

Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid
5 May 2013

John 14:23-29

I was stunned when my very good friend Cam told me earlier this year that he had been diagnosed with incurable cancer and had been given about a year to live. While he had not exactly been in perfect health, he been making a real effort to look after himself. In fact, I have not known anybody else who went to the same lengths to stay healthy. So I had not expected anything like this to happen. I did not get to see Cam straight away. I was expecting him to be with us for at least the rest of the year, and I thought we would get to spend lots of quality time together. And for various reasons I did not get to see him until thirteen days ago. At first I was shocked to see how unwell he had become. His condition was far worse than I was expecting. But then I saw how overjoyed he was to see me. Sadly, he was too ill for us to have an in depth conversation like we were used to having. But that didn't really matter. And I got to spend half an afternoon with him.

It is quite surreal being with someone you know has very little time left. They are still with us, while we are emotionally and spiritually preparing ourselves for the reality that they won't be with us for much longer. On one hand, there can be an exaggerated sense of normality, but there is also the unspoken realisation that there is about to be a major upheaval. It is all very unsettling. And I am pretty inexperienced at spending time with the dying. My only previous experience of this was with my father, more than nineteen years ago, and back then, I was frustrated at times by not knowing what to say. Now of course I know that it didn't really matter. The important thing was being there.

During my visit to Cam that I found myself thinking about today's gospel reading. Now I believe that it was probably around this time that Jesus' disciples had finally began to understand and accept that He would not be with them for much longer. While the synoptic gospels tell us of three occasions when Jesus spoke of his death prior to their entry into Jerusalem, His disciples had failed to grasp what he meant. But now they were in Jerusalem, and they had seen Jesus make some powerful enemies by challenging the religious authorities on their home turf. And now he was telling them in no uncertain terms that He would be going from them. It must have been difficult. Jesus would have been well aware of the turbulent emotions they were surely feeling. So he assured them how they would not be alone after he had gone. They would have the

Advocate, or the Holy Spirit, also known as the Comforter, the Helper, the Counsellor, and the Spirit of Truth to teach them and remind them of what He had told them.

When read in its context, today's gospel reading is part of Jesus' long farewell discourse the night before He is crucified. At first, this seems a little out of place. After all, in our liturgical calendar, it is now the sixth Sunday of Easter, and Jesus was crucified more than five weeks ago. But we are also only four days away from the Ascension, when we observe the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. And ten days after that, it will be the Feast of Pentecost, the final day of Easter, when we observe the coming of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. So a text about Jesus going away couldn't be more appropriate for today.

But let's go back to my visit to Cam. After we had spent some time together, we went for a drive. He had at one point asked his brother to take him on a trip to Otaki, so they dropped me off on the way. As they drove off, Cam smiled and waved, and I did the same back. I sincerely hoped it would not be, but I had a feeling inside that this would be the last time we would see each other in this life. And less than 36 hours later, Cam did indeed leave this life. I had the privilege of giving a eulogy at a memorial service for him on Friday, and I spoke of my hope of us meeting again in the Resurrection. And although I did not choose the readings, they were from the same discourse that today's gospel readings came from, and they assured us of the place being prepared for us.

This was not the first time I have known in advance that I would be parted from someone close to me. I don't think it will be the last time either. And most, if not all, of us here today will have experienced such impending losses at some stage in our lives. But I am comforted by the promises Jesus made his disciples when they were in the same situation, because these promises also apply to us. So whatever happens in life, do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. For we will never be abandoned. And when someone close is taken away, we have the hope of the Resurrection to come.

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