

May 17, 2020  
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Cycle A  
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Does it seem a bit strange to you that Jesus, in this discourse that we have just heard from John, should be assuring grown men and women that he will not leave them orphans? Adults do not usually fear being left orphans. Orphanhood relates to children who have lost their parents through death or permanent abandonment. So what is being assured in such a promise, not to be left orphans?

When I was in the ninth grade at St. Michael School in Flint, Mich., the oldest of five children, my father had a serious heart attack. I prayed mightily to God for his recovery. My prayer was heard, but deep down I realized and feared what the loss of even one parent might mean, let alone two.

Parents give us assurance, confidence – even in difficulties – that there is some underlying substratum, or some orbit could we say, within which we live and move. We take it for granted but it sustains our life, our home, our resources, our relationships – even our identity.

Orphans are vulnerable on every score. In the HIV-AIDS crisis in South Africa, a new social service category emerged: “child headed households” – orphans – that exists still today. One can almost assume this category will only expand in the present Covid crisis. Orphanhood is not good.

But why did Jesus promise his adult followers they would not be left orphans? This promise could be read in the context of the promised coming of the gift of the Spirit. Every reading today alludes to that coming. It is that Spirit who will ensure we will not be left orphans.

But what might that coming ensure?

Well, perhaps it will ensure that we will not lose our homes (as orphans often do). There will always be a place where we belong, where we can be ourselves, accepted for who we are, one of the family, forgiven our failings and idiosyncrasies, for we are loved and secure.

We will have an identity, a memory, we will know who we are; we have a referent “the son of ...;” “the daughter of ...” We are not isolated, scattered and adrift but part of a line of family members, with heritage and memory.

A friend I knew from a large Catholic family lost both her parents within a year when they were still children. She was sent with a younger child to live with some relatives. Nightly, her younger sister would ask her to, “tell me something about momma; tell me something about papa.” So, with tears, she did. They were separated soon afterward and shared memories were lost. The younger sister retained no memory of either parent.

In families, we are assured we will also have the resources we need to live: money, food, education – things material – but also encouragement, compassion, insight and inspiration.

In Jesus' promise of the Spirit, who "will not leave them orphaned," the same assurances might apply.

The disciples will not be lacking a home, a place of belonging among the brothers and sisters of the Christian community. It is here where that familial love, forgiveness and acceptance will secure a welcome in the midst of the journeys they will soon face.

The coming of the Spirit will ensure that Jesus' followers will not be lacking an identity or a memory. The identity is new, that of a son or a daughter. The risen Christ tells Mary Magdalen, "Go and tell my disciples that I am returning to 'My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'" Our identity is in and with Christ to his Father. The title now is "Christian;" the relationship, brother and sister; and the memory is that of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

The promise of the Spirit ensures that no one will be lacking in resources. Over and over Jesus promises that the indwelling Spirit will tell you all things, will reveal to you all that is needed. You will do even greater works. You will not be left orphaned. We live within our families and within the Church as in an orbit of the Spirit, moving in and out, drawing from the Spirit's energy and momentum, yet always encircling the reality of the Godhead and its manifestation in the Risen Christ.

But we live also in the orbit of our planet Earth. In this coming week, we mark the fifth anniversary of the encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis has asked us to observe it as time to consider anew our place as brothers and sisters in the family home of our mother Earth. We do so this year from a new place, one we never would have imagined five years – or even five months – ago. We must attend to what the indwelling Spirit seeks to tell us in this most exceptional of times, for the message has come at a great cost.

The various antiphons and the psalm of this day, of this whole season, speak of Joy. Today's first reading says "there was great joy in that city" at the words and works of Philip. But we know it is a joy that was born out of obedience and suffering. The promises of Jesus do not erase these realities from our lives, but the promised gift of the Spirit should fill us with confidence. And hope.

We have a tradition of marking the half-way point of our liturgical seasons. Half-way through Advent we have Gaudete Sunday, and half-way through Lent we have Laetare. Perhaps today, more or less half-way to the celebration of Pentecost's bestowal of the Spirit, could we term this "Jubilate Sunday?" It may seem far from our minds and hearts in this time of the virus crisis, but as adopted sons and daughters of the Father –orphans no longer – we have a secure basis on which to place our hopes and the resources that we need to respond to the present realities of the crisis in whatever way we are able. The promise was obtained for us at an infinite price; we can be assured it has not diminished in its power or in its consolation.