

I Will Not Leave You Orphaned

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 17 May, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Elizabeth Lee

Easter 6A

Contemporary reading: Excerpt from ‘*It will be morning*’ by C S Lewis; John 14:15-21

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

It seems a bit odd! Here we are in the Season of Easter, yet today we listen to the climax of Jesus’ farewell speech to his disciples at “The Last Supper.” We are back in the pre crucifixion days while celebrating Resurrection.

What does this reading have to offer us in this Easter season? And what does it have to offer us in these days of COVID isolation?

Easter is about encountering “The Risen One” well illustrated in the familiar post resurrection stories: like Mary of Magdalen at the empty tomb, the disciples in the upper room and the two on the Road to Emmaus.

But I also note that these resurrection encounters emerge from places of grief that these disciples were immersed in. So, for me, Easter is not just about encountering “The Risen One,” but doing so even while dwelling in grief. Easter is about making meaning in our lives even amid change, loss, and grief. Grief that begins to make sense, is an experience of resurrection. Life through death.

Let us return to the Gospel of today. Jesus, on the eve of his death, says to his disciples “*I will not leave you orphaned.*” I was surprised with the force with which those words hit me. “*I will not leave you orphaned.*”

In 1989, Julia, the eldest of my 3 children was not yet 3. Laila, who had until recently, been the family day carer of both Julia and Maria, died unexpectedly. I was driving with the children. I don’t know why, but those deep and meaningful questions are asked when one is driving. Julia says “*Mummy, promise me you will not die.*” How do I, as a new mum, respond to such a fear laden cry? “*Darling, I cannot promise you I won’t die. I will die one day. We will all die sometime. But I hope it will not be for many years when you are grown up.*” Fortunately, my answer seemed to reassure her. Julia was afraid of being orphaned, although that word was not part of her vocabulary.

Fear of being orphaned is surely one of the universal fears of humankind. Not necessarily the fear of our parents dying but the fear of isolation, abandonment, chaos, loneliness, vulnerability in all its guises. Fear, that by ourselves we are not enough, for we are not created to be self-sufficient, but for relationship.

Jesus draws on this potent metaphor. On the eve of his death, Jesus wanted to offer reassurance to his disciples, just as I wanted to reassure my daughter, Julia. Jesus has no doubt that those whom he loved would be filled with fear and terror in the days ahead. They would be vulnerable and panic, so Jesus was both preparing them for the inevitable and doing what he could to mitigate it. He assured them that he would not leave them orphaned.

I notice that Jesus does not say that they will not be orphaned but that he will not leave them orphaned. As we know from the various accounts of the Resurrection, the disciples initially felt the intense grief of being abandoned. Many of us are familiar with the 5 stages of grief identified by Elizabeth Kubler Ross: anger, denial, depression, bargaining and acceptance - and maybe we can see these in the resurrection stories.

Was Mary angry when she found the tomb empty - "*where have you taken my Lord?*" Were the disciples depressed as they walked along the road to Emmaus or the 12 who were locked in fear in the upper room? Was there some level of acceptance when Peter and his mates were back fishing on the Sea of Tiberias? These emotions come with being orphaned. There is a lack of the abundance of life that Jesus promised. But Jesus did not say you will not be or feel orphaned, rather Jesus says "*I will not leave your orphaned.*"

So, what is on offer? Jesus offers to send a Paraclete, a comforter, encourager, helper, an advocate which he calls the Spirit. This Paraclete will offer what Jesus has been offering the disciples. The Spirit would continue the work of Jesus.

In "*Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*" David Kesslerⁱ extends the work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross, with whom he worked, adding another stage to help understand grief. He says acceptance is not enough. We need to find meaning following bereavement, be that death, divorce, drought, bushfire, unemployment, yes- even a pandemic.

Does the Paraclete that Jesus spoke of, the Spirit, appear in different guises at different times? Could the Spirit be the meaning making David Kessler sees as so important in healing grief? The arrival of the Paraclete ensures that the revelation of God, in the incarnation, does not end with the death of Jesus. Jesus says, "*You will know that I am in God, and you are in me and I am in you.*" This promise of union with the Divine is the hope that Jesus offers.

I now need to return to the beginning of today's Gospel passage. Jesus says: "*If you love me, and obey the command I give you; I will ask the one who sent me to give you another Paraclete.*"

I am not a Greek scholar but others inform me that the Greek indicates a condition of fact, not a conditional statement, so a better translation might be, "*Since you love me, you will keep my commandment.*" We need to make sure we don't turn it around. Jesus did not say, "*If you keep my commandment, I will love you.*" He is simply saying, "*Since you love me, you will be keeping my commandment.*"

What is the commandment? Jesus never mandated that they keep the 613 commandments in the Torah, nor has his focus been on the 10 commandments handed to Moses. We know from earlier in John's Gospel that the new commandment that Jesus gave was "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" And Jesus adds "*This is how all will know you are my disciples: that you truly love one another.*" (John 13: 14-15). Jesus is telling his disciples that it is through love, the way that he has loved, that they will come to experience the gift of the Spirit, that sense of not being orphaned.

But, what does Jesus mean by “love”? It is agape love, that unconditional love that he showed throughout his life.

The love with which he washed his disciple’s feet including those of Peter and Judas.

The love that Luke’s Gospel describes when Jesus announces his mission to proclaim liberty to the captives, sight to the blind and release to those in prison.

The love that Matthew’s Gospel illustrates when Jesus talks of feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner or the ill.

The love of intimate relationship he affirms when Mary of Bethany sits at his feet, or when the woman washes his feet with her tears.

The love of forgiveness on the cross.

Jesus offers his disciples words of hope. He reminds them that since they are loved by him, they will keep his commandments, loving in all the ways that he loves and in doing so, they will come to experience of the presence of the Spirit. Jesus was saying that to experience the abundance of life that he promised, we need to love like he did. And in doing so we are able to claim the fullness of life in the face of fear, terror, panic, isolation, loss, grief that is a consequence of the very nature of our existence in the world.

So how is this reading speaking in these days of COVID isolation and reorientation? It seems to me that we are needing to hear the words of Jesus- *“I will not leave you orphaned”* – that there is meaning and hope amid the grief that many of us and the community may be feeling.

- The grief resulting from social distancing that has forced us apart from colleagues, friends and family for months.
- Disappointment has accompanied postponed or cancelled baptisms, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, or funerals.
- Public activities and experiences that may have brought us together in person have been abandoned or moved online.
- City streets are vacant, businesses closed, public transport empty.
- Perspex protective screens distance us from the cashiers in the supermarket, we stand at arm’s length from people in queues, and eye off the stacked tables as we pick up our takeaway coffees to sip on our lonesome.

We grieve for our world:

- the deaths of more than a quarter of a million people,
- the almost 1 million in our country who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19,
- the plight of asylum seekers and those on temporary visas with no access to the welfare offered to Australian residents.

This grief is on top of the grief we were already feeling because of drought, fire and flood, the grief associated with climate change and callous disregard for the environment resulting from dysfunctional economic and political systems. We are collectively grieving the world we have lost.

We can look at the Gospels as a past memory of some historic event of 2000 years ago, some sentimental story that makes us feel good or encounter the Sacred words that speak into our present reality, words that challenge, guide and nourish our lives. Some of us may recognise that we have been experiencing anger, denial depression, bargaining and acceptance over these past weeks.

And yet, today's Gospel is inviting us, when the time is right, to find meaning in this global pandemic or as Gareth described last week "*being thrown off our guard at this time.*" This may require a reassessment of the way we live individually and collectively.

Some of us may have already begun to find signs of resurrection.

The quieter pace of life enables us to re-centre our lives.

Our daily walks among nature offer us a feeling of kinship with the entire breathing world as we listen to birdsongs, coming to deeper appreciation of our entanglement with all that surrounds us.

Some of us may be savouring this apprenticeship with slowness establishing deeper bonds of intimacy with partners, children, neighbours, lorikeets and eucalypts.

Some may be finding meaning through the deepening of relationships among the Pitt St Community "visiting the sick" through mailing a card, feeding the hungry by dropping off groceries, while others through acts of service in the wider world.

None of this is to deny or diminish our grieving. Rather an invitation to seek life amid death.

When we love, and sense we are loved, we no longer feel orphaned, we keep the commandment.

We love God, love our neighbour, and love ourselves with our heart, soul, mind and strength. This love grows, expands and transforms self and the world, such that in the words of Jesus, "*you will know that I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you.*"

We encounter "the Risen One." No longer stuck in grief, we see and live differently. We truly experience Resurrection amid COVID isolation.

And this is the antithesis of being orphaned.

ⁱ Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief by David Kessler (2019)