

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel--St. Thomas More, NYC
May 17, 2020 Streaming Mass
Easter 6th Sunday of Year A John 14:15-21

Since the golden era of television the courtroom drama has always had a special appeal. Perry Mason, soon to return on HBO, could always ferret out the truth in seemingly impossible situations. More recently we have Law and Order, where we can expect to see the innocent vindicated and the guilty punished---usually, but not always. As familiar as we may be with this particular entertainment format, it may seem a bit unexpected that Jesus should use a term from the courtroom of His day to explain to His disciples the role that the Holy Spirit will play in their lives, after He has left them. Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the "Advocate." In the courtroom, an "advocate" was essentially the public defender, the counsel for the defense, The advocate spoke on behalf of the accused in order to get at the truth. It was the advocate's job to cut through the web of lies in a rigged trial to reveal to everyone what was actually going on. The advocate was the one who uncovered the truth that many would prefer not to have to deal with.

An advocate, a counsel for the defense, of course presumes an accuser, a prosecutor. So, in the Scriptures, who might that be? "Accuser" is precisely what the name "Satan" means. Another name for Satan is "Beelzebub" which means the "Prince of Lies." Here there is the sense of being confronted with an accuser who will lie, who will use any means necessary to intimidate, to belittle, to cut you down. In the Bible Satan is not just some scary creature with horns, a tail and a pitchfork, and a red jumpsuit trying to lure us off the "straight and narrow." Satan is the fog of obfuscation, of confusion, that is so often at the heart of the human condition. Satan is real, Satan exists as a power, as a dynamism, as a malevolent force greater than any single human being or collection of beings—more elemental than anything that our psychologies, sociologies, anthropologies can provide an explanation for.

Satan is that metaphysical reality, that force of evil, that in so many ways accuses us, puts us on the defensive, telling us in one way or another that we'll never measure up to what society tells us we are supposed to be. We are constantly being judged by society's standards of success, attractiveness, intelligence, with the result that in our need for approval we resort to strategies of deceit, of expediency, of exploitation, of violence in order to secure a sense of self-worth. To put it simply, we sin. Satan would induce us to find some illicit way to defend ourselves, to give an account of who we are, to justify our existence, when we hear that accusing voice in the recesses of our mind, "You are just a worthless piece of ____; you'll never count

for anything." Or, "You can fool others, but you can't fool me." On a larger scale it is the tendency of groups, small and large, when threatened to find someone else to accuse, to blame, to bully, to bear the weight of the group's collective insecurity. This is the voice of Satan speaking, the Primordial Accuser. The human condition, viewed from this perspective, is the place where we are always on trial, always being tested, always being judged. Satan is better understood by what Satan does, than by what Satan is.

Today's Gospel is indeed "good news"---that by faith in Jesus Christ we are saved, we are rescued from that debilitating cycle of charge and counter-charge; that when we are put to the test, we have the best defense possible, we have the Holy Spirit as our Advocate, we have God on our side. Because God does not judge anyone, we are able to handle any false accusation leveled by the "Accuser." We don't have to justify ourselves in the face of society's accusations. We find our self-worth, our dignity as a "child of God." We need not lash out reactively in fear or anger at society's threats, but respond in love from the core of our being, where we dwell in God's abiding presence. That is how we are able to keep the commandments Jesus has given us, because we have the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of love, within us.

In Confirmation we have received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. So, we are called to be witnesses to the Truth, to be truth-tellers in a world of so many lies, half-truths, of so much inattention, distraction, group-think and willed forgetfulness, that would dissuade or deter us from dealing with the truth, from handling the truth. Let us pray that we can use the gifts of the Holy Spirit, our Advocate, in order to live more authentically for our own sake and for the sake of others.