

6 Easter 2020

Great Healer, make us aware of your great Spirit here in this place. Touch and heal our brokenness, and lift us out of despair and doubt. Dry our tears of pain and sorrow. Comfort and nourish us with the many blessings of your great love. Amen

When times seem barren, when we feel alone, where do we find our hope?

There were a few criticisms on Facebook, this past week, that too many clergy have used their sermons to talk about the pandemic and its effects on society rather than talking about 'Christ crucified'. I am sure that some of this is warranted and the effects of this pandemic are certainly far-reaching, but as I have said over the past few weeks, it is difficult to not think about where we find ourselves today in relation to Sunday's readings. At least **I** think so.

Talking about Scripture without making it pertinent to people's lives doesn't make sense to me unless it is **purely** a Bible Study, and even then, if we are using the African or Lambeth Bible Study, we are asked to relate how the passage touches our lives today or what Jesus is saying to us through that particular reading.

Our Gospel reading today, is part of the Last Supper Discourse (or Farewell Discourse) in John chapters 13-17. Jesus is discussing his impending return to his heavenly Father and what this means for the disciples whom he is leaving behind in the world.

I can only imagine that state of mind of the disciples as they listened to what Jesus was saying. They really had no clear understanding as to what was coming so therefore could not have fathomed the significance of Jesus going to the Father and God sending another advocate to them.

I looked at several different translations of this passage. There are at least 8 words used for the Holy Spirit in verse 16. Advocate; Comforter, Companion, Holy Spirit, Helper, Counselor, Friend, Mediator, and Paraclete.

Since Jesus is also speaking to each of us this morning, what descriptive term makes sense to you, in your life, at this time? I shared in a Bible study I was in yesterday, that I would normally use the term Advocate when I think about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit intercedes on my behalf to God and Jesus. In fact, many of the terms for the Spirit of God are active in nature and I tend to be passive. The Holy Spirit comforts, mediates, counsels, advocates, and helps me. The one term I had to think about was companion. That one didn't feel right to me. The Holy Spirit as a companion with me. This story seems to help and I am sure that some of you may have heard it before.

Derek Redmond was determined. He had to finish the race. Period.

He was a young British runner, one who had sky rocketed to fame by shattering his country's 400-meter record at age 19. But then an Achilles tendon injury forced him to withdraw from the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, and he endured five separate surgeries. When the Summer Olympics arrived in Barcelona in 1992, Derek Redmond was absolutely aching for a medal.

On the day of the 400-meter race, 65,000 fans streamed into the stadium, anxious to witness one of sports' most thrilling events. High in the stands is Derek's father, Jim, a faithful witness to every one of his son's world competitions. According to ESPN, Jim was wearing a T-shirt that read, "Have you hugged your foot today?"

The race begins and Derek breaks through the pack to seize the lead. "Keep it up, keep it up," his father Jim says to himself. Heading down the backstretch, only 175 meters from the finish line, Derek is a shoo-in to win this semifinal heat and qualify for the Olympic finals.

But then Derek hears a pop. It's his right hamstring. He pulls up lame, looking as if he has been shot. His leg quivering, Derek begins to hop on the other leg, and then he slows down and falls to the track. Medical personnel run toward him as he sprawls on the ground, holding his right hamstring.

At the very same moment, there is a stir at the top of the stands. Jim Redmond, seeing his son in trouble, begins to race down from the top row. He is pushing toward the track, sidestepping some people and bumping into others. He has no right or credential or permission to be on the track, but all he can think about is getting to his son, to help him up. He is absolutely single-minded about this, and isn't going to be stopped by anyone.

On the track, Derek realizes that his dream of an Olympic medal is gone. He is alone. The other runners streak across the finish line, with Steve Lewis of the United States winning the race. He is orphaned, as it were, a lonely figure on the track, friendless, parentless and alone.

Tears pour down Derek's face, and all he can think is, "I don't want to take a DNF." A Did-Not-Finish was not even part of his vocabulary. When the medical crew arrives with a stretcher, Derek tells them, "No, there's no way I'm getting on that stretcher. I'm going to finish my race." And so, he lifts himself to his feet, ever so slowly and carefully, and he starts hobbling down the track. Suddenly, the crowd realizes that Derek isn't dropping out of the race. He isn't limping off the track in defeat, but is actually continuing on one leg, in a

fiercely determined effort to make it to the finish line. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more agonizing than the one before, Derek limps onward, and the crowd begins to cheer for him. The fans rise to their feet and their cries grow louder and louder, building into a thundering roar.

At that moment, Jim Redmond reaches the bottom of the stands, vaults over the railing, dodges a security guard, and runs out to his son — with two security people running after him. “That’s my son out there,” he yells back at his pursuers, “and I’m going to help him.”

Derek initially tried to push him away, not realizing who he was, but then heard a familiar voice. “Derek, it's me” his father said.

Redmond told his father “I’ve got to finish this race.” His father said “If you're gonna finish the race, we'll finish it together.”

Derek puts his arms around his father’s shoulders and sobs. Together, arm in arm, father and son struggle toward the finish line with 65,000 people cheering, clapping and crying. Just a few steps from the end, with the crowd in an absolute frenzy, Jim releases the grip he has on his son so that Derek can cross the finish line by himself.

“I’m the proudest father alive,” Jim Redmond tells the press afterward, with tears in his eyes. “I’m prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal. It took a lot of guts for him to do what he did.” Together, they kept a promise they had made to finish the race, no matter what.

Derek’s dad did not finish the race for him; His dad didn’t advocate to the judges about his sons’ injury; Mr. Redman did not counsel his son on other ways he might

finish the race; and he did not comfort his son by telling him that there would always be another race. His dad helped him to finish the race as his companion. The apostles had Jesus right beside them for three years. He was their friend and companion while he was with them. They understood **that** relationship. What Jesus was now telling them and us, was that same relationship continues through the Spirit.

That should give each of us hope.

A companion is a person with whom one spends a lot of time or with whom one travels. Traveling through life, alongside God, seems fairly straightforward. Most of us would say that we want to spend a significant amount of time in conversation with God and that we certainly want God to be with us when we are in need or trouble. But being companions with the Holy Spirit means hanging out when things are good too.

Sure, we want someone who will intercede for us with God when we are having difficulties or to counsel us when we are confused or lost. And I believe that happens. But if we are truly companions in this life, those intercessions and blessings will happen a lot sooner.

I think we all know that in the times we find ourselves right now, we need the Holy Spirit as advocate, counselor, comforter, helper, and companion on behalf of ourselves, our families and loved ones, our neighbors, our friends, and our leaders, as we navigate through this pandemic.

With the Holy Spirit as our friend and companion, it will be so much easier to find that hope, in times of darkness, and to walk through this world in love.

There is an old song, that I consider to be a hymn. For me, it encompasses the intimate relationship and deep love, that God desires with each of us as the Spirit walks right beside us as companion.