

Lord, take my words and speak through them, take our thoughts and think through them, take our hearts & set them on fire with love for you through the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

This past year has been a strange one for us all and like it or not we have had to learn how to wait. Waiting for infection rates to go down, waiting for lockdowns to be lifted, waiting to hear if loved ones are recovering, waiting for vaccines, waiting to see the impact of a new strain of the virus, waiting to see if furlough would be extended, waiting for pubs and restaurants to be opened, waiting to be able to see our loved ones, waiting to be able to hug our friends, waiting to know how exam results will be calculated, waiting to all be reunited in church and to be able to sing again. I am sure if you are like me, at times that waiting has been very hard and I know I have had to make a conscious effort to pray and to ask God to help me to learn to wait well. There is still a feeling of being in an 'in between space' where what we knew is no more, but what is yet to come is still uncertain and it is in this vacuum that we find ourselves waiting.

Today's reading from Acts, which comes straight after Jesus has ascended into Heaven to be with his father, finds the disciples waiting in the Upper room in Jerusalem as they have been promised the gift of the Holy Spirit, which will give them the power they need to fulfil their commission to be Christ's witnesses throughout Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. They too were in an 'in between space', knowing that 'what was' had ended with Jesus ascension, but the 'what next' hadn't yet come. It was a place of waiting, of not knowing, a place of transition.

These periods of transition, which we all experience at different times in our lives are often described as liminal spaces, liminal coming from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold. As we know, a threshold is a door or a gap between two spaces. So liminal spaces are where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown, due to a myriad of reasons including the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, an engagement, the birth of a baby, a health diagnosis, retirement, life taking an unexpected turn or this year our personal experiences of the pandemic for example. Although these times can be unsettling, they are spaces where transformation can take place if we learn to wait, to pray and to allow ourselves to be formed by the Holy Spirit into something new.

Whilst the disciples are waiting in this liminal space, we see Peter taking control, chairing the first ever PCC meeting and addressing what I am sure was the elephant in the room – Judas. I wonder if he had prepared his speech, or whether it was spontaneous, or coming out of prayer allowing God to speak through him. However it was, he explained how the betrayal of Judas had been foretold in the psalms and that what was prophesied had now come true, something that Jesus also referred to in our gospel reading. He reminded the others that Judas had shared in the work that they as disciples had been commissioned to do and had been their friend and companion. I am sure that despite what he had done they missed him and mourned his death, and probably like us didn't understand how his tragic death was held as Tom Wright puts it 'within the strange, dark overarching purpose of God.' Peter in particular must have been aware that he too had betrayed Jesus but had had the opportunity to have his relationship with Jesus restored. We don't know whether Judas also had his relationship restored, but I must admit I love the response given by a nine year old to a question about Holy Saturday, another liminal space. When asked, "What did Jesus do on Holy Saturday?" he replied, "He went and searched the deepest, darkest, coldest corners of hell, looking for his friend Judas..."

Having spoken into the unspoken situation, Peter then gets down to the main item of the agenda, electing a new disciple. The 120 people in the room understood that Jesus purpose was to renew and restore God's people Israel, and therefore the whole world, and that the disciples were representative of the 12 tribes of Israel, but with only 11 of them the symbolism was lost.

The person specification for the job is made very clear in verses 21 and 22, it needed to be someone who had been with them for the past three years, starting from Jesus baptism by John through to his ascension. Essential to this was having been an eye witness to the resurrection, which immediately shows us that Luke

as the writer of Acts puts the resurrection at the centre of the embryonic church as it makes them heralds of God's new creation rather than just another sect. Whoever was elected had the job, along with the other disciples of continuing Jesus' work in furthering the kingdom. Two suitable candidates were shortlisted, Joseph, who was called Barsabbas, with the surname Justus, and Matthias. Those present then, didn't interview them but rather prayed and asked God to show them who he had chosen as his appointed one and the lot fell to Matthias. For him the waiting had resulted in election, for Joseph Barsabbas – we are not told what happened to him, although it is said that he went on to become a bishop and is now venerated as a saint.

Following the election, the disciples and the others, including Matthias went back to waiting and praying. They prayed and they waited, waiting in that liminal space for the Spirit to come, preparing themselves for the work for which they had been commissioned.

In our gospel reading, we find Jesus in a liminal place, waiting and praying. He has shared the last supper with his disciples and gone out to the Garden of Gethsemane to await Judas' betrayal. In verse 4 of chapter 17 we read that Jesus knows his work on Earth is completed, he has done what he came to earth to do, glorifying God and now must die in order to complete the work of reconciling the world to God, ushering in the age that is to come – the beginnings of the new kingdom, opening up the way for eternal life for all. He prays for his disciples, the ones who have journeyed with him, who have believed and become one with him and the father. He prays for their protection and that they will be sanctified, marked out as different, distinctive and empowered to spread the good news of all that Jesus has done, united as one as He and the Father are one.

As we read his prayer, we are reminded that because we are believers, disciples, we too are being prayed for. How exciting is that – in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed for you and me. He prayed for our protection. He prayed for our salvation. He prayed that we would be empowered to overcome the dangers and difficulties of living in this world, whilst being citizens of the new kingdom. He prayed that we would be made holy and begin to experience life in all its fulness, eternal life, becoming the people he intended us to be, and that filled with joy and love we would be sent out into the world to tell others the gospel story that they might believe and in so doing help to grow His kingdom.

Our lives, as a result of the resurrection, are lived in the liminal place of now and not yet in regard to eternal life, and in that place, we have a responsibility to help the kingdom break through more and more in our own lives and in the lives of others. But we do not do it alone because we too were promised the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, how does all this apply to us this week, as the country opens up more tomorrow, beginning to come out of a time of waiting. Well, we find ourselves as the church once again in the liminal space between ascension and Pentecost, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The challenge to us is that as we wait, will we, as the disciples did in the Upper Room, commit to pray, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done' allowing God to transform us, so that we are ready to go into whatever is next for each one of us as individuals and as a Church witnessing to the resurrection.

Dare we today ask God how he wants to use us to transform, revive and heal society as we come out of the pandemic, working for peace, truth and justice? Are we prepared to commit ourselves to praying that God's values will be seen more today than yesterday, and more again tomorrow than today in our lives? Are we, as a church, brave enough to ask God to create, in the words of Archbishop Stephen Cottrell a more Jesus shaped church post-pandemic? Can we commit to joining morning or evening prayer at least one day this week either at St Mary's or via the Church of England podcast or to arrange to meet with friends to pray together or to carve out some time each day this week to spend alone with God, talking and listening to him about what we have been challenged by today?

It is my prayer that we will all wait well in the liminal space this week, so that we are ready for the coming spirit, because we know she is on her way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen