



The Advocate
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Year A, Easter 6

Acts 17: 22-31, John 14:15-21

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In 1974 the IRA bombed two pubs in Guildford, London. The pubs had been chosen due to their popularity with English military personnel. In the explosions 5 people were killed and 65 people were wounded. English police moved swiftly to identify those involved in the bombing in order to bring them to justice.

The police initially arrested four young Irish people aged between 17 and 25. All had recently left Ireland to make their home in London. The police claimed that these four had carried out the attack. Following further investigations, the police arrested and charged a further 7 people who they believed had handled the explosives used in the bombing. Of these 7 people the oldest member of the group, Giuseppe Conlon was 52. The youngest, Patrick Maguire, was only 14. These two groups came to be known as the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven.

Some of you might remember the Guildford Pub Bombings and the case that followed. All 11 people arrested were convicted of various crimes relating to the attack. But these crimes are now remembered for another reason. Only three years after the Guildford Bombings four members of the IRA, who were on trial for different crimes, indicated to their lawyers that they knew that there were innocent people in prison. Their suggestion was that they were the ones responsible for the Guildford bombing, not the Guildford Four. Despite this, the English courts denied all attempts to appeal those convictions.

The six members of the Maguire Seven, whose sentences ranged between 4 and 14 years, all completed their jail terms. The seventh member, Giuseppe Conlon, died while still in prison.

In 1989, fifteen years after the crime, a detective looking into the case located a police notebook relating to the original investigation. A close look at the notebook revealed that much of the evidence presented in the original case had been tampered with, in order to back the official story presented by the police. This, combined with allegations that the confessions of the Guildford Four had been obtained under torture, resulted in an appeal.

The human rights lawyer Gareth Pierce, who represented the Guildford Four, presented this evidence to the courts and succeeded in having all their convictions quashed. Following this, Pierce continued to advocate for the Maguire Seven, despite the fact that they had served their time. In 1991, the convictions against these people were also reversed.

This story was later made into the critically acclaimed film, *In the Name of the Father*. In the cinematic version of the film we see the lengths that Gareth Pierce went to for her clients. Through her dogged determination a great injustice was overturned.

This morning I have recounted this story in light of the way Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit in this morning's Gospel reading. The writer of the Gospel of John used the Greek word Parakletos to describe the character of the Holy Spirit. Like many Greek words found in the New Testament, Paraclete is full of meaning and does not easily translate into English. It is variously translated as advocate, counsellor, comforter, helper and mediator. The deep meaning of the word is a combination of all these different ideas, but this morning I would like to focus of two of them.

The Spirit of God is an advocate, one who supports and argues for justice. An advocate is someone who champions a cause, much as the lawyers for the Guildford Four and the Maguire Seven did. It was their determination in seeking the truth that ultimately led to justice for the wrongly imprisoned. In the same way the Spirit understands the innate truth of each of us, and seeks to make our truth known in the world.

Jesus expressed this understanding of the Spirit to his disciples, because he was aware of how his core beliefs put him at odds with the powers of the day. Jesus was not only convicted by the Roman systems of his time, he frequently lost out in the court of public opinion. We know this because in the Gospels we find examples of Jesus being called a glutton and drunkard, while others went as far as to question his sanity.

Knowing this Jesus sought to assure his followers that while they would face times of persecution, the Spirit of God would continue to be with them in challenging unjust structures and proclaiming God's justice.

The Spirit of God is also the comforting presence of God. This is the God who resides with us in times of peace and times of adversity. To be comforted by a loved one can help us find the strength to face difficult moment after difficult moment.

Gerry Conlon, one of the Guildford Four, wrote about his experience of being wrongly imprisoned. In one article he stated that, "It is still hard to describe what it is like to be facing a life sentence for something you did not do. For the first two years, I still had a little bit of hope. I would hear the jangling of keys and think that this was the time the prison officers were going to come and open the cell door and set us free. But after the Maguire Seven were arrested, I started to lose that hope."

It took the death of Gerry Conlon's father in prison, to motivate him to seek justice once again. Giuseppe Conlon's dying words to his son were, "...my death will be the key to your release". Those words were intended as comfort to his son, but more than that they motivated Gerry to take his own cause seriously and to work proactively with his lawyers for his freedom as well as the freedom and exoneration of the others falsely imprisoned.

The Spirit of God, more often than not, is found through the presence of others. We are the bearers of God's love, of God's comfort and compassion. The Spirit is seen and felt through our efforts in helping, counselling and advocating for others. The movement of the Spirit is the movement of justice.

Let us pray

May the Spirit of God be within us to keep us,
beside us to guard,
before us to lead,
behind us to protect,
beneath us to support,
and above us to bless. Amen.