

The readings for Sunday, May 21, 2017:

First Reading: Acts 17:22-31

Psalm: Psalm 66:7-18 (Psalm 66:8-20 NRSV)

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22

Gospel: John 14:15-21

In today's Gospel, we get a hint of Pentecost. Jesus tells his followers that he will never leave them orphaned or desolate, to use words from several different translations.

Every year as Ascension Day approaches, I think of those poor disciples. They have such a short time with their resurrected Lord, before he goes away again. How on earth do they cope with this?

I also see this situation as a metaphor for our own modern one. You may be feeling a bit whipsawed by grief and loss yourself. You may recover from one crisis, only to find yourself staring down the maw of the next. As I've gotten older, I've noticed that these crises seem to be increasing in frequency and severity. I look back to the dramas of my high school and college years, and I understand why so many elders chuckle dismissively at the troubles of youth. We forget, however, that trouble feels like crisis, no matter what our age.

But Jesus offers this comfort: we will never be alone.

Notice what Jesus does NOT offer: our God is not Santa Claus. Our God is not a fix everything quickly God (at least not all the time).

I have some acquaintances who claim to have lost their faith on September 11, 2001. They had been faithful in their church attendance, but once that disaster happened, they declared they couldn't believe in a God that would let such terrible things happen. No talk of free will would deter them in their determination to let go of their faith.

Earlier generations had a similar difficulty with Auschwitz (perhaps you do too). How can God let such awful things happen?

Well, that's the disadvantage of gifting humans with free will. We will sometimes get things spectacularly wrong. I think of it as being a parent of an adolescent. We want the best for our teenagers. We know the dangers are acute; so many mistakes that are made at this age are mistakes for life and can't be easily undone. So many choices made at this age will impact the rest of adulthood.

Yet as parents, we can't prevent every tragedy. All we can do is to be there for our children when they go off the rails.

Likewise as friends, as spouses and significant others, as children: we can't keep our loved ones safe. We can try to help them avoid the pitfalls that we see, but even that won't always be successful. We can only be with those we love as they suffer, in the hopes that our presence will alleviate some of the pain.

Evil has real power in the world, and we forget that at our peril. As Christians, we are called to take a longer view, and we are called to believe that God will eventually emerge victorious--but that doesn't mean that this victory will happen in our lifetimes. We are part of a larger story, and we all have our part to play. But we must be aware that we might be like Moses or the early apostles: we may not see the fruits of our labors; we may not get to the promised land (at least not in this life). The Good News that Jesus delivers should give us comfort: all of creation will be redeemed eventually, and that redemption has begun.

Return to that promise of Jesus: we are not orphaned. We are not abandoned. Even in our darkest days, when we feel at our most unlovable, God sees our value. God remembers our better selves. God knows what we could accomplish. If God can use deeply flawed people like Saul who becomes Paul, God will also weave us into the great fabric of Kingdom life.