

NOT AS ORPHANS

John 14:15-21

The Word of the Lord from John 14:18: Jesus said, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Our Gospel lesson is a continuation of the discourse Jesus is having with His beloved disciples that we overheard last week from the Upper Room during the Last Supper. It is a critical time of last minute instruction and encouragement before Jesus is arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. How does the Teacher begin?

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me” (verse 1). These friends of Jesus were very troubled by His words. First, all the talk about doing to die, and then this special Passover Supper with the added twist of instituting a new testament in His blood. What could it all mean? Whatever it was, the disciples couldn’t help but be upset and anxious. After all the time and energy they’d invested in their Galilean Rabbi, to have it go down like this...was this what they had signed up for when they left their nets, walked away from their tax tables, their whole way of life in the real world to follow Jesus?

“Let not your hearts be troubled,” Sons of Thunder, ever-boisterous Peter, mixed-up Thomas, confused Philip and all the rest. “I will not leave you as orphans!” Oh, but all His talk of sacrifice, and “little while,” and command for them to love each other was all pointing to their orphanage and abandonment. Jesus was leaving them! That much they understood. Otherwise Jesus would not have needed to reassure them as He is with the promised coming of the Holy Spirit and His imminent going to the Father.

For years I have wrestled with the context of this particular Holy Week discourse of Jesus finding its way to us post-Easter. Jesus speaks in the thick of Holy Week (Maundy Thursday to be exact), but why do the faithful all over the world hear it at this time of year? The obvious answer lies in Jesus’ forthcoming ascension on the liturgical calendar. Our Lord wants us to know that His Ascension is not abandonment, as though He’s committing us to some solitary orphanage where we are left to meditate some deep philosophical question. No. Consider for a moment what takes place in churches all over the world on Easter and its holy Sundays that follow.

What did the Early Church of the first century establish as a kind of tradition along with celebrating Jesus' resurrection from the dead? Answer: They baptized babies and confirmed the catechumen in their charge. Easter and new converts, newborn Christians still wet behind the ears...these go together. As our young people pledge to be faithful to God and confess Christ even to the point of death at altars all across Christendom, Jesus is in turn bringing them this critical promise and pledge: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Easter and Pentecost are therefore inseparably linked. Just because you don't see Jesus with your physical eyes, don't think He's not there. You are still a disciple since Jesus still comes to you in His Word and through His Sacraments. The Holy Spirit continues to work in Baptism and Supper drawing us ever closer by faith to Jesus. You are still a disciple even after Confirmation since you crave the pure spiritual milk of the Gospel that Peter wrote about in his epistle.

Jesus knows that the newly baptized and newly confirmed are easy prey for the devil to confuse and trap. Jesus knows that you won't always be on the mountain top high that Peter, James and John experienced at the Transfiguration. Some days as Christians, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death—frightened, all alone, as if orphaned, overwhelmed and troubled by what we see and hear. Perhaps you have felt that way in your isolation these past few trying weeks. Distancing leaves you isolated and alone. You long for community, a communion of saints who share a common confession of faith. Here you have consolation and comfort in your brothers and sisters. But lately they have been distant, unable to join you in prayer and worship. In such times, let not your hearts be troubled. Jesus has not left us as orphans. He will come to you as surely as He has come into the world to give His life a ransom for many. He will come and bring you to Himself in, with, and under bread and wine which are His body and blood.

An orphaned calf, or lamb, or fawn will wander away from the herd in search of its mother. Without the mother, the young one is in grave danger because it has no defense against the wolf. We see this happening in the church when our young people leave their home churches and head off to college. Many of them are not strong enough to ward off the voices of wolves. They become orphaned because they no longer listen to the Word, and they fall away because they no longer recognize the voice of their Shepherd. Many cannot remember what they promised at Confirmation, while others live lives as if they'd never been baptized into Christ.

What ought we to say to these orphans? How do we get them to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd once again? Before we say anything to them, it is our Christian duty first and foremost to pray. At the baptism of a child or adult, we pledge to pray for them and offer them our support as a congregation and as

individual Christians. Therefore, pray earnestly that our heavenly Father would look in mercy on them and bring them to repentance. Then, by all means speak a word of hope and encouragement, inviting them to church and listening to what is important to them. We can say all kinds of things that are good, but we must also be willing to listen to what they have to say. Parents and teachers, pastors and church workers are to be voices that help wayward orphans hear the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd loud and clear.

In a very real way we are all orphans because we all sin and have strayed from the voice of the Good Shepherd. Sin dwells in us, alienating us from that which we know to be good and right. In sin we are cut off from our Father and left to wander, cast out, abandoned, isolated, dead to God. In utter humility, Jesus became our Brother and Orphan par excel lance. On the cross He was forsaken by the Father that we might remain forever sons and daughters of God. There He took upon Himself our every sin, though in truth He Himself knew no sin. On the cross, alienated, struck down and isolated, Jesus bore your sin and mine so that today we believe and trust with all confidence and truth: "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." In Jesus we have seen the Father, for Jesus and the Father are one. The Holy Spirit testifies and His word is true.

Therefore, dearly loved and blessed, let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Jesus, His Son because you will never be orphans just as long as Christ our Lord comes to you as He has so promised to do. Whether standing high on the mountaintops of life in all their glory, or walking through the valley of the shadow of death, you are not orphans, for Jesus has made you His own. This is most certainly true. Amen.