

Homily for May 23, 2017

Today's Gospel gives us an almost perfect summary of the work of the Spirit. The word that John uses of the work of the Spirit is the word *elegchein*, translated as *prove* in our translation. The trouble is that no one word can translate it adequately. It is used for the cross-examination of a witness, or someone on trial, or an opponent in an argument. It has always this idea of cross-examining people until they see and admit their errors, or acknowledge the force of some argument which they had not yet seen. It is, for instance, sometimes used by the Greeks for the action of conscience on a person's mind and heart. Clearly such cross-examination can do two things—it can convict a person of the crime that has been committed or the wrong that has been done; or it can convince a person of the weakness of a particular case and the strength of the case which has been opposed. In this passage, we need both meanings, both convict and convince. Now let us go on to see what Jesus says the Holy Spirit will do.

The Holy Spirit will convict people of sin. When the Jews crucified Jesus, they did not believe that they were sinning; they believed that they were serving God. But when the story of that crucifixion was later preached, they were pricked in their heart (Acts 2:37). They suddenly had the terrible conviction that the crucifixion was the greatest crime in history and that their sin had caused it. What is it that gives people a sense of sin? What is it that makes people humble before the cross? In an Indian village, a missionary was telling the story of Christ by means of slides projected on the whitewashed wall of a village house. When the picture of the cross was shown, one man stepped forward, as if he could not help it: 'Come down!' he cried. 'I should be hanging there—not you.' Why should the sight of a man crucified as a criminal in Palestine 2,000 years ago tear open the hearts of people throughout the centuries and still today? It is the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will convince people of righteousness. It becomes clear what this means when we see that it is Jesus Christ's righteousness of which they will be convinced. Jesus was crucified as a criminal. He was tried; he was found guilty; he was regarded by the Jews as an evil heretic, and by the Romans as a dangerous character; he was given the punishment that the worst criminals had to suffer, branded as a felon and an enemy of God. What changed that? What made people see in this crucified figure the Son of God, as the centurion saw at the cross (Matthew 27:54) and Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1–9)? It is amazing that men and women should put their trust for all eternity in a crucified Jewish criminal. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who convinces people of the sheer righteousness of Christ, backed by the fact that Jesus rose again and went to his Father.

The Holy Spirit convinces people of judgment. On the cross, evil stands condemned and defeated. What makes us feel certain that judgment lies ahead? It is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who gives us the inner and unshakable conviction that what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5 is true:

For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

There remains one thing which at the moment John does not go on to mention. When we are convicted of our own sin, when we are convinced of Christ's righteousness, when we are convinced of judgment to come, what gives us the certainty that in the cross of Christ is our salvation and that with Christ we are forgiven, and saved from judgment? This, too, is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who convinces us and makes us sure that in this crucified figure we can find our Saviour and our Lord. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and convinces us of our Saviour.

We see the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit played out in today's reading from Acts. Although severely wounded by the flogging they had received, Paul and Silas are able to sing hymns at midnight. When the prison doors are open from a resulting earthquake Paul and Silas don't make a quick get away. This becomes the opportunity for them to witness to the jailor who in a matter of minutes, moves from despair, he is going to kill himself, to praise, He and his family are baptized and Luke tells us:

He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

It is important to remember that the Holy Spirit is most able to work when we as Christians faith challenges and opposition that calls us to be like Paul and Silas, convinced and committed to being channels through whom the Holy Spirit can work to convict people about sin, righteousness and judgment.