

## Anticipation and uncertainty

A sermon prepared by The Ven Jonathan Chaffey, Archdeacon of Oxford, for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, 16 May 2021 and preached in St Peter's Wolvercote

Ref: Acts 15-17, 21-16; John 17.6-19

**Anticipation yet uncertainty.** It's difficult to imagine what it was like for the disciples in the days between the Ascension of Jesus and Pentecost. St Luke tells us that they all stayed together in an upper room, possibly the very room where they had celebrated the Passover meal with Jesus – and they prayed constantly.

It's hardly surprising if they struggled in this 'in between' period. At a basic level we all know that change can be difficult. It takes time to adjust, to make transitions – from primary to secondary school, to college, a new job, a new home, relationship commitments, parenthood, different stages of life: these can carry lots of hope and expectation yet also uncertainty, anxiety and even fear.

How much more the disciples: they had been on a unique journey, at the heart of God's salvation work: three years of accompanying Jesus in his ministry and then the trauma and tragedy of Holy Week, followed by the astonishing transformation of Easter Sunday. They knew the risen Lord! And now he'd gone – yes, into heaven, but he'd gone – and they were told to wait: he would come back – but when? And they were to expect the Holy Spirit first: but how and what would it mean, for them to tell of Jesus to the ends of the earth = an unprecedented calling. All told, they must have been processing so much of great significance and in such a short space of time!

**Anticipation yet uncertainty - I wonder how you cope with change?** And how are you at waiting? I guess as **children** we are pretty immediate in our requests: "*Will you come and say goodnight? Will you help me with my homework, play a game, buy me an ice cream and so forth?*" Most **adults** learn a little patience, but waiting can be very hard: "*Will he/she say yes? When will I get a job /pass the test/hear the results? How will my problems be resolved?*" And as **Christians**, we look further afield, with longing for God's healing & renewal – amongst those most vulnerable within the pandemic, from youngsters struggling with mental health issues to the almost unimaginable scale of loss in India, from the poor caught up in conflict in Israel and Palestine, the Yemen, Ethiopia, to the millions in servitude, domestically or in the workplace, trafficked & abused – with the Psalmist we cry, "How long, O Lord?!" Whatever our circumstances, our scriptures today give us a firm foundation on which to build hope and trust. A few elements stand out in our readings:

**First, the disciples stayed together.** In the last few years I've grown in my appreciation of the church – I guess as a chaplain in the Armed Forces, organisationally slightly distanced from the wider church and at times physically isolated, I'd been fairly self-contained in spiritual terms. Now I've re-learned that the basic unit of Christianity is the community, not the individual. We need each other – and I hope that a return to in-person worship has rekindled your own appreciation of your fellow Christians.

**Secondly, they prayed** – constantly. You can't beat it. Just speaking with God and listening to him. The diocesan vision is that we should be contemplative, compassionate and courageous – in other words, 'Christ-like for the sake of God's world'. Perhaps it's best to begin by realising that we do not first contemplate God, he contemplates us – rather like a parent with a newborn child, just gazing at each other.

**Thirdly**, as Jesus prayed to his Father in our Gospel reading, "*I have given them your Word; sanctify them by the truth – your word is truth*". In my Bible that I would take on military deployments, my wife inscribed a quotation from M Theresa: "*Know the Word of God, Love...Live...Give...and the word of God will make you holy*". Take this seriously – as the 1662 BCP puts it, '*read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures!*'

Prayer, the Bible and each other are key ingredients in helping us retain our hope in times of change. There is a **4th element** mentioned in our readings, one which I am excited that you have already fulfilled: choosing another leader. Just as the disciples prayed earnestly and discerned wisely for a successor to Judas, so you have the lovely Kate coming to Wolvercote & Wytham in late Summer. It was profoundly moving to be part of that process and a real joy to come confidently to such a decision. I want to thank your wardens, church officers and assistant clergy in coping with a church vacancy in very difficult circumstances.

**But ultimately the surest foundation for trust in the future is Jesus himself.** John wrote, '*God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does*

*not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.'* In our own lives, as we re-gather both in church and as we look to witness to the ends of the Wolvercote & Wytham, as we observe the wider world, let us trust in his promise to be with us always as the risen, ascended Messiah and to know the power of his Holy Spirit at work among us.