

A reflection from Leisa for the 6th Sunday of Easter

Repeatedly throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament, is the call, “Do not fear, I am with you.” In the readings for this Sunday that reality is described both in terms of the transcendence of God (who is present everywhere) and in terms of the imminence of God (who is with us where we are). However, God is no attention-seeking showman. But he invites us to seek him out, in the places where we find ourselves. Sometimes we must look hard for God and sometimes we must trust that God is there when we are tempted to think otherwise. ‘Though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17).

There are ‘seasons of life’. Periods, when the transitions, changes, and tragedies can leave us feeling as orphans. Whether spoken or unspoken the questions begin. What will I do now? Where do I go? What happens next? Who will love, nurture, and guide me? Who stands on my side? 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 our gospel reading, this week.

“I will not leave you orphaned.” At some point we all want, or even need, to hear these words. They speak directly to some of our greatest fears and challenges, abandonment and isolation, loneliness, vulnerability. They remind us that we are not destined to walk this earth without an identity or direction. We do not stand alone. God is with us!

It is the last supper. Disciples have been fed, feet have been washed, the betrayer has left. It is night, dark, and Jesus announces he is leaving. The one, for whom they left everything, now says he is leaving. The questions and longing have been building up, through our lectionary readings - “We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”; and “Show us the Father.” Anyone who has ever loved and lost – a spouse, a child, a friend, security, hope – knows the orphan’s questions.

“I will not leave you orphaned.” That is the promise. Regardless of the circumstances of our lives - storms, death, separation - we have never been and will never be orphaned by God. How strange that must have sounded to the disciples. In the same conversation Jesus tells them that he is leaving and coming. Presence and absence. These must be held in tension. That is what Jesus has set before us in today’s gospel. That tension confronts us with the question of whether Jesus, for us, is a past memory or a present reality. Is His life, death, and resurrection a sentimental story that makes us feel good, or a living experience that challenges, guides, and nurtures our life?

According to Jesus, what challenges, guides, and nurtures our life is determined by the love that we reveal and fulfil in keeping his commandments. The commandments to love our neighbour as ourselves; to love our enemies; to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

There have been practical boundaries, during this lockdown, in sharing this deep love of God. Boundaries of self-isolation or social distancing. Boundaries that still require many of us to stay at home and all of us to 'Stay alert, control the virus, save lives'. But we have seen God breaking through these restrictions, in creative and innovative ways, right across our communities; through us, in us, with us. People living out the commandment to love one other, during this lockdown and revealing God's presence and abiding love for all.

Every time we expand the boundaries of our love, we push back the orphanages of this world. Creating space within us and within our communities for God to fill every longing heart with his presence. "I will not leave you orphaned." Over and over, day after day, regardless of what is happening in our lives that is Jesus' promise. We have not been abandoned.

In John's gospel, the disciples have gathered with Jesus for the Last Supper. There is a terrifying feeling of loss and uncertainty that the disciples pick up on. Jesus keeps talking about crucifixion and the disciples are confused and frightened by the prospect of this horrible loss.

In the face of this Jesus tells them to "Love one another" and that the Father will give them "another Advocate". He tells them that this Advocate will be the spirit of God and this Advocate will come alongside them to stand with them. But not only that, this Advocate will empower them to stand with each other.

This Advocate, the spirit of God, is with us today. Filling and re-filling our hearts and our homes, with his love. Being alongside us, in our comings and our goings. Present with us in the lament of all that has ended and in the prayer and promise of each new day.

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