

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In today's Gospel text, Jesus gives His disciples – and us – a preview of what's coming, namely, Pentecost. As they are gathered in the upper room, hearing one last discourse, one last sermon, Jesus tells them of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Helper, the Comforter.

In this particular section of John's Gospel, Jesus focuses on two activities that the Holy Spirit will do when He comes. First, He will convict the world. And second, He will guide the disciples, the Church.

So it might seem a little odd that this Comforter would be one who convicts. Comfort, convict, those seem sort of opposites. Yet this is precisely what Jesus says the Holy Spirit will do.

And it makes sense, because as Jesus says, "He (the Holy Spirit) will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak," and "He (again, the Holy Spirit) will take what is mine and declare it to you." The Holy Spirit speaks the same things that Jesus spoke. And Jesus speaks what His Father gives Him to speak. So the whole Triune God acts as one, not contradicting Himself or changing His teaching.

The Holy Spirit will convict the world because Jesus convicts the world. All throughout His public ministry, Jesus confronted sin and sinners. He never turned a blind eye, never winked at the breaking of God's Law. No, He confronted. He convicted. He called to repentance.

Sometimes this was more direct, even harsh, as when He calls the Pharisees whitewashed tombs and children of hell. Other times, it's more gentle, such as when He points out that the woman at the well is sinning by living with a man to whom she isn't married. But either way, Jesus convicts people. And so then does the Holy Spirit.

Jesus names three things in particular of which the Holy Spirit will convict the world. He says, "And when He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." So first: sin. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will convict of sin "because they do not believe in me."

Sin is anything that is opposed to God's will. And as Jesus says earlier in John's Gospel, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." God's will is for people to believe in Jesus, and so to not believe is sin.

Why would God the Holy Spirit need to convict people of this? Well, there are a lot of people who say that they "believe in God." But to believe in God isn't just to have knowledge in your head that He exists, or that Jesus was a person who lived two thousand years ago. As James points out later in his Epistle, even the demons that this sort of "belief," and they won't be in heaven.

No, to believe is to trust that, though you are a sinner deserving of God's wrath and punishment, He in love sent His Son to die for you, and that by His grace you are delivered from sin and death and given new and everlasting life. This believing – saving faith – then leads to good works, seeking to live in accord with God's Word, both to honor Him and to show His light and love into the world.

This belief comes out of a love for God in the heart. And how does that love, that belief get into the heart? Remember your catechism! “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

God the Holy Spirit is the one who creates faith in a person through the Word and Holy Baptism. He then sustains and grows this faith through the Word and Holy Communion. And so, He is the One who then convicts when it isn't there.

The Holy Spirit also convicts the world of righteousness, because, as Jesus says, “I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer.” Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught that He alone is the way to the Father. There is no other path to heaven. There is no one else who can save souls from eternal condemnation. Only Jesus.

That He goes to the Father shows that He is holy and that the words He speaks are truth. No sinner can enter into God's presence, and no liar and blasphemer would be raised from the dead and exalted over all. In His ascension, Christ will sit down at the right hand of the Father, which isn't a physical place, but an expression of Christ being given all power and authority as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

And as He says, He will be seen no longer. We mentioned this last week, how Jesus told the unbelieving Pharisees that He would be among them for a little while, but then He would go to Him who sent Him and they would not be able to find Him.

How does the Holy Spirit convict of this? By pointing out the truth of Jesus' words! He convicts the hearts of those who think that they can order Jesus around, demand that He appear when and where they want Him to appear. He convicts those who think that there are multiple ways to heaven, multiple truths that are equally effective. He convicts those who think that Jesus was just a man, a wise teacher of sorts but not the holy, sinless, God in the flesh.

How do we know He convicts? Just look at the reaction of those who reject these truths. Those who would say there are multiple paths, who preach “tolerance” in the corrupted, worldly sense of the word, often don't just smile and nod when confronted with the exclusive claim of the Gospel.

No, they tend to react quite strongly against such proclamation. The offense of the Gospel, and the world's endless efforts to silence it, are evidence that it is being used by the Holy Spirit, that it is affecting hearts.

There's other evidence too, of a much more positive variety: what we see when someone is convicted and repents and believes. A change that we can see takes place! The Spirit who then comes to dwell in that person's heart produces all sorts of good works. Those who believe in Christ show forth Christ's righteousness, and they do this through the Spirit's power.

The third thing the Holy Spirit convicts the world of is judgment, for as Jesus says, “the ruler of this world is judged.” At the cross, Jesus silenced all the accusations of the devil, taking away the devil's only weapon against God's people.

When He died there, the righteous for the unrighteous, Satan was shown to be the liar, for Jesus had fulfilled the promises He had made throughout the ages concerning His saving action. All that the Spirit had spoken through the prophets was fulfilled, and so Satan's lies were exposed. For this he is judged. He is shown to be the evil one seeking to destroy God's people, and for this crime he comes under God's divine judgment.

This is why Satan rages as He does. He knows his time is short, and so he seeks to attack and destroy as many people as possible. Yet as scary as he may try to appear, he can't pull you down into hell with him. Only God can condemn people to hell, and it is Satan, not the children of the Kingdom, who is under this divine judgment. The saints have been declared innocent. As the Spirit says through St. Paul, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Of these three things – sin, righteousness, and judgment – the Holy Spirit convicts the world. Now we must ask the question, how does He do this? Does the Spirit manifest Himself as a dove or some other creature and speak to people throughout the world directly? Does He give dreams and visions to unbelievers throughout the world? Not so much.

Remember, the Holy Spirit acts to proclaim the words of Jesus. Who is it that is called to proclaim these words of Jesus throughout the world? His people, the Church! It is Jesus who said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." It is Jesus who said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

We are His witnesses! Jesus doesn't tell His followers to just go home and relax, and His Spirit will beam His Word directly into the hearts and minds of unbelievers. No, Jesus sends out His disciples in all ages to proclaim His Word to the world.

And this includes convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. We the Church must call out against the sinful rebellion of the world against God, that His Word is over all people, not just those who call themselves Christians. We must declare that Christ alone is the way to the Father, and that apart from faith in Him there is no righteousness, no salvation. And we must not shrink from declaring that all who rebel against God and His Word are under judgment.

We'd like to only ever speak nice, pleasant words to people. But if we don't speak to convict, if we don't call to repent through the words of the Law, then people will remain in their sins, and the Good News that Christ died to free from sins and grant eternal life is of no use.

Will the world want to hear this? Will it welcome such conviction with open ears and open arms? No, it won't. The world will hate it, and many will try to silence it. Jesus told His disciples right before our Gospel text, "They will put you out of the synagogues" – meaning that they will cut you off from society, your family and friends – "Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

The world will respond negatively, even violently, to keep this conviction from being proclaimed. It put Christ to death for such words; it will not gladly listen to those who continue to speak Christ's words.

Facing such a grim reality, what then is our hope? Not what, but who! God the Holy Spirit! The Helper, the Comforter – He is our hope! He is God who is still with us, dwelling in the hearts of all believers. He is the One who calls together the whole Christian Church on earth and who keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

On our own, this call to speak God's Word of conviction to the world would be an impossible task, even a suicide mission. But we are not alone! When you speak the truth of God's Word, God the Holy Spirit speaks through you, and it is His power at work.

It isn't your charisma, or logic, or knowledge that works to convict and call hearts to repentance. The Spirit may make use of such gifts as He gives them, but it's ultimately His almighty power that transforms hearts and minds. That's part of the comfort which He, the Comforter, provides. The pressure isn't on you – it's on Him, and He gladly bears that burden for you.

In addition to bearing the burden, the Holy Spirit will provide you with the words you are to speak. As Jesus says, "He will guide you into all the truth." Now, does this mean that He will divinely bring the right words for you directly into your mind, just out of the blue? Not necessarily.

Yes, the Holy Spirit can do that, as He is God, and perhaps He even does on occasion. But there is a much more certain way in which He does this, namely, the Bible. Despite being physically written by many different men over the course of several centuries, the Bible ultimately has one author: God the Holy Spirit. He is the One who guided the prophets and apostles and evangelists into truth as He directed them to write what they wrote. The Holy Spirit is also the One who has preserved the Bible for the Church throughout the ages, even to the present day.

When you wonder what is the truth, pick up your Bible and read it, and through it the Spirit will lead you into truth. When you are wondering what you might say in a particular instance or to a particular issue, study your Bible, for as it says, "there is nothing new under the sun." It's all been addressed in those pages.

As you read the Scriptures and study them and hear them taught and preached, God the Holy Spirit will plant them in your heart and mind. He will store them away, and then recall them to mind when the time is right. Jesus says that His words are Spirit and life, and through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit takes what is Christ's and gives it to you.

As the Holy Spirit does this, He will use those true words of Jesus and of the Father to give you comfort. When the world rejects the words of conviction you speak and attacks you for them, then the Spirit will remind you that that's what they did to Jesus, and so you need not be ashamed.

When the world would threaten you for refusing to follow in its sin and for denying its twisted version of righteousness, the Spirit will remind you that the ruler of this world and his followers are judged, and that the One who has judged them has declared you innocent for Christ's sake.

And when you are worried about what to say to someone and will it do any good, the Holy Spirit will remind you that He is the One who makes the Word effective and powerful, so don't worry.

The Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church into the truth, continues to work through the Word and the Church to call sinners to repent and believe, and continues to bring comfort to Christians suffering for the sake of Christ's name. He is our Helper and our Advocate, and He will remain so until our Risen Lord returns in glory.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!