

Never Orphaned

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on Mother's Day, May 10th, 2026 – John 14:15-21)

Never Orphaned

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on Mother's Day, May 10th, 2026 – John 14:15-21)

There is a story that Mother Teresa rescued a child from the streets and took him back to her home where she fed and cleaned him, but then the child ran away. This happened several times. So, one of the Sisters in her order followed the child. She found them sitting with their mother under a tree, cooking. The child was asked why he kept running away, the reply, well this is my home, this is where my mother is.

A similar thing happened with Molly in the film 'The Rabbit Proof Fence' which is based on a true story. One of the Stolen Generation, Molly and her sister twice escape from the 'mission' near Perth and travel hundreds of kilometres back to their mother following the Rabbit Proof Fence.

I can also remember two occasions when young offenders got themselves into more trouble just so they could be with their families, such is the desire for people to be with their families.

I once worked with a woman who had younger onset dementia. Her greatest fear, her greatest pain, her greatest grief was for her two daughters and not seeing them grow up, marry, have children and so on. This relatively young woman did not want to leave her children orphaned in effect – the thought for her was overwhelming and she cried and cried for that future she knew she would not have. The pain of a parent who knows that at some stage (and probably not too far away) her dearly loved children would be orphaned.

I was orphaned in 2018 after my father died, my mother had died more than a decade before that – it felt strange, who would I go to for advice now, in my wider family I was now one of the older generation, one of the elders but I felt very vulnerable and alone.

There are more than 153 million orphans worldwide, created by war, conflict, poverty, and bad health outcomes.

There is a stigma and pain and heartache associated with being an orphan, so no wonder the bible is clear about the need to care not just for widows but orphans too.

I imagine the pain of the orphan is matched by the one who is doing the leaving. Jesus understands this, he knows his leaving will distress his followers, and might I say distress him as well. This experience will be akin to being orphaned. In our reading today he goes to great lengths to remind his followers that they will not be abandoned, alone, unable to connect with each other even after he has left. He tells them of his gift, the gift of the Spirit, the gift of God's abiding presence to comfort, to enlighten, guide, instruct, defend and advocate for us forever, gifts that anyone who is orphaned or feeling abandoned needs to hear. We are not alone. Jesus will be absent and yet present, we will be adopted, belong, know security and be loved, as we become part of this world-wide family of God.

Never Orphaned

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on Mother's Day, May 10th, 2026 – John 14:15-21)

I first understood what Jesus meant shortly after my mother died. I had been at a long and frustrating board meeting and when I got home I was deciding if I would resign from that board or not. The phone rang, I thought it was going to be someone from the meeting to check in and see if I was okay. No, it was Uncle Theyo.

Now Uncle Theyo was calling from Nagaland in Northeast India, and I had hosted him about seven years previously when he had attended a Baptist conference in Melbourne. He was an important man in Nagaland, a politician and when he was here, I had introduced him to my family and to the beach. (Nagaland is landlocked). He had just found out from somebody else that my mother had died. He was calling to offer his condolences, to tell me that he also missed her and then he said he just wanted me to know that I wasn't alone, he and his family were with me! Not an orphan but one who was loved by others across the miles. Little orphan Biddy (a name my mum called me) was not orphaned, God had placed people in my life, even on the other side of the world who reminded me I was not alone. This is a little bit of what I think Jesus is trying to tell his disciples.

However, the relationship of which Jesus speaks is two way. It is a relationship and just as we are loved we are called to love. Keeping God's commands is always about love – love of God and love of neighbour. It is a community of love.

This kind of love means we cannot allow others to live as orphans, to live in distress and pain, to live ostracized or traumatized, to live lonely lives, to live in such way that they feel abandoned or without hope.

Today is Mother's Day. Mother's Day was first suggested by Julia Ward Howe in 1870 in response to war. She suggested that it might be held as a day of peace, as a protest to the carnage of war. In her statement of that year, she protested the war, which allowed sons to be trained to injure others and to unlearn all their mothers had taught them of charity, mercy and patience.

It is ironic that today on Mother's Day that we have a reading about being orphaned.

Think about mothers in bible and how they do not abandon their children or if they must do all they can to ensure the safety and protection of their child, they remind me of Jesus saying how he wanted to gather, shelter and protect the people just as a mother hen gathers its chicks under her wings.

Moses' mother showed extraordinary courage in giving him up so that he might live. Mary, Jesus' own mother believed in him, brought him up and then watched him die. The Canaanite woman subjected herself to insults and was ignored and rejected. But she put up with it all as she sought a cure for her daughter.

Never Orphaned

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on Mother's Day, May 10th, 2026 – John 14:15-21)

Paul knew the importance of mothering. As he writes to Timothy he remembers both Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois who were people of faith and Paul suggests that it is they that have taught and led Timothy to faith, a gift he tells Timothy to nourish.

These are our mothers in the faith, we see in these examples from the bible – these women, these mothers say yes to God, that they are courageous risk takers, resourceful, argue for the sake of others, teach the faith and love courageously.

True mothering is about bringing something to life (a child, an idea, faith) and nurturing and protecting that.

Many have mothered us in the faith, they have brought to birth in us new things, they have nurtured and encouraged us, they have never abandoned us rather they have adopted us into their world. We remember these people with gratitude today. We as a church community are called to do the same, to not leave anyone feeling like they are orphaned or abandoned.

Mother's Day is a wonderful day for some, but for others it can be a very difficult day for those estranged by distance, death or difficulties from their mothers.

But the word of God offers us all a word of comfort - we are not orphaned, we are not abandoned but God's Spirit, God's abiding presence is always in our midst, and it will lead us to truth, to reconciliation, to love, to freedom and to the future.

Love like this should affect the way we welcome asylum seekers, who acutely feel a sense of abandonment. It should affect the way in which we welcome the homeless. It should affect the way we embrace those battling addictions. It should affect the way we treat those exploited by others or by the system. It must affect the way we try to understand those who have been abused.

Gustavo Gutierrez says that this presence of the Spirit is not only our comfort but also our challenge. You see, our response to this ever present and living God who abides with us is to love, to love God and neighbour.

Beloved children of God, never orphans. Amen.