

I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANED; I AM COMING TO YOU Jn 14.18

I recently came across a photo of a boy of about six standing on the stage of Leeds Town Hall. It had been taken about a hundred years ago, 1920/1. He looks lost, bewildered. He's all by himself, the centre of attention, being watched by the great and the good sitting in solemn assembly on the stage and in the hall. He's receiving a medal on behalf of his father for his work with the Voluntary Fire Service. He's receiving it because his father has recently died. The little boy lost is *my* father.

He was an orphan. His mother had died in child birth when he was three; his father died of TB when he was five. He always bore the wound of being orphaned so young. For much of his life he had a stammer, and for all his life he had a well-disguised anxiety that his security would crumble away.

Most of us can only imagine the anxiety of being an orphan so young.

But this pandemic we're living through now is giving us something of that experience of being orphaned. We're suddenly cut off from normal life, from our security. Everything we thought we could rely on 'out there' in the world has suddenly become fragile. Just meeting people, going shopping, touching the post or a door handle – it's all threatening. We're always want to control our lives and now we've lost control. We're orphaned in a strange, new world.

Jesus said to his friends in today's gospel, 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.' They were about to have their normal lives rocked to their foundations - Jesus was about to be destroyed in the cruellest way the Romans could devise. In the new 'Kingdom-family' that he'd been setting up with them, they were about to be orphaned.

So he was giving them a promise. They wouldn't stay like that. They would receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. 'I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him. But you know him because he abides with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you.'

Because this Advocate, this Spirit is **his** Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. **I** will come to you, he said.

Jesus also calls the Spirit the Comforter. Do you know how many times in the New Testament Jesus says 'Don't be afraid,' 'Don't worry,' 'Peace be with you'

and words like that? Seventy. It's what he said more than anything else. 'Don't be afraid' in the storm, on the water, in the Sermon on the Mount, after the resurrection. 'Don't be afraid. Be at peace.'

He says to us, 'Don't be afraid. I won't leave you orphaned in this strange new world of the pandemic and post-pandemic. I'm coming to you.' The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus is always coming to us – in new found strength and resilience in this crisis, in the care of friends and the love of family, in the concern of old friends who suddenly turn up on email, in the renewing gifts of the garden and the glory of spring in the Dales, in sudden moments of inexplicable joy, in the hush of night, in this service now... The Spirit is always coming to us – if we notice.

But don't let's take the Spirit for granted. Don't let's try to capture him, box him up and hang him on the wall. The Spirit is a free spirit. I've been reading a wonderful novel called *The Killing of Butterfly Joe* by Rhidian Brook. It has a family of fabulous characters, chief of whom is Joe himself, who sells butterflies to whoever he can talk into it. A gentle giant with enough enthusiasm for a whole town. He's also a wild and whacky Christian, who enjoys interrupting sermons! The narrator is an unreliable young Welsh guy re-named Rip who's talking here to Joe's sister Isabelle:

Rip says, 'I used to wear my cynicism as a badge of honour but I secretly loathed it, knowing it was really a cloak to cover my uncertainty about myself. I envy Joe's hope, his faith. And yours, Isabelle. I'd like some of it myself. What is it? It's a mystery to me.'

Isabelle was fully engaged by now. 'Well, it's not magic; but it's hard to explain it. It's a bit like a butterfly. It's beautiful and true but elusive – and fragile.'

'And the moment you catch it you kill it!' I said.

'Yes,' she smiled. 'Maybe that's the answer. Not to catch it. Or try to explain it. But let it fly.'

Let the Holy Spirit fly. Don't try and tell the Spirit what to do, how to come to us, and what to do with us.

Why don't we let the Spirit fly into our lives - now, and in the new normal when we eventually emerge from this orphanage.

We have the promise of Jesus: 'I will not leave you orphaned. I'm coming to you. I want to fly into your life.'