

14 May 2023

Acts 17:22-31  
1 Peter 3:13-22  
John 14:15-21

*The sun'll come out  
tomorrow;  
bet your bottom dollar  
that tomorrow  
there'll be sun.*

*Just thinkin' about  
tomorrow  
clears away the cobwebs  
and the sorrow  
'til there's none.<sup>1</sup>*

In the musical set in New York in 1933, eleven-year-old Annie sleeps in an orphanage with many other girls her age. Even though her parents abandoned her at the orphanage as a baby, Annie holds on to the hope that they will come back for her one day. She makes several attempts to escape the orphanage to escape its cruelty and to try to find her parents. On one such attempt Annie befriends a stray dog – in a sense another orphan – and in the song “Tomorrow” tells the dog of better days to come.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus says, “I will not leave you as orphans.”

Jesus makes this statement within an extended talk (of which we heard the first part last week) which takes place as Jesus and his disciples share what turns out to be the last meal they will have together before his crucifixion. As Jesus speaks darkly of being betrayed and denied, and of going away from them to a place where they cannot join him, his disciples get more and more perplexed and fearful. So Jesus speaks to reassure them.

Our Bible publishers try to be helpful by breaking the text into paragraphs and sections, and then giving us headings for sections. Most of these breaks and

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<sup>1</sup> “Tomorrow” song by Martin Charnin (lyrics) and Charles Strouse (music), from the 1977 musical *Annie*.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie\\_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Annie_(musical))

headings are not in the original text, and thus they can sometimes misdirect us. We also often break up passages for reading in services so they are more digestible chunks. But what makes for easier digestion can sometimes have us missing the wonderful interaction of the flavours of the full feast!

What Jesus says to his disciples across the part we heard last week and in this week's part, and then on into the rest of the chapter, is all of a piece and has consistent themes. And a pretty good catch-all for those themes is found in this phrase: "I will not leave you as orphans".

To disciples who had left homes and families and livelihoods to follow him, and who now fear that they are about to be abandoned, Jesus promises that he will be *with* them, in some fashion, from that day forward. He alludes to his resurrection life, the life that he makes available to his followers. He talks of a future in which his disciples can be assured of a dwelling place with God; and he declares that he is the way to that future. In him they see God: unlike the Athenians addressed by Paul, this is no "unknown god". One scholar has written that "for the Christian the separation from the Father is abolished. The Father is no more the Unknown, the great X which in the end can also be the 'Nothing'. Rather behind the mask of the 'Nothing' there stands the great Lover."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus reminds the disciples that they have a purpose, that they are to continue his work through prayer, witness, and action in his name. And he assures them that they will be equipped and supported in that work as the Father sends the Holy Spirit, his breath, his own inner life. In no way can the disciples feel abandoned: "I will not leave you as orphans."

When Jesus talks of the Spirit he uses a special Greek word – *paracletos* – which has several layers of meaning, which we find reflected in the differences between various Bible translations.<sup>4</sup>

We can think of the Spirit as 'helper', lending assistance in the various tasks, giving strength and energy to do what needs to be done, living for God and witnessing to his love in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> E Haenchen, cited in Beasley-Murray, *John*, p.259

<sup>4</sup> For the following Wright, *John*, pp.62-63, in places quoting directly. See also Kruse, *John*, pp.303-306, and Beasley-Murray, *John*, pp.256-258

We can think of the Spirit too as ‘comforter’, akin to the strength and support we get from the expressions of presence and love from others that help us meet the demands of crisis, disaster, and tragedy.

We can think of the Spirit as ‘advocate’, one who stands up in a court of law and explains to the judge and jury how things are from his or her client’s point of view, one who pleads the case. Jesus assumes that his followers will often find themselves, as he found himself, on the wrong side of official persecution. He saw the situation, as centuries of Jewish tradition had done before him, in terms of the heavenly lawcourt with God as the judge. In that court, his people can rest assured that their case will be heard, that God will constantly be reminded of their plight, because the Spirit will plead on their behalf.

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I’ve left what I think is the most significant and powerful theme to the last. To disciples fearful of abandonment, Jesus assures them that they will be drawn into the very life of God. In terms that will be repeated by Jesus when he prays before his death,<sup>5</sup> Jesus talks of how he himself is “in” the Father, and that his disciples are “in” him and he is “in” them. It is an expression of astonishing intimacy, and is a rich wonder deserving of at least a sermon on its own (perhaps on Trinity Sunday in a few weeks’ time).

But those who read John’s Gospel should not be shocked to find this amazing intimacy with God. Right at the start of his Gospel, as he tries to set the scene for the narrative to come, John writes of Jesus, the eternal Word from the Father, that “to those who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God.”<sup>6</sup>

We are not orphans: we are adopted children of the living, loving, God.

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<sup>5</sup> John 17:20-23; 26

<sup>6</sup> John 1:12

In this relationship we take the model from Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God.<sup>7</sup> When Jesus was baptised by John, the voice from heaven declared “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”

The first essential element of the relationship is the *fatherhood* of God, the one to whom Jesus is son.

The second essential element in the relationship is *identity*. God identifies Jesus as his beloved son. Jesus’ identity flowed from his relationship with God the Father; and out of this came his security and confidence. It is interesting that this was tested by Satan in the wilderness immediately after Jesus’ baptism and affirmation of his identity.

The final element is *obedience*. Jesus acted in a way that is consistent with his identity. Because of the oneness Jesus had with God the Father, he was perfectly obedient – as Jesus said on one occasion when his authority was questioned: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.”<sup>8</sup> “By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus’ relationship started with God’s *fatherhood*, leading to Jesus’ *identity*, and thence to *obedience*.

As adopted children of God, the same pattern follows for the disciples and for us. God the Father adopts us, leading to our identity as children of God, in which we have security and confidence. And from that secure identity flows our obedience: as Jesus said to the disciples, “If you love me, keep my commandments”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The following exposition is drawn from Breen, *Covenant*, pp.207-209

<sup>8</sup> John 5:19-20a

<sup>9</sup> John 5:30

<sup>10</sup> John 14:15

But we can all too often get all this around the wrong way, trying to earn our way into God's love, feeling as if Jesus ought to have said "keep my commandments and *then* I will love you."

Jesus reassured his disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans." He says the same to us, offering us the same assurance and the same proofs and equipping. But despite this, and despite the extraordinary advantage we have over those Jesus addressed that day given that we live after his resurrection and after the coming of the Holy Spirit, we can still often fall into living as if we were still orphans.<sup>11</sup>

Living with the heart of an orphan we can regard God as a demanding master, rather than as loving parent. We may then react against that understanding of God by seeing ourselves as completely independent and self-reliant, rather than being willing to acknowledge our need of God and our interdependence with other family members.

When we live by the love of law we display the heart of an orphan – trying to work backwards from obedience to identity – rather than living by the law of the love which gives us our identity and out of which we desire to obey. When we strive for human praise, approval, and acceptance rather than finding ourselves totally accepted in God's love and set right by his grace, we are falling back into acting as orphans again. We act as orphans when we are jealous of the success and position of others, rather than having the humility to value others and rejoice in their successes.

We are *not* orphans: we need to live into the fullness and assurance of what it means to be the beloved children of God.

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Today's reading from 1 Peter ends with: You are saved "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him." This Thursday we celebrate Jesus'

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<sup>11</sup>For the following contrasts, and more, see the one-pager at <https://chialpha.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/The-Heart-of-an-Orphan-vs.-the-Heart-of-a-Son-Allowing-God-to-Transform-Your-Heart.pdf>

ascension to the Father. In the second verse of his well-known Ascension Day hymn, *Alleluia, sing to Jesus!*, nineteenth century businessman William Chatterton Dix picks up Jesus' words from John 14:

Alleluia! – not as orphans  
are we left in sorrow now:  
Alleluia! – he is near us;  
faith believes, nor questions how.  
Though the cloud from sight received him  
whom the angels now adore,  
shall our hearts forget his promise,  
'I am with you evermore'?

In the musical, Annie the orphan comforts the stray as she sings of her confidence that tomorrow will be better than today. We, with the disciples, can have full confidence in the face of all that troubles us and gives us cause for fear, because we are not left as orphans: we are adopted children of the living God.

#### Sources

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