

What Love the Father has Given Unto Us!

In the story written by Charles Dickens the orphan “Oliver Twist” learns that he has a very different heritage from what his current circumstances declare. The surprise the author has for the reader is contained in the fact that rather than an impoverished fate that he seems to have Oliver Twist is actually the member of a rather wealthy family. The movie adaptation of this story highlights the wonderful picture of the pursuit of the wealthy grandfather in finding the orphan. While we may not realize it Oliver Twist’s story is also our story to some degree. The love that is portrayed in that work of fiction is a description of the love that John proclaims in his first letter. As he states, “See (behold) what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” (1John 3:1) John is writing to a group of people in which many were not from a Jewish background. They wouldn’t have described themselves this way but they could have been considered orphans. The Father in heaven granted them the ability to be declared ‘children of God’. The Apostle wrote about this once before in the prologue to his Gospel of Jesus. “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13) Whether we understand this or not the fact of the matter is that before our adoption as children of God we were orphans. We may have been blessed to have caring people looking after us but our real Father in heaven was not known to us. Oliver Twist had a life of squalor but occasionally a foster family was found to treat children well so there were orphans whose lot was better in that world. Regardless of that fact the message of God to the world through Jesus Christ is a plea for the orphans of the world to come home and find their true father. All who are not in the family of God are orphans who are welcome to find their real home. This is part of what the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus accomplished. Any barrier that existed between God and humanity was removed through the sacrifice of Jesus so the pathway is clear for the adoption to happen. Some barriers had to be removed in order for Oliver Twist to find his real home and the news we are asked to share with those around us is that the work has been done for us - all we need to do is allow that reality to be born in our hearts.

On the third day after his crucifixion Jesus came and stood among the disciples in their gathering place. John tells us that they were in a locked room because they were afraid that Jesus’ fate was going to be their fate as well. They must have felt quite abandoned - orphaned you might say - without their leader. Luke tells us the story of the two travellers from Emmaus who had just regaled the band of disciples with the story of meeting Jesus and that story followed stories from the women and Peter about

an empty tomb. According to Luke Jesus was suddenly standing among them as big as life. No wonder their reaction was described as being ‘startled and terrified’ and they thought they were seeing a ghost. Based on all their past experiences this was the only explanation but Jesus proceeded to show them that something new had happened and that it was something that had been predicted. “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled”, Jesus said. (Luke 24:44b) This somewhat unbelievable series of events was in God’s plan all along and the promise of a renewed and restored relationship with God was part of the reason for the plan. The adoption of the human race after they had ‘run away’ was in the heart and intention of God and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was means through which that would be accomplished. What a wonderful gift that was for those who first witnessed the events. They not only saw with their own eyes that Jesus had indeed be raised but he ‘opened their minds to understand the scripture’ (Luke 24:45). How I pray for that to happen and how wonderful it is when God’s insight is shared with me through the Holy Spirit. From utter grief these first disciples were transported into a place of wonder and joy. From being lost orphans they became children of the Most High God.

The story of Oliver Twist ends with him living in luxury and leaves the question of what happens to all the other orphans an open ended question. In the account of Jesus’ resurrection the disciples who were the first witnesses to the resurrection were, in one sense, living in luxury but while in that state they hear of God’s plan for the rest of the ‘orphans’ like you and me. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:46-47) The fact of our adoption is to be the reason for us to tell the story of Jesus to all who will hear. The luxury we experience through the lavish love of God is meant for our blessing but not just for our that. The blessing is meant to be shared with those around us and we are told that we do so by proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name. The gift of forgiveness and the freedom which comes from repentance is meant to be shared through our words and actions with the world in which we live. We do this by becoming accustomed to repenting when appropriate and by forgiving others in the way that God has forgiven us. This is the way children of God are to behave along with an openness for others to discover the same wonder that we experience. We don’t know this about Oliver Twist but we can well imagine that as he became an adult he demonstrated his thankfulness by supporting the work of rescuing orphans from the squalor that he experienced as a child. Our willingness to share the gift that comes through repentance and the forgiveness of our sins is an expression of our thanksgiving as a way to help others find their way out of the ‘squalor’ in which they are living.

This is part of the picture of the love the Father has for us, to call us children of God. An awareness of that fact has changed the way I behave and I have seen the same kind of effect in many others. It is our privilege to introduce others to this wonder that we practice for ourselves - that the penalty for sin has been paid and we are forgiven through the grace of God as seen in Jesus Christ. Since we are God's children we are asked to behave in a way that helps others see the wonder of that love that is lavished upon us. As we live in this locked-down world may we find new and helpful ways to continue to share this story with those we meet. In conclusion I offer this prayer for the neighbourhoods in which we live.

O Lord our creator, by your holy prophet you taught your ancient people to seek the welfare of the cities in which they lived. We commend our neighbourhood to your care, that might be kept free from social strife and decay. Give us strength of purpose and concern for others, that we may create here a community of justice and peace where your will may be done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.