

“We Are Not Alone”

As I have been thinking about this Sunday I have thought that it is not only the Seventh Sunday of Easter but it is also the Sunday after the Ascension. Ascension Day is forty days after Easter. It marks the day when Jesus left his disciples and ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father. It also marks the day when Jesus said that he would send another to be with the disciples and us. That other is what we call the Holy Spirit. In Greek it is the Paraclete which translates as the comforter or the advocate. The one who is our companion in our earthly pilgrimage both to give us comfort in our trials and to be our spiritual advocate when we are persecuted.

I do not want to diminish in any way the role of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we will celebrate the Holy Spirit next Sunday on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. But for now I want to stick with Jesus for a few minutes.

The disciples, some of whom are still doubting according to Matthew’s Gospel, might be troubled that Jesus would leave them behind. The disciples had been through so much with Jesus including his death when they thought they had been abandoned and did not know what to do with Jesus dead and their ministry seemingly over. When he returned through the resurrection they were ecstatic even when they were not sure what was going on.

Now some forty days later they think they may have a handle on things and Jesus tells them that it is time for him to leave them and return to the Father in heaven. I expect they were feeling that it was not fair. Even with the promise of the Holy Spirit there was a sense of abandonment.

But, in John’s Gospel, as we heard last week, Jesus says, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” Even as he is preparing to leave he says he is coming to us. Even as he ascends into heaven and the sense of abandonment increases we are promised that Jesus is coming to us. The Jesus that once dwelled in the flesh is now coming into us in a new way. No longer a separate being, Jesus comes to dwell within us to abide with us as he promised in the passage about the True Vine.

What was once a promise or a parable is now coming true. Jesus physically is going away to be with the Father, but his spirit remains dwelling within all who believe in him, trust in him, and keep his commandments.

It seems to me that Jesus is not sending the backup team, the second stringers or bench players to take his place. Rather we are getting a double dose of the Godhead. The Son in our heart and the Spirit at our side. It is not a bad deal; a sort of spiritual BOGO i.e. buy one get one free. Believe in Jesus and keep him in your heart, and get the Holy Spirit to be by your side to comfort you and advocate for you. The disciples had to wait ten days from the Ascension to Pentecost to receive the Holy Spirit, but you and I get the Spirit on demand. Believe and receive as it were.

I do not mean to be glib. These are hard concepts to grasp, especially with our modern minds that insist on being able to touch and feel things. That insist on everything being material if we are to believe it exists.

Allow me to share with you one of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets. Perhaps in her poetic words the concepts of companion, comforter and spirit will make sense and you will be able to abide with them in your heart.

“Let Evening Come” by Jane Kenyon

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned  
in long grass. Let the stars appear  
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.  
Let the wind die down. Let the shed  
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop  
in the oats, to air in the lung  
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

These are uncertain times and we are anxious. Like Jesus in our Ascension window we are not quite sure of what is happening. But also like Jesus in that window we can be looking in wonder to what is to come rather than looking back at what was and what we have left behind. God is inviting us away from our materialistic selves to a new life that values one another, the lives of others, and living in a community of love and mutual respect that transcends our old lives and draws us closer to God in heaven. We can let all that is frightening and all that is beautiful come and we can greet it with open and tender hearts, because we know that we are not alone. We are not orphans. We can let it all come as it will, and not be afraid. For even if Jesus has gone from our sight God does not leave us comfortless, so let evening come.