

Waiting for God - Getting ready for Pentecost

Today we have two very similar passages that are both written by Luke; one at the end of his Gospel and the other at the beginning of his account of the Acts of the Apostles. They are both about his Ascension. Jesus has been with his disciples for about 3 years, has been Crucified and risen, has spent another 40 days teaching them and explaining the scriptures to them that had been fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. Now he was leaving them and his last instruction is that they wait in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high, until they had been baptized with the promised Holy Spirit.

Ascension Day was last Thursday and this Sunday we are in that 10 day period of waiting until the Spirit came at Pentecost.

What a roller coaster ride his disciples and followers had been on. And now they were told to wait for the next part of the ride, what would happen when they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. They were in the hiatus, Jesus was no longer with them and His Spirit that he had promised them, was also not yet with them. They were waiting for what God would do next . In the time in between.

In some ways perhaps we are in the same situation now. We are waiting for God to do something. Our gatherings are small. The world around us is indifferent at best to what we are about here, uninterested or hostile to our faith, to Jesus. We are in many ways powerless to do much about that and waiting to see God do something with us too.

What did those first followers of Jesus experience when they were empowered. When we think of the day of Pentecost we may well think of the amazing outburst of many other languages, of supernatural tongues but actually the most amazing event of that day was that more than 3000 were added to their number, that so many began to follow Jesus too due to the witness given that day. And that is what both accounts of the ascension day instructions from Jesus point to as well – that they would be empowered to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and all the way to New Zealand at the ends of the earth.

That is what we are to wait for, the empowerment to witness to Jesus, to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name. The whole of the book of Acts shows what happens when God does empower his people with his Spirit to witness to him.

But we are waiting. And during the 10 days the followers of Jesus at that time were waiting. What did waiting mean for them? What were they doing during those ten days? Can you recall what the passage and the accounts at the beginning of Acts said?

- continually in the Temple praising God – They had so much to praise him for and putting God centre in our waiting is essential. We are waiting for him, seeking his glory not our own.
- Staying in the upper room, in Jerusalem, constantly in prayer. Prayer is a big part of waiting. Seeking God and orientating ourselves to his ways and purposes in our inmost beings, in the depths of our hearts.
- Chose a replacement to Judas so that they would witness as twelve apostles, practically addressing the circumstances they were in. To begin their witness to the Jewish people in Jerusalem and Judea they were going to need twelve apostles. We might not think this way today but to present God's new out pouring of grace to the shattered remnant of Israel they needed twelve men. Jesus had been working towards this. However, since Judas was no longer with them they needed a substitute so Peter steps up as leader and sets the agenda among the 120 or so people there to select a suitably qualified person to replace Judas as Apostle number 12. During the waiting time there was still work to be done to prepare for their future witness.

So they were both doing practical things and involved in worship and prayer. That is something we are about, week by week too as we wait for what God will do among and through us.

But I'd like to go deeper into what those 10 days of waiting were about. Perhaps we have a tendency to think that as we run around doing practical things, praying and especially doing all that is involved in worship that we just have to wait for God to do the rest, that waiting apart from that is pretty passive. I think as we go deeper we will find that waiting is more than that.

A clue is found in the first sentence of the account of the events of Pentecost –

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

Being all together – what did that involve? How did they get to be 'all together'? What enabled these 120 people to be in unity, and the 12 Apostles to be standing together as Peter gave his first sermon as their spokesman. Remember even during the time of Jesus resurrection appearances at the end of Matthew's gospel we are told

Matt. 28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

They weren't together then so what happened?

Let's think about what may have been happening during those 10 days. To begin with they were mostly staying in one place – the upper room, though they obviously weren't hiding away now and were coming and going to the Temple. What happens when people are together for more than a few days? I think of some of the church and Christian camps I have been to. When you spend time with people up close after a while some of the issues you have with each other begin to become more obvious. Have any of you experienced this?

What do you think the Disciples and women, his family members and other followers who were with them were doing then? I've got a list here but I'd like to hear what you come up with first.

- they worked through more of their understanding of what Jesus was about, got their basic story sorted, worked out what they had to say to really truthfully witness to what Jesus was about. We know this was still necessary as even at the time of the ascension they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' ⁷ He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ 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.' (Acts 1:6-8)
- they processed their feelings about Judas – one of their number for 3 years. What must they have felt about what he did? It wasn't just the practicality of replacing him that they had to deal with.
- They processed the issue of Peter's leadership to the point where they could stand with him as he preached on Pentecost. Peter had always been their apparent leader and had been given that role again by Jesus along with his forgiveness after the resurrection. But he was the one who had denied Jesus three times. And he had responded with violence to those who came to arrest Jesus. Was he a credible leader with those sorts of failings? Just think how much reconciliation and healing needed to be worked through for all to accept his leadership and spokesperson role!
- The 12 who had been with him in the garden of Gethsemane had fallen asleep rather than praying. Might the others say, "What sort of spiritual credential was that, you guys!" That had to be worked through.
- What about Thomas? He had disbelieved the joint witness of the others to say he would only believe what he could see and touch for himself. Why did you not believe us? What is your estimation of us? Will you believe us next time, brother Thomas?
- James and John – the sons of Zebedee – Through their mother they had tried to get senior postings in the Kingdom to come, to sit on Jesus left and right hand in power. Ambitious climbers are not usually good team players. Apart from their misunderstanding of what the Kingdom was about

anyway, especially what power and status was about in God's kingdom, relationally something had to be sorted out there too.

- Then there was how the disciples treated the women who had been the first witnesses to the resurrection. The male disciples had dismissed them as hysterical, as bringing an idle tale, as speaking nonsense! All the way through Jesus' ministry he had been relating to women in a way that was different from the surrounding culture. Jesus had been treating them with respect, uniquely revealing his identity to a Samaritan woman, commending the faith of a Syrophenecian woman, expecting women like Mary to be listening to his teaching as avidly as men even when there was housework to do, etc. Jesus had radically changed their status in his group of followers and they even had the privilege of being the first to discover the empty tomb, of being the first to hear the announcement of his resurrection, and Mary Magdalene of being the first to meet the risen Lord. And yet the male disciples didn't believe their testimony. I think there was a great deal to be sorted out here. Obviously it did get sorted because later on in the early church described in Acts women were involved as church leaders in several roles.
- We are told that Jesus' mother and brothers were among the 120. Do you remember what they had done at one time? They had tried to see Jesus and extract him from the crowd he was ministering with and distract him from his mission. They had something to work through with Jesus and other followers there.
- I wonder if any of the parents of the children Jesus had welcomed were there. The disciples had tried to stop them bringing their children to Jesus. A bit of reconciliation needed.
- The group there was very diverse, not just apostles, but also family members of Jesus, women who were part of the group who followed Jesus on the road and who provided for the travelling group, and then likely people like the Pharisee, Nicodemus who had been a member of the Jerusalem ruling council and also involved in helping Joseph of Arimathea with the burial. This diversity may have been something that they really had to work through to be all united together on the day of Pentecost.

That's an enormous stack of issues to be sorted out in the life of the koinonia-fellowship of those believers and that's only the issues we know about. Perhaps some of them had been sorted earlier but I expect those ten days were still full of much talk, reconciliation and repair of relationships as well as the prayer and praise for God's forgiveness and wholeness.

None of that could be achieved without the time spent living together, talking, hanging out in that upper room together. That waiting on God was probably quite intense.

Application

So back to us as we wait on God to bring us to be ready for what he wants to do among and through us, for what he will do to enable us to be his witnesses in Dunedin in 2022, to see him add new disciples to our number. Francis and I believe that we too need to spend that time together, to get to know each other and to be able to share our lives deeply enough that we can work through any issues we might have in being united in our diversity, in relating as sisters and brothers in Christ. We need to work on our koinonia-fellowship as we wait for God to empower us for witness in his world.

Now I don't think we can spend 10 days intensive all together in one place. So what can we do to be together. Let's begin by thinking about what we do in our lives at present. How do we spend our time – the 24 hours a day that we all have?

- sleeping
- daily household and personal tasks
- shopping
- visiting/ time with friends or those we help
- reading/recreation/exercise

- eating

What of these things that fill our lives can we all do together? We all have to eat and that is something we can do with others. Jesus met with people all the time but a great deal of his meeting was around food. A meal can lubricate a social setting and enable conversation in a natural way. It doesn't have to be just about fuel for the next activity.

Francis and I have started to consult with Vestry about preparing a way for us to spend that valuable time together around a table, listening to each other, sharing our lives with each other, praying and learning how to deeply reconcile to each other as well as to God. We pray that through this sort of active waiting, alongside our prayer and praise, we may grow in unity to be ready for God to empower us to be his witnesses in the world we live in.