

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 2nd June 2019 10am

Ascension Day

Revd Val Reid

Acts 1: 1-14

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

‘This’, he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’

He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Sermon

Thursday this week was Ascension Day.

That slightly odd event between Easter and Pentecost.

Always so difficult to prach on.

Because we don’t really believe in a literal ascension, do we?

So what is it about?

This period between Ascension and Pentecost is also the period of ‘Thy Kingdom Come’.

‘Thy Kingdom Come’ is a global prayer movement which began in 2016

It invites Christians around the world to deepen their personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

To pray for God’s spirit to work in the lives of those they know.

To come to realise that every aspect of their lives is the stuff of prayer.

Why now?

Why these eleven days between Ascension and Pentecost?

Well, I think our lectionary reading this morning invites us to reflect on what it means to be people of prayer.

It’s an antidote to our usual way of responding to things.

Here we have a group of disciples who have been faced with a roller-coaster few weeks.

Their Lord and Leader has been crucified.

It seems as though all their hopes are at an end.

And then, suddenly, miraculously, against all the odds, he is back.

Luke tells us that he was with them for forty days.

Nearly six weeks.
A long time.
Enough time for them to get comfortable again.
To think that everything is OK.
Everything is as it was, and as it should be.

And they ask Jesus *'Is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?'*
The Messiah has come.
Death has not had the last word.
Something amazing is bound to happen.
Their vision will be realised at last.
Their hopes vindicated.

But the answer – as so often – is not what they expected.
It is not for you to know the times.
I can't offer you the instant solutions you still long for.
I can't provide a Gantt chart of the evangelisation programme.

And it was at this moment that, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Once again they are on their own.
Once again they take the path back to Jerusalem, and head for that upper room.
Just as they did after the crucifixion.
Their comfort zone.

But this time they are not just locking themselves away from reality.
This time they are doing what they have been told.

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

So that's what they are doing.
They are waiting.
The opposite of our quick fix culture, when a google search will provide an instant solution for any question.
Where Amazon Prime will deliver your book the very next day.
Where waiting for anything seems so old-fashioned.
Where getting things done is affirmed.
Where not working or not doing is somehow looked down on.

Jesus makes it clear that his followers, his church, are not a quick fix community.
Wait.
The hardest thing.
Wait for something that you don't really understand.
Wait for an outcome that you can't really envisage.
Wait for consequences that cannot be mapped, or planned for, or controlled.
Don't rush into anything.
Wait for God's timing.

And stay where you are.

Don't leave Jerusalem.
Don't go rushing off looking for a better place.
Don't think that the answer lies somewhere else.
Don't be like those gyrovagues that Benedict identifies in his rule.
Those wandering monks who think that the grass is always greener.
Who are always looking for the perfect community somewhere else.

Stay here.
With the people you have been given.
Luke lists the names of the disciples.

Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas son of James.

Real people.
Named people.
Each individual is important.
Eleven disciples.
Because one, the other Judas, has betrayed them.
A damaged community, a reduced community, but a real community.

So we are tasked with waiting.
Waiting here, where we are.
Waiting with our community.
Each individual known and valued.
Waiting is a community project.
Waiting together is an act of solidarity with each other and with God.

And while you are waiting, you need to be praying.

*You will receive power, Jesus tells them, when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.
And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

It's easy to imagine that the disciples might start producing a mission plan.
Right – who will take Judea?
Who's going to Samaria?
We need a travel schedule, an action plan, some smart targets.

The Book of Acts is a bit like a Boys' Own Annual.
It's full of adventures, of journeys, of miraculous healings and amazing escapes from prison and shipwreck and snakebites.
Reading it, it's tempting to imagine that being church is about doing stuff.
Going places.
But it begins with the eleven disciples, and Mary, and Jesus' brothers, sitting quietly in an upper room.
And *constantly devoting themselves to prayer.*

Before they can get stuck into the action, they need to be prepared.
So that forty days with the risen Lord is significant.

Forty days.

The time that Moses was on Mount Sinai with Yahweh before he was given the ten commandments.

The time that Jesus was in the wilderness wrestling with his demons.

Forty days is a symbolic time during which God prepares and instructs people for the task they have ahead.

And then this time of waiting.

Waiting without their leader.

A time not of giving up.

Or of distracting themselves with tasks to do.

A time of prayer.

We are a church, a circuit, which loves doing things.

We are rightly proud of our housing and community services projects, our Wednesday Club, our Winter Night Shelter.

We are people who feel comfortable when we have a task to do.

My experience is that we are less comfortable with waiting.

With praying.

With making space to explore our relationship with God.

So I invite you to take the rest of this week before Pentecost to engage with the challenges of 'Thy Kingdom Come'.

To pray for God's spirit to work in the lives of those you know.

Who needs to be conscious of the presence of God this week?

Pray for them.

To make time and space to be present to God yourself.

To come to realise that every aspect of your life is the stuff of prayer.

It's 10.14am.

Set your alarm for 10.14am tomorrow.

When it goes off, stop.

Pause for a moment.

What are you doing here? Now?

In what way is it the stuff of prayer?

It is, if you make it so.

Offer what you are doing this time tomorrow to God.

Who knows what unexpected movement of the Spirit might surprise us, as it surprised the disciples two thousand years ago?

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/11217/thy-kingdom-come-methodist-novena-2019.pdf>