

## Sermon Archive 153

Sunday 21 May, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 14: 15-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



The boy looks about twelve years old, dressed in a shapeless hoodie, scruffy jeans and trendily tatty Chuck Taylor shoes. Scene One has him looking through a cardboard box of objects in the bedroom: a watch (which he tries on his wrist, then takes off), a pair of glasses (through which he looks, then puts away), a notebook (which he flicks through slowly). He goes downstairs and asks his mother “Mum, what was Dad like?”

Mother and son are now walking outside, and she’s answering the question. She’s telling him random thoughts about his father. He was tall as a house, with big strong hands. (The boy looks up at the size of the house they’re walking past. He looks at his own small hands.) His father was never scruffy, always smart. (The boy pulls up his jeans, notices his tatty shoes.) As they go past a football field, he’s told his father played football, and was good at it. (Just then a ball is kicked out of play. The boy attempts to kick it back - but mis-kicks.) Down some steps they go, as two girls come up. With his smile failing to catch anything but a scowl from either of them, he’s told that his father was a real catch - a “wow” with all the girls. As they arrive at a takeaway place (maybe mother’s attempt to normalise the sharp, emotional questioning), the boy asks one more question: “Did he have blue eyes, like me?” His mother answers “No, brown!”

Having cancelled his questions for now, he sits with his mother at a table with their chosen takeaways. Taking his first bite of his chosen burger, a fillet of fish, and having got some tartar sauce on his chin, he hears his mother say “that was your Dad’s favourite too. Tartar sauce all down his chin.” She looks at her son with love. The scene fades out to a red

background with two golden arches.

How do you feel about that?

This advertisement, made in England, played only for a couple of days. In quick time hundreds of complaints were lodged with the British Advertising Standards Authority. The general drift was that it was wrong to use grief to sell fast food. One complainant expressed incredulity that any take away meal could lessen the pain of losing a parent. The bereft child. The un-moored youth. The vulnerable person without a protector, keeper, modeller of life.

Anna Hosemann-Butler reflects:

*I lost my father to cancer when I was eight years old, and so became a "half-orphan", and thus appropriately half-terrified. I became a child who on the surface was fine, but inside was frantic in my love for my mother, always on the edge of panic where her well-being was concerned, desperately afraid that something would happen to her and I would be completely alone in the world. Anxious fear was a constant childhood companion. There was no way around it . . .*

*Nothing **did** happen to her, thank God. She lived a good, long, and faithful life, and died when I was an adult with little children of my own. By then, the panic had subsided, mostly because I had grown up, and grown stronger with the constant gift of her love.*

*But, if we really look to see, we find orphans of some kind every day. There are thousands of children alone in this world due to the AIDS epidemic. There are thousands of children left to their own devices because of abuse and neglect. If we really look, we encounter people every day whose primary fear is that they are unlovable, and thus, will always be alone and isolated in the world . . .*

That's what Anna said.

What the hamburger people said was that the advertisement had been completely and permanently withdrawn from all advertising platforms. A

spokesperson declared “It was never our intention to upset . . . We are particularly sorry that the advert may have disappointed those people who are most important to us - our customers.”

Wasn't that nice! Whether our own experiences have left us sensitive, or whether we are highly protective of the sensitivities of bereaved children out there, we are important, as consumers, to the hamburger chain. Such is the world - which cannot receive him, for it neither sees nor knows him - the Spirit of truth.

-ooOoo-

Enough of that. Now we turn to our reading!

Seeking to name the growing vulnerability he sees in his disciples, Jesus draws on the metaphor of the double bereaved child - **the orphan**. Aware that he is about to “go away”, also aware that maybe some of them are beginning to realise it, he says to them “I will not leave you orphaned”. “Orphanhood is not something I will leave you. That you be not orphaned, I will send another Advocate, to be with you forever.”

For the orphaned (an image of the ultimately vulnerable human being), he promises an Advocate. “Advocate” is a word with legal attachments. The advocate is the one who pleads our case, who stands in our defence against whatever of which we've been accused. The Advocate is the experienced one who is on our side, who knows what to do and say. And if you're feeling vulnerable, not sure of what you need to do or say, then you're going to love the Advocate.

What else does the Advocate do? The Advocate of whom Jesus speaks stays forever. This is no contractual arrangement with a twilight clause. This is about committed presence, unconditional commitment - a pledge within which it becomes possible that deeds of love, knowing they are supported, may grow.

It's also about the giving of company that feels familiar to the disciples - having deep resonances of the **first** Advocate - knowing and being

known, ringing natural and true. This is the Spirit of **truth**, feeling right, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him - "but you know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." Tied, committed forever, deeply knowing and known. The orphan doesn't need to ask "what was Dad like", because already tied, committed, forever, the Advocate is full of the Father. The soon-to-be-leaving Jesus assures the disciples that they won't be orphaned. They will continue to live in the love that has become familiar to them as they have lived with him. A new Advocate - an old love.

-ooOoo-

This sermon is about to end. Where have we come to? A great British backlash against the use of a bereaved child has spoken about our fears about loss and vulnerability. Perhaps the scale of the backlash has described how common a thing it is for human beings to be frightened. Yet Jesus has spoken to his frightened people, assuring them that they will, in fact, never be alone. God's established way of being with them (Jesus and flesh and blood) may indeed "no longer been seen" by human eyes - but still God's presence remains. They're not orphaned. They have an Advocate. They're not alone.

Perhaps it's from **this insight** that we live a faith, build a church, dream a mission. Maybe it's from here that we become advocates for the orphans, for the vulnerable creation, for the other disciples to our left and right. Maybe it's from here that we speak to the cynical advertisers to whom our hamburger custom is so important. Or maybe, from here, it's simply considering whether we love this One who sends the Advocate. I don't know . . .

But we are not orphans. We are not alone.

Let us keep a moment of quiet.