

Dear Friends,

John 14: 15-19

Jesus knows that his friends are about to experience some devastating hard knocks. He therefore gives them promises that he hopes will stop them from being overwhelmed. He promises that he will not leave them orphaned, but will continue to take care of them and be their teacher and guide. He promises to ask the Father to give them the Holy Spirit to be in them and to strengthen them.

George experienced many hard knocks. When he was young, he rescued his little brother from an icy cold river. Sadly, while he was in the water, he got an infection which caused him to lose the hearing in one of his ears. Also, while he was young, he stopped a man from making what would have been a terrible mistake. The man did not immediately understand what George was doing. He thought he was being difficult, so he hit George so hard that it made his ear bleed. George was learning that life is filled with hard knocks.

He had big dreams. He wanted to go and explore the world, but he was never able to get away from the town where he lived, which he saw as being a crummy old place. He watched as his friends got away and became successful while he was stuck where he was. Sometimes his disappointment filled him with rage. It made him furious.

The sun did come out for him in one particular way. He made a good marriage and he and his wife had four beautiful children.

But the hard knocks kept coming. A powerful business man in the town was always trying to get rid of George and the little bank that George ran. Eventually some of the money from George's bank got into the hands of the big business man. He was corrupt and decided not to give the money back to those to whom it belonged. He saw it as an opportunity to destroy George. George knew that he was facing bankruptcy, scandal and prison.

He went to a bar and started drinking. It was at this moment that he decided to pray. He confessed that he was not a praying person, but now he really needed help. This however, was also the moment when someone, who he had earlier offended, recognised him. The man hit George and knocked him to the ground. "That's what you get for praying", George thought, "a sock on the jaw and a split lip". George could see no way out. He seriously considered ending it all by taking his life.

But God was listening and George was not the only one praying. People from all over the town were praying for George. And God sent an angel, Clarence Odbody AS2, a second-class angel, one who had not yet been given his wings.

Okay, if you hadn't noticed, this is the plot of the film "It's a Wonderful Life". So, we're not in real life but in Hollywood fiction. Except that, this little piece of fiction is

stuffed full of real life and is a wise and accurate reflection of it. Clarence shows George what the world would have been like without him, that without him there would have been an awful lot of holes. George comes to see that he really has had a wonderful life. That doesn't mean that it's been easy and nice with only things to enjoy, because it hasn't. It's been a hard knock life which has contained disappointments and sadness. Life is like that. It was like that for George. It's like that for most of us. God does not take the hard knocks away or smooth them out and make everything easy. But God does promise to come alongside you and strengthen you by challenging and comforting you, so that you are not overwhelmed, so that you can handle all that comes your way.

God says, "Do not be afraid .... When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you ... You are precious in my sight and honoured and I love you".

God bless you,

Tony