

Beyond Easter 2021: Pt.4, Jn. 14.15-21

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By Major Brian Coles

[slide 1, blank] Stashed away in a drawer or box somewhere around your house, now nearly forgotten, you may still have a stack of old 45 rpm records from the 50's through to the 70's.

Worn and scratchy, long since outdated by digital technology, these primitive vinyl's hold a vast memory of great hits. Hits like "Born Free," the first 45 I owned as a kid, recorded in 1966 by Matt Munroe.

[slide 2] During this same time period, one well-known recording artist was blues master Jimmy Reed.

Reed brought the harmonica-and-guitar-driven black rhythm-and-blues of the Mississippi Delta into the musical mainstream.

[slide 3, blank] There was a story that grew up around his songs. Some people say that if you listen very carefully to some of his recordings,

you can hear, ever so faintly in the background, a woman's voice murmuring in advance the next verse of the song.

As the story goes, Jimmy Reed was so absorbed in the bluesy beat and the throbbing guitar riffs of his music that he simply could not remember the words of his own songs.

He needed help with the lyrics, so his wife coached her husband through the recording sessions by whispering the upcoming lyrics into his ear as he sang.

Whether or not this story is true, X'ns will surely recognize a parallel experience.

[slide 4] In John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that a key role of the Holy Spirit is, in effect, to whisper the lyrics of the gospel song into their ears.

When Jesus was physically present with his disciples, he was the one who instilled in them the right lyrics, who coached them through the words of the verse, who taught them all the right cords to play.

But now that Jesus approaches his death, now that he draws near to the time of his departure, now that the disciples will soon be on their own without Jesus' physical presence, that task is to be handed over to the Holy Spirit.

[slide 5] Jesus spoke these words to them in John 14.16.

“Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another *παράκλητος* [translated as Advocate, Counselor, or Helper] to be with you forever.”

And in John's gospel, the primary task of the Holy Spirit is to remind the faithful of the truth, to jog the memories of the followers of Jesus about all his teachings.

[slide 6] Jesus said in 14.26, “But the *παράκλητος* [the Advocate, Counselor, or Helper], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will cause you to *remember* everything I said to you.”

The Holy Spirit is the one who whispers the lyrics of the gospel song in their ears.

[slide 7, blank] It may surprise us to think of the Holy Spirit in this way. Often the Spirit is presented in flashier ways:

For example, the Spirit gives ecstatic experiences; the Spirit causes speech in unknown languages; the Spirit prompts dramatic and miraculous healings.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit does perform such wonders, but for John, these are all the result of the one, primary activity of the Spirit –

reminding those who follow Jesus about everything that Jesus taught and commanded.

The very fact that we need reminding implies that we are a forgetful people. So, the Spirit whispers the gospel lyrics in the ears of the forgetful faithful to remind us of the truths Jesus taught.

For example, when Jimmy Carter was running for President of the United States, one of the more dramatic moments in the campaign passed by almost unnoticed.

One Sunday morning, candidate Carter had been worshipping at the Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia.

When the service was over, he exited the church and walked into a swarm of media staked out on the church's front lawn.

With cameras rolling, lights glaring, microphones thrust forward, the media moved in like bees on honey

with their inane questions to ask the presidential candidate on the way out of church –

“Did you like the sermon?”

“Did you enjoy the singing this morning?”

“Do you plan to remain a Baptist in Washington?”- on and on the questioning went.

Suddenly, a reporter shouted out a question that genuinely mattered:

“Mr. Carter, suppose when you are President, you get into a situation where the laws of the country conflict with what you understand to be the will of God.

Which will you follow, the laws of the state or the commandments of God?”

Carter stopped, looked up, and blinked into the bright Georgia sun, obviously turning the question over in his mind.

Then, perhaps with the Spirit gently whispering the lyrics of the gospel in his ears, he turned toward the reporter and replied, "I would obey the commandments of God."

Alert aids, alarmed by his honesty and unnerved by his remark, hurriedly whisked him away from the press and into a waiting car.

Carter the politician should have avoided the question, but Carter the X'n had the Holy Spirit whispering the words of Jesus in his ear from Jn. 14.15, "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

The reason we need the Holy Spirit whispering the lyrics of the gospel in our ears is, of course, because we are extremely forgetful.

As one Christian writer, Fred Craddock, points out, "an early X'n definition for being lost was to have amnesia."

We are all amnesiacs who cannot keep our calling clearly in mind. Like blues master Jimmy Reed, we are caught up in the rhythms, but we forget the lyrics.

We know we are created to love God and to love one another, but when life's pressure builds, and temptation increases,

we simply forget who we are and what we are purposed to do and be in life; we forget the lyrics – we forget the teachings of Jesus.

The doctrine of sin discloses that our loss of memory is not a momentary lapse.

We choose forgetfulness again and again, preferring the unaccountability of amnesia to the accountability of remembering Jesus' commands.

It's like what happens in the book, *Lost In The Cosmos*, by Walker Percy. In this book, Percy describes a frequent device of soap operas, movies and novels.

What happens is a principal character will develop amnesia. He or she is in a new place, with a new job, a new set of friends, and perhaps a new mate.

"This plot device," says Percy, "is endlessly fascinating since it feeds our fantasies about a risk-free forgetting of the old self and the embarking on a new identity."

"Imagine," he writes, "a soap opera in which a character awakens every morning with amnesia..."

Every day, the character is in a strange house with a strange and attractive man or woman. Everything is new and fresh.

Does this prospect intrigue you?" asks Percy. "If it does, what does this say about your non-amnesiac self?"

Percy's point, of course, is about the *lure* of forgetfulness.

One way to describe sin, according to Tom Long, is willful forgetfulness. We choose amnesia; we decide, as an act of our will, not to remember that we are God's very own son or daughter. We can choose to forget the lyrics of the gospel – the teachings of Jesus.

But God, in his mercy, gives us the Holy Spirit who whispers the lyrics in our ear, telling us what we cannot - or will not - remember,

refreshing our memory about who we are and to whom we belong, refreshing our memory about Christ's teaching, about his commands.

When life's pressure builds and we remember the truths of the gospel, when temptation increases and we remember the teachings of Jesus, it is because the Holy Spirit is whispering the lyrics in our ear.

[slide 8] We have an example of this in the book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*, by Oliver Sacks. There he tells the story of Jimmy, a former sailor, now a patient in a nursing home,

whose severe neurological disorder has left him with a profound and permanent amnesia. He simply has no memory of anything from 1945 on.

Having no ability to retrieve the past and no ability to construct a meaningful present, Jimmy lacks any sense of self.

He is, writes Sacks, a person who “wears a look of infinite sadness and resignation.”

However, when Sacks asked the Sisters who ran the nursing home whether Jimmy had lost his soul, the Sisters were outraged by the question. “Watch Jimmy in chapel,” they said, “and judge for yourself.”

Sacks did watch Jimmy in chapel, and there he observed an astounding transformation.

There in worship, Jimmy was no longer at the mercy of a faulty and failed memory. He was, as Sacks put it, “wholly held and absorbed” [in worship].

In other words, in the singing and sayings, the signs and symbols of worship, Jimmy heard the voice of the Holy Spirit whispering the lyrics of the gospel.

Jimmy is a lot like us. In the final analysis, we are the forgetful faithful. Yet God, in his mercy, sends us the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, whispers in our ear, telling us what we cannot - or will not - remember,

refreshing our memory about who we are and to whom we belong, refreshing our memory of what Jesus taught us.

When in situations of testing and temptation, we remember the truths of the gospel, the teachings of Jesus, it is because the voice of the Holy Spirit whispers the lyrics in our ear.

Where we have no faithful memory, God, in his mercy and grace, gives us the Spirit who whispers the lyrics of the gospel in our ears reminding us of Jesus' teaching.

[slide 9] As Jesus said in Jn. 14.15ff, "If you love me, you will obey [or keep] my commandments.

Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another *παράκλητος* [Advocate, Counselor, or Helper], to be with you forever—

the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept [or receive] because it does not see him or know him. But you know him because he remains with you and will be in you."

[slide 10, blank] And it is the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, who, as John points out in v.26, will teach us all things, and will remind us of everything Jesus has said to us.

I trust our deepest desire is to love Jesus with all our hearts. We express our love for him by obeying his teaching, by keeping his commands.

But sometimes it seems that no matter how deep our desire our natural tendency is to forget his teaching.

Therefore, let us thank God this morning for the Holy Spirit who whispers those lyrics in our ears – who reminds us of the teachings of Jesus.

I invite you to sing with me song 312 / 834, "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me."

As we sing, let us all pray that we might be listening to the Holy Spirit whispering the lyrics, the teachings of Jesus, into our lives.