha*. So the discussion of how you kept the law was called *halakha*. And *halakha* literally comes from the word (the verb) in Hebrew *halak*, which means to walk. So *halakha*, how you keep the law, is literally how you walk. It's a very active image for the fact that in order to keep the commandments, we have to do it everyday. It's like walking. It's something that's a constant process that lasts throughout our lives. So when he says we:

...ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

It's an image for the imitation of Christ in our moral life. So although we have an intercessor who atones for our sins, that doesn't free us from the obligation of imitating the One who was without sin — namely, Jesus Christ.

So on this third Sunday of Easter, I think it's actually significant that the Church is bringing before us the reminder both of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus that we celebrated at Easter during the Triduum, but also the implications of that sacrifice — namely, that we have to walk in the way that He walked and we have to keep the commandments of God.

So what I mean by that is — during the Easter season you'll see this — the second readings that are chosen are often teaching us about certain truths of the faith but also about what life in Christ looks like. What does it mean to live in the power of the risen Jesus, to live as members of the Mystical Body of Christ in the new covenant age, in the new era after the Resurrection?

So in closing, I just want to end with — along those lines of moral exhortation and the moral implications of what it means to be a Christian — with a quote from Augustine of Hippo. Augustine has a series...he didn't write commentaries on every single book in the Bible like some Church Fathers did, but he wrote homilies. He was a preacher, and he preached throughout many, many of the

Scriptural texts. And one of his most famous and most beautiful collection of homilies are his homilies on the first letter of John. They're really, really profound and beautiful. This is the New City Press translation, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*. And in homily number one, Augustine takes up this treatise. I really encourage you — this would be a wonderful reading during the Easter season if you want to dive into Augustine's writings.

And when he gets to 1 John 2 and the whole question of what happens if we sin after Baptism — which, by the way, during the Easter season that's going to be something you would want to preach about to the newly baptized. Okay, you've been baptized; you've received the grace of forgiveness of sins. You're made new creations in Christ. What happens if you should sin *after* Baptism? So listen to what Augustine says:

But perhaps sin creeps up on us from human life. What will happen then? What? Is there now to be hopelessness? Listen: "And if anyone sins," he says," we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins" (2:1-2). He is our advocate, therefore. *Be careful not to sin. If sin creeps up on you due to life's frailty, be vigilant at once, let it displease you at once, condemn it at once, and, when you have condemned it, you will come securely to the judge. There you have your advocate.* Don't fear that you may lose your case once you have confessed. For, if there are times in this life when a person entrusts himself to a clever tongue and doesn't perish, will you entrust yourself to the Word and perish? *Cry out: "We have an advocate with the Father!"*²

That's Augustine's homilies on John, first homily, paragraph seven. I think it's a beautiful paragraph, because you'll notice that Augustine (following John) recognizes that through human frailty, post-Baptismal sin is a reality that we have to reckon with. But notice he doesn't excuse it. And he tells the people to whom he's preaching, if you should sin, if it creeps up on you, how do you respond?

...be vigilant at once, let it displease you at once, condemn it at once...

² Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John*, 1.7; trans. Boniface Ramsey

In other words, don't fall into the trap of making excuses for sin. And don't fall into the trap of hopelessness in the face of your sin, thinking that all is lost, because you have an advocate with the Father. And so he says don't forget that you're going to lose the case once you have confessed. Notice he presupposes confession. Confess your sin. But he also presupposes trust in Jesus Christ, who is our advocate with God the Father.

And if He loved us enough to go to the cross on Calvary, if we truly repent, He surely will love us enough as well to be our advocate with the Father and the atonement for our sins.