**Sermon for 24 May 2020**

**Waiting for…?**

*Please read Acts 1.6-14.*

How much things change in 40 days! Here are the disciples – *apostles* Luke calls them, and we’ll think about that term again later – back in an Upper Room (v.13). The last time we saw them there, they’d locked themselves in the room, full of fear. It’s all different now. They now have purpose and tasks to undertake: not just locked away for their own safety but busy preparing for the future; their next steps. They may not be quite sure what’s going to happen, but they are trusting the promises Jesus gave them, that something was about to happen.

We could perhaps identify with this situation, just a little, as some of us prepare to take steps out of lockdown, even if it’s just tiny steps. What needs to be in place before this is safe for us? What can we plan to do to make this happen effectively?

But let’s go back to the disciples to find out what’s changed for them. We’ve just remembered and celebrated the Ascension of Jesus. That time when, 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus makes his final, physical appearance to his disciples. Luke writes two parallel narratives of the Ascension: in his Gospel (Luke 24.44-51) and this one in Acts. From this and the account we’ve been studying from John’s Gospel (John 20 & 21) we know that the 40 days has been about Jesus’ confirming his resurrection for them and continuing his teaching with them. This will prepare them for the moment of Ascension and what will come next.

And the disciples are still learning. If we look back just a couple of verses earlier in Acts 1 we see Jesus teaching them (again) about the Kingdom of God and the promise of the Holy Spirit[[1]](#footnote-1) and the disciples (again) failing to understand that a phenomenal, spiritual step change was about to happen. They were still focussed on restoring the actual Kingdom of Israel; Jesus was teaching that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they were about to bring in the much more important Kingdom of God, starting in Jerusalem, and spreading out ‘to the ends of the earth.’ (v.8)

Then, as if they hadn’t experienced so many impossible yet wonderful things over the last 40 days, there was one more remarkable event. After this special time together following his resurrection, Jesus leaves them to ascend to his Father to take up – as I read in one commentary – his place as ruler of all creation. Jesus departs from his followers, in a manner full of spiritual mystery and significance, so that he might exercise his authority and influence over all things, places and powers. The Ascension does not mean Jesus' absence. It does not mean the suspension of God's activity to reclaim the world. Quite the opposite.

Which leaves the disciples walking back to their room, their base, in Jerusalem. Were they full of wonder at all they had seen; full of trepidation about the future; sad at the thought of never seeing Jesus, physically, again – not having him sit amongst them sharing food and fellowship; full of questions or determined to carry out his instructions? Whatever their immediate feelings, they did as he asked them – went to wait in Jerusalem – trusting that his next promise, ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses…’ (v.8) would take place.

And that promise seemed to give them joy and focus. In his Gospel Luke describes the disciples as ‘continually in the temple blessing God’ (Luke 24.53) alongside their coming together in the Upper Room, settling down and ‘constantly devoting themselves to prayer’ (v.14).

What a good model this is for us, too, as we take part in the world-wide initiative of Thy Kingdom Come. The disciples are a group of people, preparing to be witnesses for the Kingdom of God and devoting themselves in worship and prayer before they begin.

But while considering this passage, one thought kept coming back to me. It was the gap, the waiting time, between the Ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What was all this about? Why did they have to wait?

One of my favourite Bible verses comes from the prophet Isaiah (40.30-31). It is about waiting:

*Even youths will faint and be weary,
    and the young will fall exhausted;****31****but those who wait[[2]](#footnote-2) for the Lord shall renew their strength,
    they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
    they shall walk and not faint.*

There are other passages, particularly in the Psalms, which relate to waiting for God to reveal his purpose or the full extent of his love. The disciples would have known that: they had grown up learning these passages. They would have learned the importance, the value, of waiting for God, worshipfully and prayerfully, even if they didn’t always put that waiting into practice. They may not have known yet about the power of the Holy Spirit and what that would enable them to do, in the name of Jesus, but they would have known about staying close to God and waiting for his will to be revealed. And the importance of getting themselves ready, through prayer, for whatever this might be.

But maybe there were other more pragmatic reasons for the waiting time. When we are planning an event or new activity, we pray for people to offer themselves and their skills into the organising team. We pray too, for that team to learn to work effectively together. The 11 disciples who walked back from the Mount of Olives had a similar task.

Perhaps now is the time to call them ‘apostles’, which means the special messengers (witnesses) of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. In our passage we learn that these apostles were joined in the Upper Room by certain women, including Jesus’ mother, and also his brothers. Further on in this first chapter of Acts, even before Pentecost, Peter is speaking to 120 followers (v.15). This is a big, new group. These people probably wouldn’t have worked together before. They needed to get together and team build. The apostles had to learn to do that (and anyone who has tried to build a team will know this can be bumpy, as well as rewarding). Remember Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12.12-30: his insistence about valuing the different parts of the body, especially the weaker parts? They also decided to elect a replacement for Judas – someone to join the apostolic team and restore its number to 12 (v.23-26). They had to do this without the personal guidance of Jesus, or the gift of discernment from the Holy Spirit. But they needed to be ready.

So, we can perhaps think of this waiting as a God-given time for them to anticipate, a time to learn, a time to build up themselves and this responsive community. A community that waits, worshipfully and prayerfully, upon God to take the next step. Which of course, he does. But we also need to wait for next week to celebrate that.

So what does this mean for us?

Let’s think about prayer first. We are in the middle of Thy Kingdom Come. As I write this, I’m hoping, soon after I finish, to download the family prayer app, which looks so much fun – not just for children!

There are other things, too (if you look on the website, <https://www.thykingdomcome.global/> you’ll be spoilt for choice). Last year I prayed specifically for 5 people to come to or deepen their faith. That was a moving exercise. This year, I’ve become aware of people who are coming to faith because of Covid-19 and the time they’ve had to reflect on the meaning of their life, but also those whose faith has been challenged enormously by the pandemic and its impact. These will be part of my 5, not least to be able to witness with love to them. And although I’ll try and start on Day 1, I don’t think it matters if I’m a few days late.

I’m hoping to take part in the 24-7 Prayer on Wednesday evening, too, even if I don’t manage the full hour. For some people, it is really difficult to find special prayer time in a house full of others; but if we can find just small moments of time and align ourselves with all those others, all across our nation and wider, there is so much power in prayer – being close to God.

Waiting too has taken on a new prominence as we go through Covid-19. Waiting for the lockdown to ease; waiting to see our friends and family in person again; waiting for a vaccine…

That model of the apostles and followers of Jesus, waiting in the Upper Room, taking time for God to reveal the next step, and actively preparing themselves for it, is a powerful challenge to us as we wait for the pandemic to end. Is there something new and different God wants us to do in the next phase of our lives? As we wait, are we staying close to God and getting ready for whatever this might be?

*Margaret Ward*

1. See also John 14.15-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sometimes wait is translated as hope. Both translations seem to fit this context. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)