

Message of reassurance in time of great uncertainty

by Carole Lewis

Today our gospel reading invites us once again into the upper room with Jesus and his disciples. This is their safe space. The very next night most of them will already be back in there, in self-imposed lockdown. Tonight, they're together at supper for the last time. Tonight, their beloved master has washed their feet and now he's offering them words of reassurance. He loves them so much. He feels for them so deeply in their anxiety and uncertainty, but he knows he can't protect them, or himself, from the agony to come the very next day- -Good Friday- -when their world will be turned upside down.

So how do they take his words of reassurance? The events immediately afterwards certainly don't show them reacting calmly and confidently, far from it. Yet only a few weeks later, sheer joy and confidence will be theirs in spades! They'll come out of lockdown and start a movement that will change the world.

John is the only one who records these farewell discourses, as they've come to be known. It will be many years before he's able to distil his memories, through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, into his written account of the good news of Jesus Christ. The promise we read about today is extraordinary. Jesus has been with the disciples for three years. They've witnessed astonishing happenings, been challenged, thrilled and made to think so far outside the box that they've been blown away. They've enjoyed precious times of intimacy with their leader and they've grown to adore him. They've pinned all their hopes on him, but now, all their certainties seem to be crumbling away to nothing. They're going to lose him. He's promising, nevertheless, to come alongside them again soon, to be with them forever. How can this be after he is gone?

"I will ask the father", he says," and he will give you another advocate". In our translation we have "advocate". Others say helper or accompanier or comforter or intercessor. The Greek word they're all struggling with is paraclete. It means all those things and was often used as a legal term, meaning, "one who is called in to speak for the accused," like a counsel for the defence, or to intercede with the judge.

Jesus also calls him, "The spirit of Truth." He's just spoken of himself as, "The way, the truth and the life". He's promising that in some mysterious way, through the action of the Spirit they too will be drawn into the intimate relationship that Jesus has with the Father. And others will follow. This is the first reference to the paraclete- -the spirit of truth and as the next chapters unfold there'll be more.

We have the benefit of hindsight. We know the story of the resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the spreading of the good news of God's love for the whole of creation, and the continuation of this cosmic story until this very day, as we become part of it. In the next chapter but one Jesus prays for his disciples and then he adds, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word that they may all be one. As you Father are in me and I am in you, so may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me....so they may be one as we are one". That includes us!

So how do we receive these words now, in our own time of world upheaval, in our own anxiety and uncertainty? We can't escape this sudden shattering of our usual way of life by this new virus- - something so small that we can't even see it, that floats in the air and can strike with such devastating effect.

Some may be actually enjoying the sudden dramatic change in our way of life, for others it may be sheer hell, and between these two extremes there'll be all kinds of positives and negatives. For me

an extravert on the list for long term isolation, technology is my lifeline. Living in River Park with neighbours close by is a godsend. But not being able to hug my friends and family, not allowed to hold or even see except on a screen my new baby great-granddaughter is grim. And not to receive Holy Communion for weeks on end- -awful. Of course I know I have many blessings to count, but there are times when the thought of this going on for months on end is almost unbearable. So I need to come back again and again to Jesus's promise that he will always be alongside. Whatever we are going through he understands - -on earth he knew both joy and sorrow, delight and disappointment, grief and gratitude, loyalty and betrayal, ecstasy and agony, life and death- -all of it, just as we do. Staying close through regular worship and prayer is not always easy... but it's life sustaining. As we pray today for the healing of our world, let us pray for ourselves too, for help to remain faithful, refilled by the Spirit day by day with the love and compassion and endurance of Christ. When this disease is finally under control, let us be open and ready to embrace change, finding new ways to be alongside others and to care for all of creation. Be encouraged, trusting in our God who has promised to hold us securely in his love now and forever, come what may.

For... Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!