

'I will not leave you orphaned' (John 14:18)

You probably know the saying, 'nature abhors a vacuum'. Aristotle first developed this idea of the natural world, but it equally applies to spiritual and moral lives. In the physical world it is simply the idea that if a vacuum is created then it will quickly be filled by matter. If this weren't the case, then my vacuum cleaner would not pick up dirt and dust.

But it is as an observation of our moral and spiritual life which I'd like to reflect on for a moment. Supposing I say, I'm going to give up eating all biscuits. Fair enough; but what replaces this? I have to be careful, because I might replace eating biscuits with consuming chocolate. More sensible would be giving up biscuits by eating something more healthy such as fruit.

Nature abhors a vacuum. We know that we never get rid of bad habits merely by stopping them but replacing them with good habits.

Jesus knew the dangers of spiritual vacuums. During his lifetime he was there to guide his followers in their moral and spiritual needs. But it is what might happen after his death which poses the real challenges and potential dangers.

The immediate danger is the problem of the cult of personality. There are numerous negative examples of this in history where through fear or psychological need human individuals have become the source and fulfilment of human needs. Think for example of the cult of Roman emperors, and more recently the cults of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler and Mao filling the space of the regimes they toppled. Or in a far more benign way, after his death, the fans of Elvis Presley set up shrines to 'the King' and even dressed like him.

So, we can see that when Jesus said to his disciples, 'I will not leave you orphaned' that he was very conscious of what could so easily happen after his death. All alone and without the master there to guide them his followers might have easily created a cult of Jesus. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that this happened, and I think still happens. We must be very careful not to let our worship of Christ become a cult of his personality.

Nature abhors a vacuum.

So, we must listen carefully to what Jesus himself said.

First, the vacuum created after his death would be filled by the Holy Spirit. Actually, the Greek word referring to the Holy Spirit is 'parakletos' - meaning literally one who is called along-side. Paraclete lends itself to many different translations such as: advocate or counsellor, as in a lawcourt where the lawyer acts on one's behalf; or comforter; or helper; or intercessor.

Second, the paraclete would be the Spirit of Truth, just as Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. So, in a sense the Spirit is also the continued spirit of Christ, not as an individual personality but as a living presence in the community.

Thirdly and finally, the characteristic of the community after his death is love. Crucially it is not merely love of Jesus the person but love as expressed in the Father- Son-Spirit relationship which must therefore be the foundation of the Christian community of love.

Jesus was well aware of the potential dangers of the vacuum left by his death. We don't replace being orphans by creating a human introverted club-like cult of Jesus, but by allowing the ever-living presence of Christ to be expressed extrovertly and generously by loving one another, not just fellow Christians, but all. Jesus said:

... you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.' (John 14:21-22)

Jesus' words are powerful reminders how we must fill our moral and spiritual needs without turning our faith into a Jesus personality cult or the Church into a club only for the initiated. Sadly, there are far too many examples today where this is so. For this not to happen we must allow ourselves to be open to development and change, led by the Spirit of truth and love, who will not and does not leave us orphans.

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