

On a threshold, but not alone

A sermon on John 14:15-21 by Cas Wepener, 17 May 2020

I will reflect on the Gospel reading from John. This whole larger section of John, chapters 13 to 17, of which our verses form a part, are called the Farewell Discourse. Jesus is here telling His disciples that He is leaving them. And then in the next chapter Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father. Our verses are part of this Farewell Discourse of Jesus preparing them for when He will be gone and part of an answer to Philip's request to show them the Father. This is the background.

We read these verses today on the 6th Sunday of Easter. It is Easter, but I must admit, to me the liturgical year 2020 feels like one long stretched out Holy or Quiet Saturday. Lockdown in South Africa came just before Holy Week in March. And it feels as if the liturgical year ended in the grave of Holy Saturday. We celebrated Easter in our homes and in virtual liturgical celebration, which were good, however, I feel like I remained in that grave. I am, my body is, still waiting for that resurrection moment that will release me and other bodies from Lockdown. I also want to ask, like Philip, show me the Father in this situation.

Holy Saturday is to my mind the big threshold of the liturgical year. On that night we move from Lent to Easter. And we did and we are in Easter... and yet... I and many other people feel as if we are not in Lent, but also not in Easter. It really feels as if we were left on a threshold, as if someone pressed the pause button on Holy Saturday.

In some of the older houses in South Africa at the front door you will get a huge yellow wood threshold worn in by thousands of footsteps crossing it over the centuries. When I think of our situation, actually when I think of the world globally, I imagine that yellow wood threshold and me and everyone else standing on it.

On the one side of that threshold is an old world order as we knew it. On the other side is a dark cold house. You cannot see what is inside, it's a bit spooky. You look back, you look forward and you want to ask: show me the Father.

And thresholds are a bit like boots... they are not made for walking, but they are made for crossing. Not for just standing on them. And yet, here we are, on the threshold. Neither here nor there. Not in the old or in the new.

However, my feeling of remaining in Quiet Saturday, of standing on a threshold, is nothing compared to the experiences of many of my fellow citizens at this moment in history

In South Africa, as I said earlier, we have been in lockdown now for 7 weeks. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is horrendous.

I mentioned the number of deaths and infections (which is a low number compared to other parts of the world)

our economy has taken a huge knock and we see widespread hunger and job losses (as in the rest of the world)

then of course there is also the psychological and spiritual impact of the pandemic on people which ranges from fear of the unknown to anxiety caused by loneliness. We are a very

unequal society, so as where a few barely notice the impacts, the majority are taking a huge knock.

When I look at the South African landscape and the reactions of people to the Pandemic and to our Lockdown situation, I think of the 5 stages of the grieving process, but the phases are all happening at once. You see people in denial, there were more of them at the beginning of our Lockdown period. There is a lot of bargaining going on. Many are very angry, especially because of food shortages and job losses! Others are experiencing forms of depression. The last stage of acceptance, I admittedly encounter less. Maybe you can relate to some of this in Australia.

And then, to complicate matters, South Africa is a very religious country with 84% of the population being Christian. So many people are, whilst being in one or more of these phases, asking where God is in all of this? I hear a new echo of Philip's request in John 14 verse 8: "Show us the Father." The request for which the verses in John which we read is part of Jesus's answer. And being a very diverse country, there are many variations on this question or request.

Some Christians from a more Western decent will go as far as asking whether God exists and if God is completely absent in what we are experiencing. Some Christians from African descent will probably pose the question differently, and ask which spirit is the real or true spirit that can be trusted in these confusing times? I think their version of Philip's request is: show us the Spirit and show us the true Spirit.

We have a mixture of experiences and longings regarding the absent-presence of God.

I think many people share the threshold experience and the mixture of emotions and fears. And in John 14 the disciples are also very much in-between, they are also on a threshold. What they knew is passing. What will be is very uncertain.

Maybe to an extent we are sitting like those disciples around a table, devastated by the news that what we knew and how we lived, has forever changed. We will have to live and adapt in a new situation. That is inevitable and just how it is.

This is the reason I chose this text to reflect on today, because I think it is very apt for our situation.

The 6th Sunday after Easter, this day, is called Rogate, meaning "Call it out!" In the Farewell Discourse in John in our verses we encounter a word which in Greek is Parakletos from the words para meaning "beside" and kaleo meaning "call". It refers to the Paraclete, the Spirit, who is 'called to stand alongside'. Other names or translations that you might encounter are: Advocate, Helper, Strengthener, Inspirer, One speaking on another's behalf and more. The English text that I worked with translated the Paraclete as "Counsellor". And Jesus calls the Paraclete "another Counsellor" as well as "the Spirit of truth".

In the rest of the chapters in the Farewell Discourse you will find more descriptions. Later in chapter 14 we read that this same Paraclete will teach and remind us and I always think, because of that description of the Paraclete also as a Prompter in a theatre. That person standing in the wings on stage with the full script for in case an actor forgets her words. When Hamlet forgets his line, a very awkward silence falls and you hear softly from the wings: "Psst, Nathan, to be or not to be..." and then Hamlet proceeds again. I think it is a good

description of the One who stands beside you. Our verses are closely connected and sheds light on this Paraclete.

In our verses it is firstly called another Counsellor, because Jesus is already a Counsellor. Jesus is going away and will be replaced by the Paraclete, so in Jesus's place the disciples will receive this Counsellor. What Jesus did for the disciples, this Paraclete will also do. This Paraclete must fill the absence that they will experience, after Jesus has left, with presence.

In other words, there is a comforting promise in these verses. You feel all alone in these days? You feel like you are on a threshold between what was and a new reality? You experience great losses, like the loss of touch, of movement, of doing things the way you used to? You want to see the Father in this stretched out Holy Saturday? Well, the Paraclete fills the absence with presence.

This is the core aim of the Farewell Discourse and a central theme in our verses. Jesus acknowledges the Quiet Saturday situation, the threshold situation, but He is insisting that we are not alone. Someone has been called: called to abide with us, called to stand beside us onto that threshold, called to dwell with us, called to comfort us, called to teach us, called to remind us, called to correct us, called to lead us in the truth. This is the Paraclete. The Paraclete right here beside me in lockdown Stellenbosch. The Paraclete right there beside you in Melbourne. Really?, but I cannot see this Paraclete.

As I said earlier, Jesus's words that we read was a response to Philip's request to show them the Father. These verses do exactly that. To show the Father when people are experiencing a detrimental threshold time.

The answer that Jesus gives Philip is in our verses and the larger chapter. I can sum it up in the words "Paraclete" and "knowing". You cannot see the Father Philip, but by knowing the Paraclete, you know me, and by knowing me, you know the Father. Then you are also joining the dance of the Trinity, then you abide in Me, in the Spirit, in the Father. Then you are no longer an orphan. Through this kind of knowing in the Paraclete Philip, you are seeing, you are seeing the Father. Abide in me and I abide in you.

Rogate... call it out... what shall we call out? That we are not alone in this lonely time... because para kaleo, the Paraclete was called to stand beside us.

Quiet Saturday? A threshold? Maybe, but the Quiet Saturday and a threshold in which the Paraclete was called to stand beside me.

This I know.

Therefore I see.