



Home and Elsewhere

Five weeks ago many of us assembled in our garden at dawn to share in the first Eucharist of Easter. We gathered around a fire to light the paschal candle before sharing in bread and wine before processing noisily and joyfully to Piccadilly Circus, proclaiming the resurrection and giving out fair-trade chocolate eggs to any and everyone we met, those still on the way home after a very late night, bus drivers, street cleaners, rough sleepers and tourists alike. Later, at the end of our main morning Eucharist we joined enthusiastically in the Hallelujah Chorus. I think it's fair to say that our Alleluias have become a little quieter over the weeks.

So here we are in the 6th Sunday of Easter, only days away from the Ascension and it might seem strange that our Gospel reading tells not of the risen Christ, but rather takes us back to Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room at the last supper. In a week of ongoing political resignations, not least that of our Prime Minister, it is perhaps ironic to hear today from what is famously known in John's Gospel as Jesus's 'Final Discourse'. I can't help but wonder if the relentless political turmoil and uncertainty is partly responsible for the subduing of our Alleluias.

The Final Discourse, - of which the passage we've just heard is only a short extract is a privileged conversation between Jesus and the 11 disciples – Judas has already disappeared into the night. As often happens in John, the disciples are speaking in worldly terms, whereas Jesus is speaking in a very different way. Jesus knows how this journey will end – on the cross in Jerusalem. He also knows that the journey doesn't really end, but that the cross is necessary for him to be able to send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate.

But not surprisingly, this is a lot – too much – for the disciples to take in and comprehend. Which is exactly why they will need the Holy Spirit. As one commentator points out, "In a world where members of marginal groups were subjected to Roman "justice," an advocate was a welcome addition to the community."

Many of us have experienced the benefits of an advocate, or, as the Spirit is sometimes referred to, 'helper' in various situations. I had such an experience earlier this week. On Wednesday evening whilst staying with my parents, I went for a swim at the local open-air pool. It was a quiet evening there and I had the whole pool to myself for the last part of my swim. I then showered and changed. The pool is on the edge of a car park in what, in the evening, is a quiet part of town. The office is a single storey building and because of previous vandalism, the perimeter wall is topped with metal spikes to prevent any further break ins. As I came out of my cubicle the covers were over the pool and I noticed that the office was boarded up shut. As I exited through the turnstile, I was a bit surprised to find that the two metal gates, lined with thick steel mesh were closed – and padlocked. I figured, well, hoped, this was to deter anyone else trying to enter while the lifeguards were completing their end of shift tasks, but the little alarm bells in the back of my head were starting to sound. I turned back around to the entrance turnstile and rang the bell by the counter. Several times. No response. I then started calling out, expecting a lifeguard to come into view from around the corner at any minute. Still nothing but silence. I couldn't hear any voices. Strange. And not good.

And then, from behind me – from the other side of the padlocked gates, I heard voices calling to me, “Are you locked in?” Turning to see a group of 9 women runners, I replied that it seemed so, but I was sure the lifeguards must still be somewhere on site. “Oh no,” they assured me, somewhat horrified, “We just saw them drive off. They’ve gone. That’s terrible!”

It was a strange feeling to realise that I really was trapped. What might once seem a fantasy was not really such fun when it happened. “Oh,” I replied, “I guess I’d better call the police.” But before I’d taken my phone out of my pocket, one of the runners volunteered that she knew someone quite closely involved with the pool so would give them a call. I learned that every Wednesday they start and end their run right outside the pool and that it was a good job that that evening they’d done an extended 9K run and were just heading off to the pub when they heard my shouts, as normally they’d be long gone. I was immensely grateful that at just the right moment, whether it was sheer coincidence or pure God-incidence, I had not one but 9 advocates.

Whilst agreeing that it never should have happened, with company, it was much easier to see the funny side of my predicament and soon one of them received a call to say that the pool manager – who hadn’t been on duty – was on her way to release me. I thanked them very much and assured them that now I knew help was at hand, I didn’t want to delay them from their post-run drinks any longer. But they refused to leave until I was free. After 15 minutes, by which time the temperature was dropping, they agreed that the four who didn’t have sweatshirts or long sleeves would go ahead to the pub and get the drinks in, while the other five insisted on staying until, after another 10 minutes the profusely apologetic pool manager, understandably rather rattled by the whole incident, arrived to set me free, to much cheering from my advocates.

Jesus tells the disciples that he will send the Holy Spirit or Advocate so that they will not be alone after he has gone. The Spirit will also serve as both teacher and memory by keeping them in touch with Jesus’ words and teaching. By following Jesus’ example and living his words, prompted and encouraged and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they will know the peace of God, the peace given by Christ, which passes all understanding. It’s not an indemnity from pain or peril, but it gives them the strength and courage to stay true to the teachings of Christ in the face of adversity and persecution. It’s an invitation to generous and compassionate living. It’s also a promise, for those who accept that invitation, to be at home with God: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

This sense of our eternal home is a very important tenet for John, who was writing at a time when the early Christian community was being heavily persecuted. It was this promise, combined with the fulfilment of the promise of the Holy Spirit, that enabled many of the first disciples, and many early Christians, to follow and embody Jesus’ example even to death, trusting that they would follow Christ into the life beyond death.

We too are called to live Jesus’ words – to share his presence in lives of love and service, of generosity and compassion, of encouragement and hospitality; to offer a sense of home and peace to those whose experience of life and society has left them feeling alienated, wounded or rejected. It’s the welcome we find at the heart of the Eucharist – the table where all are welcomed, and all are fed. It’s the welcome we seek to share at the heart of our Winter Shelter and International Group breakfast – to offer a place where dignity is restored, companionship offered, where stories can be shared and heard without judgment and silence is also respected. When we make space in our lives and hearts to welcome the

stranger, so we welcome Christ – we make space for God and Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to come and dwell in us, to be at home.

In the novel *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, 12 year-old Paloma struggles to come to terms with the sudden death of a friend and writes in her 'Journal of Profound Thoughts': "So that's what it's like? All of a sudden all possibility just vanishes? A life full of projects, discussions just started, desires not even fulfilled—it all vanishes in a second and there's nothing left, ... no going back?" "For the first time in my life I understood the meaning of the word *never*. And it's really awful. You say the word a hundred times a day but you don't really know what you're saying until you're faced with a real "never again." "... But when someone you love dies...well, I can tell you that you really feel what it means and it really really hurts."

And then, in the middle of her fresh grief, something happens. She hears music, a neighbor playing the piano, drifting out into the evening air. She listens for a moment, and then concludes: "maybe that's what life is about: there's a lot of despair, but also the *odd moment of beauty, where time is no longer the same*. It's as if those strains of music created a sort of

interlude in time, something suspended, *an Elsewhere that had come to us, an Always within Never. Yes, that is it, an always within never.*"

Always within Never. Anne Howard suggests this a perfect description of many of the Easter stories – "a voice in the garden on the morning of the third day, a breakfast of grilled fish on the beach, a greeting of peace that cuts through the closed doors and broken hearts in an upper room, broken bread at an Emmaus supper, an appearance on the Damascus Road: an Elsewhere comes, a moment of Always within Never."

I'm sure you can think of examples of Always within Never moments have taken you by surprise – and of the sense of Peace you feel, even though it may sound nonsensical. Writing to a vulnerable and beleaguered community, John is urging his readers to be alert to those moments of unexpected beauty when Elsewhere breaks through the mess and muddle of our lives and we realise we're not alone, but rather we are home; home with God, home with Christ and home with the Holy Spirit. And it's still Easter.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Lindsay Meader