

## Spirit or Spirits?

Every year when I get to this Sunday, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, I'm struck by how peculiar it is. Last Thursday, three days ago, was the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. A week from today is Pentecost. So today we are in that odd in-between time. Jesus has ascended, so he is no longer with us. The Holy Spirit has not yet come down. We know what has happened. We're not sure what will come next. Today, especially, I try to walk in the steps of those first disciples.

They weren't left entirely without direction. In the readings from the Gospel of John the last few weeks, Jesus has told his disciples that after he is gone he will send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to them. The word "Advocate," derived from Latin, means the same as "Paraclete," derived from Greek: someone who provides aid, or walks alongside. We know that's a good description of the Holy Spirit. But what were the disciples expecting in the way of a spirit? We have a couple of hints in today's readings.

The first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, talks about a slave girl who had a spirit of divination. She could divine what was happening, figuring it out through intuition or fortune-telling. She brought a lot of money to her owners. Apparently this was a truth-telling spirit, because she announced out loud exactly what Paul and his companions were, proclaimers of a way of salvation. It was just like Paul to get annoyed at someone who was drawing more attention than himself, for after putting up with her for a number of days he finally rebuked the spirit and it left her. That made her worthless to her owners, so they attacked Paul. We aren't told what happened to the woman, but my guess is that she was turned out when she could no longer make money for someone else.

Spirits also show up in the Revelation to John. Generally John calls them angels. Early on he is given messages to each of the angels of the seven churches, as though the angel represented the collective spirit of the church. Throughout his book John is in conversation with various angels. He describes his visions as happening when he is "in the spirit" – although we don't know if that means "in the Spirit" with a capital S. Only at the very end, in today's reading, does Jesus speak directly to John and say that he was the one who had sent the angel to him.

Recently Father Sinclair made a casual reference to *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, which led me to pull my copy off the shelf and read it again. Written during World War II, it purports to be a series of letters of advice from a senior tempter called Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood, who is just starting out. They are funny and often hit home, although Lewis described the writing of them as "all dust, grit, thirst, and itch." I find it hard to read many pages at one sitting because of that, and because it is so true to life that it's unsettling. Lewis knew his subject well. He didn't have to look far for material. "My heart showeth me the wickedness of the ungodly," he said, quoting Psalm 36:1 from his *Book of Common Prayer*. After a few pages I, too, see how I have fallen prey to the banal temptations described by Lewis.

Whatever you may think of the actual reality of spirits, angels, devils, and demons, I find them to be useful. Some years ago a writer named Walter Wink wrote a series of books on what he called “the Powers,” the underlying spirits of nations, cultures, and institutions, similar to the angels of the churches in the Book of Revelation. Wink maintained, and I think he is right, that institutions have a spirit that outlasts the individuals who are members of it. One of his suggestions is to sit before the angel of a church and invite it to introduce itself. Ask it questions, he said, and allow it to respond freely. I’m intrigued by that idea and may try it for the angel of *this* church.

I have often said there is evil in this world greater than any one human being, leading humans to do things they would otherwise abhor, like destroying other humans. I also recognize those small, lying voices that would lead us away from God, the kind C.S. Lewis describes. We all have the experience of being tempted to do something we know is wrong. That is why I find it useful to talk about spirits even though I am trained as a scientist. Resisting those temptations is easier when we can name and objectify the source.

The first disciples didn’t have all of our modern scientific baggage, however; they had their own. They believed in spirits without question. But they still weren’t sure what would happen next after the Ascension. So what did they do while waiting in that in-between time? They continued to get together to pray and to sing and to hear the Word of God. They were faithful to what they had been taught even though they didn’t really know what would come of it. And because they were faithful in gathering as a believing community, the Holy Spirit came upon them like a rushing wind.

We, too, are in our own in-between time. For us it is the time between the first coming of Christ in the Incarnation and the Second Coming in glory. We know what that First Coming was like because we have eyewitness accounts. We know what it is to be human, so we can relate to Jesus up through his death. It is his Resurrection that has inaugurated something new, something that the witnesses experienced yet did not fully understand. As for the Second Coming, various descriptions are given that don’t all agree because it, too, is something unknown. What we do know is that the final redemption of all creation, begun at the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, will come to its full fruition.

In the meantime, we can take our cue of what to do from those early disciples. We should continue to meet and pray and sing and hear the word of God. As Jesus commanded, we can love one another. We can work for the kingdom of God. We can spread the word so that others may believe. It is what Jesus calls us to do. Yes, we yearn for that time when all will be made right, when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. But for now, there’s work to do.

[Easter 7: Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26. The Walter Wink book referenced is *Unmasking the Powers*, page 77.]