

6th Sunday of Easter, Year A

Acts 17.22-31 • John 14.15-21

14 May 2023

Christ Church, Chelsea

Sam Hole

A few weeks ago Emily and I settled down to watch that wonderful epic, *Doctor Zhivago*. Many of you will know the movie. It's a stunning tale of love amidst the turmoil of revolutionary Russia. And it begins in what I find an unforgettable fashion.

Our story begins with a view on screen is of a vast expanse of frozen Russian steppe. The wind is whistling. We hear the singing of a mournful Russian Orthodox chant. And now, from a great distance, we see a small group of mourners, a coffin in their midst, plodding slowly across the landscape, until eventually they reach a sad little cemetery. The camera view switches to a small little boy, maybe seven years old, pushed forward on his own to stand in front of the open grave. From the viewpoint of that boy, we see the priest staring down at him; we see the white coffin laid over the grave, and then descending; we see him invited to lay on a flower for his mother. And then we hear some final words spoken; the party starts to shuffle back to their meagre houses; the gravediggers wordlessly begin to shovel earth back into the grave; the boy – the orphaned boy who will grow up to be Doctor Zhivago – is left standing alone, until one mourner looks back and collects him, back to his new home with his adoptive parents.

In today's gospel, Jesus promises his disciples that, after his death, he will not leave them orphaned. Perhaps that metaphor summons up strong emotions for us, as it surely did for the disciples. It may well arouse difficult memories of what it was like to lose one, or both parents. And while we speak of orphans as children, I am told that the emotional toll is little different when that parent or caregiver dies for us as adults. It is to lose the person who we (hopefully) always trusted to have our back. It is to say farewell to the emotional attachment that has grounded us as long as we can remember. We may mourn, or fear, the

loss of a parent; not for nothing does Jesus recognise that the disciples may well feel much the same at his departure.

In Jesus' words of reassurance, his disciples will not be orphaned. They will rejoice with him in his resurrection. And then, as we will celebrate in a fortnight at Pentecost, they will receive the Holy Spirit. This will be the Spirit of God, who will, quite literally breathe in them, and be the wind in their sails.

That promise of God's Spirit is good news indeed. But there's an important qualifier here. We can end up troublingly thinking of the Holy Spirit as a bit like a divinely-appointed guardian – the Spirit as the part of God that is present, close, caring, comforting, while another part of God, God the Father, remains distant, aloof, unknown. The analogy is imperfect, but think of little orphan Pip's situation in *Great Expectations*: Mr Jaggers the lawyer is the guardian who Pip may encounter from week to week, but the true power – Pip and we eventually discover – lies with the malevolent Magwitch, Pip's twisted benefactor.

Here is a kind of 'divine subcontractor' view of the Holy Spirit, called in to do the work that God the Father is too busy, or important, or distant, to do. It's a tempting image to have in our minds as we imagine the drama of salvation. But it gets God wrong. And it damages us in the process. For yes, the Holy Spirit is the Advocate (John 14.16) – or, in the more evocative older language – the Comforter. But, as our doctrine of the Trinity affirms, God is three persons, and one God. We may see aspects of the character of God more clearly in some persons than others. But what is true of one person is true of the other two. We rightly call the Holy Spirit the Comforter. But so too then is Christ, so too is God the Father, also the Comforter who embraces us in our pain.

I think this is what Jesus is conveying in those words he then speaks to his disciples. 'On that day', he says, 'you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.' The Father, the Son, the Spirit are one; and when the Holy Spirit comes to comfort us we are caught up in the life and love of God.

It is rare today to go to a funeral and not hear one particular line uttered at least once. That line goes something like this: 'Cathy may be gone, but her legacy lives on in each one of us.' It's a sentiment I broadly

applaud. It's true, after all. But wish we could go a bit further. First, we do well to remember that this legacy is often for bad as well as for good (Philip Larkin had something to say about that). And, second, surely we can be a bit more full-blooded in our Christian hope that we will one day meet again in the new heaven and new earth, with all our imperfections having fallen away.

Perhaps we can apply a similar logic here. The disciples could have gathered round on that Good Friday evening – or even the day after Christ's ascension – and said 'Well, Jesus may be gone, but his legacy lives on in each one of us'. And if at that point they simply had in mind Jesus' inspiring life, then it is hard to imagine Christianity spreading as it has done since.

But what if it is true, deeply true, that Christ's legacy lives on in each of us? By the ways that our lives are moulded by the example of Christ's life that we encounter in the gospel. By the ways too that we as a community are being shaped into the body of Christ as we hear God's word together and gather around one table. Christ's legacy lives on in us. But it is no mere fading memory. It is no legacy like some sort of heavenly trust fund, paying out a set holiness each month. This is a legacy that is a living, animating force. It is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. And more than that, as we learn to look with the eyes of Christ, to put our hands to work as he would have us act, to walk in his footsteps, we are being led by the Spirit into the life of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

For God is, as Paul so wonderfully urges the Athenians, no mere 'unknown God'. God is known in creation, in our lives, in the resurrection of Christ and the promise that justice will one day be done in the world. As children of God, we are not orphans. Step down that path of love, enter into that family, and we will find ourselves caught up into the orbit of the living and loving God; by whose continual presence in us may we be raised to eternal joy,¹ to the praise and glory of God.

¹ A phrase from the collect for this, the Sixth Sunday of Easter.