

Easter 6A May 17 2020  
John 14:15-21  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

You who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance. Amen.

*[Jesus says] If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. Let's pray:*

“I will not leave you orphaned.” Many of you know that I was adopted from birth in Rockhampton, Queensland, so there should be little surprise that I hone in on these particular words of comfort from Jesus' last supper discourse. There's immense power in these six words, and it's difficult to quantify the relief this beautiful promise has brought to countless multitudes of people left abandoned by the twists, turns, and cruel vagaries of life; especially those who have experienced the dark night of the soul.

So, it's with a heavy heart and no small measure of chill in my spine that I read reports of those who didn't fare so well and suffered unimaginable terror and debasement at an orphanage on the outskirts of the place where I was brought into this world.

I have also heard testimonies from “survivors” of other similar institutions. These people bear scars that can’t be healed by human hands; the only treatment that exists for scars of the soul is the healing ministration of Christ’s pure Gospel.

But it’s not a prerequisite to experience horrendous evil to qualify as a recipient worthy of the comfort these words bring. At some point in life, everyone needs to hear these words because they address some of humanity’s greatest fears and challenges - abandonment and isolation, loneliness and vulnerability. “I will not leave you orphaned”, reminds us that we’re not destined to walk this earth without an identity or direction. We aren’t alone.

For sure, there are moments in life when changes and tragedies can leave us feeling orphaned. The questions echo in our minds. What will I do now? Where will I go? What happens next? Who will love, nurture, and guide me? Who can I turn to? What will become of me? Those are the orphan’s questions. Those are the questions I imagine running through the heads and hearts of the disciples in today’s gospel.

It’s night-time, and Jesus announces he is leaving. The disciples left everything behind to follow Jesus and now he tells them he is leaving them. “We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” “Show us the Father.” These are some of the orphan questions we encountered last week.

I’m sure our two children felt the same way the day my wife and I told them that we would be moving to Adelaide for five years of seminary training. “What will it be like? Where will we live? What about our friends; family?” The feeling of being orphaned is real. And the orphan’s questions are certainly buried deep within our current situation. Some of you have shared as much with me over the past two months. “How much longer do we have to remain in isolation? When can we meet again at our beloved church? How do we move forward and rebuild? Who will still be with us? What’s next?”

Anyone who's ever lost – a spouse, a child, a friend, security, hope, memories – knows the orphan's questions.

We fear becoming orphaned. That fear highlights the deeper reality that by ourselves we aren't enough. That's not an accusation. It's got nothing to do with us being deficient. Rather, it's because we were never intended or created to be self-sufficient. We were never meant to stand alone as individuals. We were created to love and be loved, to live in relationship as people giving ourselves to each other, to dwell, abide, and remain within each other even as the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father; the exact opposite of being orphaned.

"I will not leave you orphaned." That's the promise. Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, storms, death, societal upheaval, coronavirus separation, we've never been and will never be, orphaned by God. That must have sounded strange to the disciples. In the same breath Jesus tells them that he is leaving and coming. Leaving and coming sounds confusing, don't you think? Please don't get bogged down trying to work it out. It's not something to try to work out. Instead, it's a way of seeing things differently. For example: I used to work away from home and when I spoke with my children on the telephone, I would say something to the effect of, "Even though we're apart I haven't left you."

Leaving and coming. Absence and presence. These two things must always be held in tension; not considered mutually exclusive entities. That's what Jesus lays before us in today's gospel. The tension confronts us with the question of whether Jesus, for us, is a past memory or a present reality, a sentimental story that makes us feel good or a living experience that challenges, guides, and nurtures our life.

According to Jesus, the answer to that question is determined by love that is revealed and fulfilled in keeping his commandments. The commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves, to love our enemies, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Whose feet do we wash and whose feet do we ignore? What are the boundaries of love?

Dear Saints, I encourage you to keep practising the commandments. As you do, your love will grow, expand, and transform both yourself and the world. Jesus will be a present reality in your life and you will know the fulfillment of his promise that you are not left orphaned. And, as Brenton reminds us again from Isaiah 43:19, you will indeed see God doing new things in your life and in the world.

If, however, you don't want to love so much; if you'd rather be self-enclosed and isolated, you will relegate yourself and others to the orphanages of this world. Jesus' promise is still for you and he remains faithful, but you will simply struggle to realise it for yourself.

Keeping the commandments is our access to Jesus' promise that we will not be left orphaned. Keeping the commandments doesn't make Jesus present with us. It makes us aware of the reality of his pre-existent and ongoing presence with us. Adherence to the commandments doesn't earn us Jesus' love, it reveals our love for him, a love that originates in his abiding love and presence within us.

Every time we expand the boundaries of our love, we push back the orphanages of this world, creating space within us where Father and Jesus make their home.

"I will not leave you orphaned." Over and over, day after day, regardless of what's happening in our lives, that is Jesus' promise. We have not been abandoned. So, don't abandon yourselves or others to the orphanages of this world. Rather, love with all that you are and have even as Abba, Father and Jesus love us with all that they are and have. Love is what reveals Jesus to us, love is what keeps us together, love takes away our fears, and love heals our deepest wounds. "I will not leave you orphaned." Surely, dear Brothers and Sisters, there is no greater comfort. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.