

I will not leave you orphans

The fear of being lost, abandoned or separated from parents, must be one of the basic anxieties of children. I still have a vivid memory of being left as a small child on a railway station after the family had run for the train. The doors closed on me and we all stood helplessly looking at one another as the train moved off. Happily I had the presence of mind, young as I was, to catch the next train and the family was waiting for me at the next station. This was as close as I ever came to being orphaned.

In the scriptures, orphans are always included among those who are most vulnerable in society and therefore deserving of special care and attention. For this reason Jesus' promise – "I will not leave you orphans" – would have been particularly evocative for his hearers. It should touch a special chord for us too because our hearts naturally go out to children who lose their parents, whatever the cause or circumstances.

For some of you, reading this will stir your emotions precisely because you have experienced the pain of losing your parents. Indeed the pain of losing parents can be very intense even when we are adults so it should not be difficult to understand what Jesus is saying to us.

The deeper the love we have for one another the more painful the parting is, and often people grieve for their loved ones over a long period. Our grieving is necessary and healthy when we move on to realise that the love we have for one another does not die. Though the bodies of our loved ones are no longer physically present to us, their spirit is still with us.

Jesus promises his disciples that the Father will send the Spirit of truth to them and it is in this way that they will remain united both to him and to his Father. They will not be left as orphans.

Today's readings are chosen to prepare for the coming feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost. There was certainly a period of grieving for the disciples when Jesus was no longer physically present, which probably accounts for the intensity of this passage in John's Gospel: it was etched on their memories. But also etched on their memories was their transformation when the Spirit came and gave them the courage and power to continue the mission of Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles provides us with an account of how the story unfolded in the early Church and today's first reading is a perfect illustration of how important the Spirit was at all times.

Of course it is the same for us. In all the sacraments we pray that the Spirit may come upon us so that Jesus may be present to us. As the priest stretches his hands over the gifts of bread and wine at Mass today and prays that the Holy Spirit will come upon them, it is so that in our own time and place we may be in communion with the Lord.

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