

The Sunday after Ascension Day, 12 May 2024, Year B
Acts 1.15-17, 21-end, Psalm 1, 1 John 5.9-13, John 17.6-19

The Christian year with which we are more or less familiar makes space for waiting. One such occasion is on Holy Saturday. The day sandwiched between Good Friday and Easter Day. On Holy Saturday churches the world over are busy getting ready for their celebrations on Easter Day. These celebrations begin with the Easter Fire and Procession, and continue with the Singing of the Easter hymn (the Exsultet), the vigil readings, the reading of John Chrysostom's enduring Easter sermon, the processional with litany to the baptismal font for the affirming of baptismal vows, concluding with the first celebration of Holy Communion...

Before Easter Day we are busy in our homes with preparations to celebrate Easter with family and often visitors on Easter Day. There are times of the year when families gather. These are especially Easter and Christmas, as well as summer. Easter and Christmas are given, as is the Christian year, to help us as Christians to remind ourselves of who we are as Christians. But the busyness prior to Easter Day means that the waiting, the Sabbath rest, is pushed aside. During the first lockdown we observed Holy Saturday on Zoom and caught something of the mood of that day, which is characterised by a haunting silence. "And a silence came over the whole earth". It is the day on which creation was hushed before the affront of her creator being sentenced to death, humiliated and killed by human hands, Christ in whom God was pleased to dwell, crucified by Roman soldiers on order of Pilate the Roman at the instigation of the Sanhedrin, the Hebrew leaders in Jerusalem.

Again, on the Sunday after Ascension Day, we find ourselves in a place of waiting. Christ has withdrawn from the disciples and has been taken up. He is now with the Father. And now with the disciples we wait. We wait for what happens next. According to Luke the disciples and their companions wait for the power from on high to come upon them. They do to know yet what this means, but obedient to his word they wait.

Waiting is something one senses has less and less value. Everything must be anticipated. Instant gratification the name of the game. There is a useful German saying, "Man muß die Feste feiern wie sie fallen." Celebrate occasions when they occur. Don't anticipate them. Don't postpone them. Don't let either convenience or expedience always be your guides. And be aware instant gratification very often does not serve us well... Christians at their best are willing to be trained in learning to wait. It is one element amongst many that belong to their training as athletes borrowing form St Paul's metaphor for the discipline of Christian endeavour. Should we be persuaded to take this aspect of Christian training seriously it will impact on how we come to shape our lives both individually and

corporately affecting how we interact. Ours won't be an impatient, "I want it! And I want it now!" But rather a quiet acknowledgement of in God's good time... Mindful there is a time for every matter under heaven, which will include the virtue of waiting you may remember these words from Scripture which John, Paul and Mary sang clearly in 1961 (composer Pete Seeger),

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence,
and a time to speak; a time to love,
and a time to hate; a time for war,
and a time for peace.

But as they wait the disciples with their companions are not idle. Waiting is not doing nothing - I believe that is called sloth better known as laziness. The disciples get on with living, because they have a future and that future is in Christ, as they abide in Christ and he in them, in the Christ who abides in the Father and is close to the Father's heart, as we explored once again last Sunday.

I note with reference to today's reading from Acts in their encounters with the Risen Christ over forty days they have attended quite a number of what might be called Bible classes, instruction in faith. Think about this brothers and sisters in Christ the disciples and their companions, who have they say of themselves gave up everything to follow still did not understand. Right to the end they need instruction... Jesus replies to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus saying,

'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

If this is the case for the disciples how much more must this be the case for each one of us. A lot of what we believe is not based in Scripture, but in what we think might be in Scripture in hopes that we might find it there. Extrapolating from the above quote I would point to the main locus of unbelief as diagnosed by Jesus in Luke. We in the West see the locus of unbelief in the head, but Jesus with his Mediterranean and Semitic background locates it in the heart, as in and “how slow of heart to believe” you are. This reminds me of phrase from a prayer I say regularly. It is prayer attributed to St Boniface, apostle to the Germans. “May we love the things you love and serve you with our daily lives.” What God loves is our guide and our measure, if that but were the case.

And if this is the case that is more the heart than the head that causes our unbelief, how can we love God? As captured in first letter of John one of scriptural companions throughout this Eastertide, “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” Often the word in English translated here is do not love a brother or sister is hate.

Sadly, there are some who very quickly and without pause for thought, without waiting, will impute or accuse someone of hating this or that person, or this or that person on the grounds that a person disagrees with them. Disagreement on matters that affect us does not mean one hates another person. This short circuiting should be both avoided and challenged.

But I digress, ...

Again and again the disciples have been shown through Scripture that all that they have experienced was foretold in the Scriptures. Now with their minds illumined and their unbelief addressed they are ready to go forward “remembering all that Jesus said”. Peter in his speech, (you may remember that we explored the speeches in Acts in the autumn), touches on how the Scriptures had to be fulfilled. They have become convinced that Jesus’ interpretation of the Scriptures is one correct and that he is the One foretold.

The first thing they do, as they wait, as the telling goes in Luke is to find someone who can take the place of Judas. I love this passage, because it shows the disciples taking responsibility for how to go forward and on what grounds. The criteria they establish is twofold. The person who will replace Judas needs to be someone who has been with them from the start actually from the baptism of John onwards and who is also with them, not apart from them, a witness to Christ’s resurrection. And they do this by consensus. They are keeping the criteria tight for good reasons. These are those who are not only to guard the deposit of faith, but are also to make to make it known. As Jesus has guarded and

protected those with whom he has been as in today's gospel, so we too are to guard and protect that we may be one as Jesus and the Father are one and that Christ's joy may be completed in us, which is to know the Father, God. Our joy is to be with Christ close to the Father's heart.

From the companions they choose two Joseph called Barsabbas, also known as Justus and Matthias. Then they prayed. "Lord, You know everyone's heart! Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship... And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles." (Acts 1.20b-26)

Looking to the Christian year as we wait for and look forward to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit let us not be idle, but rather earnestly in this time of waiting pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be ours this Whit Sunday, Pentecost Sunday to revive us, to encourage us and to enliven us throughout the coming year...