

Offspring not Orphans

A sermon on John 14:15-21 & Acts 17:22-31 by Cheryl Williams, 30 July 2023

In a leafy suburb in Geelong the landscape is dominated by a very large building which is now a school and housing estate. When I was a kid, we all knew it was the place where the ‘unfortunate’ children lived, St Augustine’s Orphanage. It closed long ago with many of its secrets, some terrible things happened there within its walls, like in many orphanages. At one time Australia had 800 orphanages and some of them housed hundreds of children, children whose parents had died, or whose parents couldn’t look after them. UNICEF estimates that there are more than 153 million orphans worldwide. They in their own way must wonder what will happen to them, who will look after them, who will stand alongside them.

I worked with some women who had lived in such places and were traumatized by the experience, even though they left those institutions at about 15 years old, and were now in their eighties, they were still scarred by what happened. I have heard stories of them having to clean floors with toothbrushes, being punished for wetting the bed as children, being smacked or belted and feeling so alone. Some were in there because parents had died, my mother’s cousins were in there because their parents had separated, and they needed to live somewhere until their mother could get back on her feet. Sometimes siblings were separated. One woman cried with me when I gave her a Christmas hamper one year and explained, because she grew up in an orphanage, she had never received a Christmas present. For another woman it was her safe place.

There was and is an enormous stigma associated with being in an orphanage, being an orphan. There is a group who helps people who left these places decades ago called the ‘Forgotten Australians’ and they remind us of the trauma that is triggered in their old age. The sound of keys clanking together reminds them of being locked in rooms, the smell of disinfectant reminds them of cleaning on their hands and knees – these are things they now experience in hospitals and aged care facilities and which retraumatize them.

I guess one of the most famous orphans we think of is Oliver Twist. Oliver, orphaned as an infant, is raised in a workhouse, which was really just a child labour factory. The children received little food and they would draw lots to ask for extra food or gruel. One day it was Oliver’s turn, and we all remember those famous words – ‘more please’ – a riot ensues, and Oliver is sent away. He then gets into a fight and escapes to London. There he falls in with a group of thieves and is trained by Fagan as a pickpocket – not unusual in Victorian England.

I became an orphan in 2018 when my Dad died. However, many years earlier I was rudely confronted with the idea. My mother had just died, and I was at a BUVA meeting, and some older women had just found out. One of them who I knew quite well, simply announced ‘well now you are an orphan!’ I was horrified, I was hurt, my grief returned, I was reminded of my vulnerability. I was hurt not just because of her lack of empathy, but because of the stigma associated with being an orphan. Another reason for my indignation was, that I wasn’t an orphan, as my Dad was still alive and relatively well, considering he had just lost his wife of almost fifty years. I guess I was confronted with a sense of abandonment, of being alone and lonely, of my mortality.

Not long after that event, I had been at a long and frustrating BUVA Executive Council meeting and when I got home, I was deciding if I would resign from the Council or not. The

phone rang, I thought it was going to be another council member checking to see how I was. No, it was Uncle Theyo, now Uncle Theyo was calling from Nagaland in Northeast India, and I had hosted him about seven years previously when he had attend a Baptist conference in Melbourne. He was an important man in Nagaland, a politician and when he was here, I had introduced him to my family and to the beach. (Nagaland is landlocked). He had just found out from somebody else that my mother had died. He was calling to offer his condolences, to tell me that he also missed her and then he said he just wanted me to know that I wasn't alone, he and his family were with me! What a contrast to the other woman's words. Not an orphan but one who was loved by others across the miles. Little orphan Biddy (a name my mum called me) was not orphaned, God had placed people in my life, even on the other side of the world, who reminded me I was not alone. This is a little bit of what I think Jesus is trying to tell his disciples.

The bible is clear on the need to care for the orphans and widows. The Psalmist reminds us that God relieves the 'fatherless and the widow' (Psalm 146:9). And in my experience, I can see why. For many this experience is intensely painful and as Oliver teaches us as well as the experience of 'forgotten Australians' ripe for exploitation.

I imagine the pain of the orphan is matched by the one who is doing the leaving. Jesus understands this, he knows his leaving will distress his followers, and might I say distress him as well. This experience will be akin to being orphaned. In our reading today he goes to great lengths to remind his followers that they will not be abandoned, alone, unable to connect with each other even after he has left. He tells them of his gift, the gift of the Spirit, the gift of God's abiding presence to comfort, to enlighten, guide, instruct, defend and advocate for us forever. We are not alone. Jesus will be absent and yet present, we will be adopted, belong, know security and be loved, as we become part of this world-wide family of God.

Paul too knew this, that God does not abandon us. In Athens confronted by many religious statues and a memorial stone to the 'unknown God', he knew his God was different. Paul's God was known, was present, was intimate, was living and never aloof. We are offspring he says, not orphans. We are not alone or orphaned. The one who creates, loves, reconciles, shows us the way to truth, shows us the way into the future is an abiding presence with us.

Like Uncle Theyo reminded me, we are not alone, we are loved. As Gustavo Gutierrez observes it is the abiding presence of the Spirit that enables us to be the children of God, God's offspring and not orphans.

However, there is more to this relationship, it is two way. It is a relationship and just as we are loved, we are called to love. Keeping God's commands is always about love – love of God and love of neighbour. It is a community of love.

This kind of love means we cannot allow others to live as orphans, to live in distress and pain, to live ostracized or traumatized, to live lonely lives, to live in such way that they feel abandoned or without hope. This should affect the way we welcome asylum seekers, who acutely feel a sense of abandonment. It should affect the way in which we welcome in the homeless. It should affect the way we embrace those battling addictions. It should affect the way we treat those exploited by others or by the system. It must affect the way we try to understand those who have been abused. Together we are offspring and not orphans.

We are not alone, in God we have life, love and being and because of that we cannot allow others to be crippled by feeling alone, but it is hard. In Leunig's words – we are called to love one another, it is as easy and as hard as that. Amen.