

Waiting in the Upper Room

Seventh Sunday of Easter (A)

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On this Sunday, in our journey from the empty tomb to the Pentecost experience, we are in a sort of unusual position. Last Thursday, on Ascension Day, we remembered Jesus passing from earth to heaven and taking up his Throne. Next Sunday, Pentecost, the Spirit comes - that other comforter sent to equip and inspire, and here we find ourselves in the middle.

Think for a moment about the disciples and their position. Already they had thought that they had lost Jesus once, only to find him still alive and still with them and now, as he departed, the feelings of loss, sadness, and uncertainty would be overwhelming.

- Wait in the city, he said,
- you will receive power, he said,
- you will be my witnesses, he said,

but what did that mean????

Nothing could prepare them for what it was that would come. The Spirit would change them, and they could achieve the seemingly impossible task that Jesus had set them. But it is the uncertainty that I would like to focus on.

I want to say that this time, between Ascension and Pentecost, is very like the times we face this day as the church. We are in that period of uncertainty and anticipation. Our focus is both on the past because of its certainty and on the future with its promise of something new because only something new will be able to cope with the unique challenges that are now before us. And it is not only in the church that this is a problem - Life in toto, especially with the current economic and political instability, that we do not know what will ultimately happen.

Now we must deal with life uncertainties, but I want to leave them for another time and face the spiritual uncertainty today.

In some ways, I could not choose a worse time to be a Priest. For not only are there the ever-increasing complexities of the world that make the job challenging, but the pressures to take on and assess new ideas and to find the way forward with them, and the pressures of finance in a declining population and economic situation. Perhaps there is no worse time to be in a congregation as well, as there are ever-increasing demands of commitment being placed upon the people of God. But it is not only me who has them; we share them as a parish council and a congregation.

We have a choice. Now it would be easy to crawl back into a cocoon and try to keep things as they were. Or, we can prepare ourselves for what God has to offer us in the future (whatever it may be). Although we might celebrate the past (and we have a lot to celebrate), our destination is the future, and what that means is not certain. But we were never promised certainty, only the companionship of a God who walks beside us, a companion on the way.

So how will we get to this unknown future? We can bemoan it, we can fear it, or we can embrace it. We can seek out what God wants us to do, to be, and seek from him what we lack to do his will. To bring our friends and our neighbours and our families to Jesus. We can tell God that he has made a mistake, we have no money, and our churches are in the wrong place or are too small, our boundaries should be different, or everyone is busy. There is no time, or we can see these as the challenges God has given us for this future.

And the clue is in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples did not form a committee or a commission; they did not hold a synod or engage in training programmes; they did not run a stewardship campaign or an alpha course. But what they did was that they did pray. They gathered in prayer - one hundred and twenty of them devoting themselves to prayer. And it was in this way that they were prepared for the task that God had given them to do.

I am excited about the possibilities that the future holds for us as God's people. About the future that we face together. But as I engage the Scriptures, I understand that the only way we can get there and embrace it is to begin on our knees. As the Apostles and others gathered in the upper room, we need to refocus back on God and become people who pray.

This is not about prayer as we generally see it – presenting God with a shopping list of desires, needs and concerns. It is about taking ourselves into God's presence and inviting him to grant us a glimpse of his vision for our world. As we begin in prayer, we open ourselves up to be used by God and to achieve his purposes, and we prepare for a personal Pentecost and the equipping for the challenge ahead. Nothing is impossible for God, and as we work in harmony with him, Nothing is impossible for us.

So let us set our sights on the future, using our past as a springboard into it and let us begin in the way of the apostles on our knees. Let us pray...

Lord Jesus, when your disciples saw you leave, they were tempted to continue watching after you, but your angels sent them off into the world. Help us pray together to seek the possibilities that our future holds and, in prayer, prepare ourselves for the equipping and inspiration of your Spirit. And grant us the privilege of doing your will.

AMEN