

We all hit problems in our lives at some times. Some big, some small but whenever we hit difficulty we need somebody to understand us and to nurture us. We all seek refuge in the understanding of somebody who can empathise with our problems. To be honest “a problem shared is a problem halved”; we just need to have somebody close who will listen without judging, without telling us to just pull ourselves together and without just saying that they don’t have the time. Being human, and let’s face it, we all are, we can become frustrated and try and place the reasons for our problems on society, on the weatherman sometimes, the government, and when we can’t find a specific group to name we refer to “*They*”.

I’m wondering who “*they*” are? I’ve been working now for over forty five years and whenever something happens such as not being given a big enough pay rise I hear people say “*They* don’t understand how hard it is now”, or “*They*’re just not on the same planet with their bright ideas”. This anonymous, faceless “*they*” seems to be responsible for anything that people are uncomfortable about and “*they*” are seen as divorced from reality and uncaring. I fully understand because I know I’ve said it myself and I remember many occasions when I’ve blamed “*they*” for things that I didn’t like at home or at work. Now when I tell my staff about decisions at work if they don’t like what’s going on I’ll be told that “*They* don’t understand”. Amazingly they stick to the anonymous perpetrator even though they know I’ve either been fully responsible for the decision or formed part of the decision making process. We seem to want and need a faceless and unknown “*they*” to be responsible for our woes and worries because “*they*” don’t understand our problems.

The TV chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall did a programme a few years back about intensely farmed chickens. In places it was one of the most difficult programmes to watch. Hugh set up his own chicken farm following all the rules and official guidance to farm chicken for large supermarkets and commercial kitchens and also worked the farm himself. I’ll never forget seeing him in floods of tears as he had to deal with chickens that had never seen daylight, were in cramped and very smelly conditions and had never walked on grass. I knew many people who said they just couldn’t watch the programme because of the reality. I certainly found it difficult and now keep “rescue chickens” in the bottom of my garden. Some may not live that long after rescue but their first reactions to digging around on the lawn or lying in the heat of the sun are amazing. But my chickens are not the point. In the final programme which had been pre shown to a wide range of people Hugh asked if seeing the reality would change their chicken buying habits. Those who could afford to said they would only buy free range from now on but those who were living on the bread line said that they would like to but could not afford to change because “*they*” didn’t understand how difficult it was, for example, bringing up two children as a single parent on benefits. I fully understand their viewpoint. Faced with a choices that involve putting food in our children’s mouths or not I think the answer becomes a no-brainer. It’s easy making sacrifices on our own behalf, but not on behalf of our children or other loved ones. Life is never black and white and our road is scattered with boulders which we must divert around. At these times we need somebody to understand why we may have steered around those obstacles and to offer forgiveness. We see this on the forty days leading up to and at the ascension. Jesus doesn’t accuse any of the disciples of betrayal or being wrong. He understands our weakness and forgives. He only promises great love.

As I said earlier we all seek refuge in the understanding of somebody who can empathise with our problems. This is why self help groups are so brilliant. Whether they be groups

of people struggling to make ends meet, people trying to fight drug addiction or people with a similar medical condition. Just having somebody there who can understand the difficulties of a problem because they've experienced it themselves is a massive support that can help steer us through the mist of frustration.

And I think that is why seeing Jesus joining The Father in Heaven is so important to us. We, however you visualise it in your own mind, see Jesus ascending to The Father in a tangible way. God created us and God has always loved us and understood us. But after his time on earth we know that Jesus has felt our pain *in person* and can empathise with and understand us fully. From last week's Gospel we remember "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you". The Church is the biggest ever self help group where all our problems and difficulties are understood and if necessary forgiven. There is no "*they*" in The Church.

Jesus ascends to heaven and we know that He, God and the Holy Spirit are together as one; and after the life of Jesus we can no longer accuse God of not knowing or understanding the hardships of a life where we are allowed the free will to make our own choices and mistakes. Jesus was born into human poverty and became a refugee with all the fear and desolation that this can bring. He was tortured inhumanely and executed in the most painful manner possible despite being free of sin and, he was vulnerable like ourselves. He wept and he felt pain and understood what it was like to be betrayed. And Jesus is with God and the Holy Spirit, and with us.

We never need to be alone with our problems and hit out at an anonymous "*They*" who do not exist and thus can never understand. Through prayer in the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we can find the space to be understood, to be listened to, and if asked for, forgiveness. In Our Lord Jesus Christ we have constant refuge in the understanding of Our God who shares our pain and who can empathise with our problems. A problem shared is a problem halved.

Amen