

Sermon 16 May – (Acts 1:15-17, 21-end, John 17:6-19)

It feels a bit odd to be talking about people who have been told to stay at home the day before easing of restrictions means that many of us can now meet up again. “Stay at home and wait” have become very familiar words over the last 14 months.

- wait for your test results
- wait while you quarantine
- wait for the vaccine
- wait for the next step on the roadmap
- wait for the new normal

waiting is something we have become very used to even if some of us are not very good at it.

Stay at put and wait is essentially what Jesus said to the disciples before he ascended into heaven. Acts 1:4 says “While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.” We pick up the story immediately after Jesus Ascension. I wonder how the disciples felt as they met in the upper room that evening. Jesus had been taken from them for the second time in 6 weeks. It is hard to imagine the roller coaster of emotions they experienced as they followed Jesus arrest, trial and crucifixion, resurrection and appearances in the weeks following Easter and then the Ascension.

In his Gospel, Luke tells us that the disciples “returned to Jerusalem with great joy”. This is quite different to the reading we had a few weeks ago when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time. This time, according to John, the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. There was a sense of trepidation maybe even despair. Their world had been torn apart. Thomas, who was not with them, was suspicious when they told him of Jesus appearance. This time, something has changed, the sense of loss you might expect as Jesus is taken once again, is eased by an understanding that this is part of a greater plan. Things may not have gone as the disciples wanted or expected, but Jesus has shown them that God is in control. Faced with an instruction to wait, but energised by the things they had just seen, what were they to do?

In her sermon last Thursday, Sarah spoke of having to resist being “rooted still in time and place.” The instruction was to wait, but not to stand still. The disciples kept busy. They met, prayed and they chose a new member of the group to take the place left by Judas. This took time. There were criteria to be agreed on and candidate to be chosen. It had to be someone who had been part of Jesus close group of friends from the beginning. Someone who had personally witnessed his teaching as well as his death and resurrection? Eventually, after a time of prayer, a replacement was found, Matthias joined the group. The disciples were ready to set about the task they had been given, to tell what had happened to people in Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

The insistence on personal witness may have been necessary for consistent and authentic teaching about Jesus, but it would impede the fulfilment of this task. After all there were only a limited number of people who could meet this criterion. That is why they had to wait. God provided a solution through the Holy Spirit. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, everyone could have a personal relationship with Jesus. As one commentator noted, the Holy Spirit will become the criterion for authentic Christianity for all the generations yet to come, including our own.

The church has traditionally used this period of waiting, from Ascension to Pentecost, as a time for prayer and reflection. Thy Kingdom Come is an ecumenical initiative started 5 years ago by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to build on this tradition. Here is a bit more information taken from their website.

After the very first Ascension Day the disciples gathered with Mary, constantly devoting themselves to prayer while they waited for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Like them, our reliance on the gift of the Holy Spirit is total – on our own we can do nothing.

Through the centuries Christians have gathered at that time to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. 'Thy Kingdom Come' picks up this tradition. Over the years more and more worshipping communities have dedicated the days between Ascension and Pentecost to pray 'Come Holy Spirit'.

We are praying that the Spirit will inspire and equip us to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with our friends and families, our communities and networks....It is our prayer that those who have not yet heard the Good News of Jesus Christ and his love for the world will hear it for themselves, and respond and follow Him. Specifically, we again invite each and every Christian across the globe to pray that God's Spirit might work in the lives of 5 friends who have not responded with their 'Yes' to God's call.

Here at St Peter's there are many ways you can join in. The whole point is that people can pray in different ways and places. The only requirement is that you open your heart to the Holy Spirit. Maybe you could take the opportunity to try something different. This could be as simple as adding the words "Come Holy Spirit," to your prayers or prayerfully decorating a stone to place in the collection outside church. You can remind yourself to pray for 5 friends by making a knotted wrist cord and wearing it or carrying it with you, during this time or you can stand with them before Jesus by reflecting and placing your footprints in front of the Cross in church. You can pray as you walk around the community, for local needs as well as for the needs of others far away. One thing we have learnt during the pandemic is how interlinked and closely connected we are to other parts of the globe.

I started off today comparing our own time of waiting, with that of the disciples. Like them we are in a time of transition. Our world seems very different to the one we knew 18 months ago. We are told we need to wait for the new normal, but we don't really know what that will look like.

I would like to suggest that the disciples were waiting for a new normal too. I am not saying that the extraordinary events of Pentecost were normal. On that day, the world changed in ways which were unimaginable and incomprehensible. But that changed world is the one we live in. It may be amazing and awe inspiring, but it is also normal. Something we should recognise and give thanks for and never take for granted. We can take comfort knowing that this "normal" is part of God's eternal plan. That whatever else may change, the Holy Spirit will be with us to love, protect and guide us.

In the Bible there are two accounts of how God gives us the Holy Spirit. There is the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which we will celebrate next week. Then in John's gospel, the account I mentioned earlier when the disciples were in the locked room. Jesus breathes on them and gives them the Spirit. As we pray, I invite you to hold onto a picture of Jesus coming to each of us and breathing his life and goodness into us. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says. "My spirit of peace."

Let us pray

Overflowing God, breathe the spirit of Jesus into us and into all those who long for peace, especially those who have drifted from your way, got stuck in their faith, or who have not yet found a way to believe. You believe in them. Renew them by your Spirit. And today may your church be filled with Joy.

Amen

Kathy Kilgour 16 May 2021