

Sunday May 21st, 2017

Easter VI

PRAYER: O Holy One, you promised the poor and needy ones that, when their tongues were parched and no water could be found, your rivers would spring forth from the desert to relieve them. Today we thirst; bless us with your living water. Break our drought; surge through our spirits, that we may live again. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: We come to our God with assurance that he never leaves us alone. God's presence continues to guide us as we pursue the paths of discipleship. All that we have is a gift of God's grace. Let us present our tithes and offerings as a sign of our commitment to Christ and as an act of praise to the encompassing care of almighty God.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious God, you neither need our praise nor want our burnt offerings. You have created the universe and all that dwells therein. All that we have or will become is an outpouring of your gracious care. You are God, with compassion and redemption flowing from the core of your being. You have sent us the Christ to set us aright. You allot the boundaries of our existence as his body the church. You determine the times for our ministry in his name. Apart from your mercy, we wander aimlessly through life. Yet you have looked with favour upon your people and for that we laud you with thanksgiving. In you we live, move, and have our being, and with that assurance we dare to give you all praise.

We look to your Spirit to fill us with counsel and guidance. Help us to learn what it means to be called your people. As the eight were saved through water in the covenant made with Noah, cleanse our conscience through the sacrifice of Jesus made once and for all. Fill us with zeal for the fulfillment of your commandments. Give us endurance and patience when the waters are troubled. May we tread bravely the way of the cross. As Christ has subjected all authorities and powers, rendering them mute upon hearing your word, attune us to your wisdom, to learn from the Scripture what you would have us do. You hide not yourself from us; our ignorance you do not overlook. Accept therefore our repentance through Jesus Christ, and fill us anew with the promise he lived and died to proclaim. As the Spirit pervades us, may we live Christ to your eternal glory.

BENEDICTION: Be of a loving spirit, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil, or harm for harm, but pursue peace. Have no fear of those who trouble you; defend yourself with gentleness and respect, and those who would shame you shall be shamed. Have the mind in you that was in Christ, and Christ shall go with you. Amen.

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John 14:15-21

“Never Alone.”

Every Christmas season, television networks televise the old favourites, from movies to old television specials. My perennial favourite Christmas treat is National Lampoon’s *Christmas Vacation*. My two kids however have another seasonal favourite that must, at least once during the season, be viewed, plus its sequel. I’ll give you a hint as to which film I am speaking of; it stars Macaulay Culkin.

Did you guess the movie *Home Alone* and its sequel, *Home Alone 2*? What you might not know about Macaulay Culkin is that he is but one of seven children. He was just nine years old when he was cast for the movie and at the time his large family was living in a one-room tenement. *Home Alone*, launched the young Macaulay into almost overnight stardom, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since Shirley Temple.

Macaulay made a mere \$100,000 for the first film, but in *Home Alone 2*, he made a whopping \$27 million. Macaulay went on to make several movies in a very brief time, and by the time he was 14 he was burned out. He declared to his parents that he was done with movies, and had wanted to quit since he was 11 years old. To make matters worse, his father and manager Kit Culkin was reviled by movie makers.

He was impossible to work with, and made ridiculous demands. To make matters worse Macaulay’s parents split up, and began a lengthy and ugly battle for custody of the children and of course control of Macaulay’s considerable wealth, estimated at the time to be about \$50 million. It was such a terrible legal squabble that in the end a judge awarded control of the assets to a third-party accountant, until Macaulay was of age to manage himself. (Uncle John’s Monumental Bathroom Reader, Pg. 198)

What a sad story of greed, and in some ways, abuse of a talented young man. It is hard to imagine the utter sadness behind the scenes as we laugh at the on-screen antics of this little boy defending his home against robbers. If we consider what his real home life was like, one wonders if being “home alone” was such a bad thing for young Macaulay. However, as we all are well aware, being alone can, in the end, be terrifying.

Sometimes, even bad company is preferable to being alone. This may be especially true for children, who experience significant anxiety at being left alone. I have, on several occasions, seen toddlers and young children get up from where they are playing, to seek out a parent or caregiver, for no other reason than to confirm they are still nearby and are easily accessible, should a need arise.

Personally, I can clearly remember as a child, waking in the middle of the night, and seeking to calm my anxiety aroused by the darkness and silence, by listening carefully to hear my parent’s breathing in their nearby bedroom. As an adult I have, on occasion, still experienced profound anxiety at suddenly finding myself alone, made even worse if I am in an unfamiliar place. Human beings were not intended to exist alone. That is why solitary confinement in a prison is such a devastating punishment.

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Being alone, is made even more distressing when we feel threatened, or we are facing challenges that seem insurmountable. Whatever the challenge before us, can we not agree that, facing it with someone else is far better than facing it alone? The very creation of the world underscores this truth. In Genesis 2:18 we read about how God was observing the first man Adam and declared, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

As we know, God created Eve as a partner and companion for Adam. But did you catch what God said about our being alone? “It is not good.” Being alone is not a positive thing. I therefore noticed that when Jesus is seeking to encourage his disciples in John 14 he promises that he will never leave them alone. This may be one of the most significant promises Jesus ever makes.

Jesus knows what is coming for the disciples, and for countless believers in the years to come. There will be a multitude of occasions, as Christ’s followers, when we might think we are alone. Facing: persecution, doubts, illness, relational stress, or many other things, we may feel abandoned. We might identify with Jesus even, who cried from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

I believe, strongly, that this cry from the cross, was Jesus becoming well acquainted with the separation we all feel, specifically when sin separates us from God. The cross was clearly God’s plan to end the separation, and to address our being orphaned from God. I use that word, “orphaned”, because that is the word Jesus uses to describe one of our greatest fears. A fear nurtured from our earliest days.

Nothing frightens us, especially as young children, then the possibility of losing our parents. A fear, I believe, that may never leave us, no matter how old our parents may be. Some years ago, I was at a special event that Kane Funeral home put on for clergy on the subject of death and dying. The speaker that year told a story that really resonated with me, and speaks to today’s subject.

It seems that a man, in his late sixties, had come into a local funeral home to make arrangements for the funeral of his widowed mother. On the day of visitation, the man was clearly distraught, weeping uncontrollably. The funeral director admitted that his grief seemed a bit excessive, considering his mother’s age, and his own age for that matter. When the funeral director approached this man to comfort him, he was reminded of the significance of the mother’s death.

The grieving son, turned to the director and with great sobs, apologized for his tears and said, “I am now an orphan.” If a man in his sixties can feel that way, imagine a small child. Jesus uses the word orphan because of the power of the word. In Jesus’ day, being orphaned was about a desperate situation as you can imagine. With no family support or protection, orphaned children were open to serious abuse and neglect.

They were about as vulnerable as one could be. It is not wonder that God holds care of orphans as a top priority for his covenant people; along with widows and foreigners in the land.

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Faced with serious challenges despite our faith, we can still feel vulnerable and alone. How often have we received from well-meaning people the empty words, "I know how you feel, or I know what you are going through?" Most often they do not know. Jesus however, does know. He knows the pain that abandonment can bring. He has experienced the terror of being alone.

This having been said, I am therefore confused by a trend in our society that makes no sense. In fact, it is so contrary to our needs, that I can't for the life of me, fathom why we persist in thinking we have to be self-reliant. The really odd thing about our fear of being alone is that, I observe and experience in our world, the importance we place on doing things alone, standing on our own two feet, so to speak. We love to celebrate and honour those who do things alone.

The story goes that soon after the I.Q. (Intelligence Quotient) test was developed; several studies were undertaken to find out how different groups scored on the test. The test was administered to men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and many ethnic groups as well. It was in this context that the I.Q. test was given to a group of Hopi Indians. When the Hopi received the test, they immediately started to ask each other questions and compare their answers.

The instructor saw this happening, and quickly intervened, telling them that they each had to take the test alone. "You are not permitted to help each other or to share the answers among yourselves," he told them. When the Hopi heard this, they were outraged and refused to take the test saying, "It is not important that I am smarter than my brother, or that my brother is smarter than me. It is only important what we can do together!" (More Hot Illustrations, Wayne Rice: pg. 158)

This seems to have been the intention of God from the beginning of creation; we are not to go about our lives alone. The challenge, of course, is that in our fractured human existence, people can be unreliable in meeting the full human need to end our loneliness. No matter how attentive and caring our: friend, spouse, or parent is, in being our companion, it is never a perfect solution to our loneliness.

In fact, some of the loneliest persons in this world are married people, with children, and who are surrounded by coworkers and friends. No matter how close we are to someone, there is always just a little bit more, in our lives, that is left vacant. Even the best of relationships includes: misunderstanding, times of estrangement, times of hurt, and yes, even times of abandonment.

How many times have we said of someone, "They just don't understand me"? Sometimes, people get so frustrated by the emptiness they experience in a relationship, that they believe should be fulfilling, they seek out someone or something else to fill the void. And so: marriages break up; friendships end, and children and parents become estranged. I wonder then, how much of a role our loneliness has played in so much of what ails us as people. If it wasn't for our inherent loneliness, one wonders if the tabloid newspapers and television shows would have very much to talk about.

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How much of our lives have been spent seeking out something to end our loneliness? How many days have we woken to the overwhelming sense that we are orphans, abandoned by God, the world, friends and family? “Why, O God, do I feel so forsaken?” Jesus makes a pronouncement that we dare not overlook in John 14. “The world at large cannot receive him, because it isn’t looking for him and doesn’t recognize him?”

First of all, Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit or Counselor. Other names for the Holy Spirit connect even more strongly to this passage. The Holy Spirit can also be referred to as the Encourager, Comforter or Advocate. The world does not recognize the Holy Spirit, “But you do, because he lives with you now and later will be in you.” The later indwelling of the Spirit, of course, was fulfilled at Pentecost.

We know the world does not recognize the Spirit’s presence, or how the Spirit’s presence eliminates our loneliness and sense of abandonment. We intellectually, and by faith, accept this truth, but in practical terms we still fall into a self-defeating pattern. We become so dependent on ourselves, and on others, that we fail to see the Holy Spirit working in our lives.

When our friends or family fail to live up to our expectations for companionship, either by neglect, or the unfairness of our expectations, we immediately conclude we are alone. This is, in a word, nonsense! If we are truly Christ’s, and we obey his commandments, we are never alone; no matter how dark our current situation is. Are you familiar with Psalm 139, which is a Psalm of David? (Vs. 7-12a)

“I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me. I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night-but even in darkness I cannot hide from you.”

Is this your experience of God, and if not, why not? Are you still looking for the Holy Spirit in your life? Are you the confident child of a King, or the defeated orphan of the street? I am sure I shared this before, but my Grandfather, William Rich, saw the truth in seeing God’s hand in everything. He would introduce himself, and inevitably people would comment on his last name “Rich”. They would always ask, “Well are you, rich?”

So often, he would reply to this question with a resounding “yes I am”. Then he would quote Psalm 50:10 and reply, “My Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills.” Orphans, how could we even contemplate for a second that we are orphans? We are children of the great King, who sent his Son to redeem us, and bring us home. Like in the prodigal Son parable, (Luke 15) our Father has called for: a robe for us to wear, and sandals for our feet, and a ring for a finger.

Orphans, perish the thought! Let us not insult our Heavenly Father represented in the parable of the Prodigal Son, by demanding our inheritance at the expense of relationship and respect.

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The younger son's insult was that he wanted his father dead, out of the way so to speak. Our sense of loneliness, most likely stems, from our unholy desire to keep God out of our lives. We want his blessings, but not his relationship.

Orphans, Come on! Such a word should never be in our vocabulary when speaking of ourselves. It is not a mystery whose we are, or to which family we belong. Furthermore, we are never, ever alone! Where we go, the Spirit goes.

No matter how lost we feel, how abandoned by friends and family, how persecuted by life, we do not face it alone. This truth gives us a confidence only God's people can know. A Confidence built by paying attention to the workings of the Holy Spirit in your life, and the lives of those around you. Hear again the words of Psalm 139!

"I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me. I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night-but even in darkness I cannot hide from you."

Make these your words. Make this your hope and remember, always remember that you are never alone!