

SERMON – 24 MAY 2020 - Acts 1.6-14, John 17.1-11

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

So on what we know as Ascension Day – forty days after Easter – the disciples are together. By now they must be wondering what the future holds for them. They had had that roller coaster from Palm Sunday, through to the Passover, then watched – or ran away – when Jesus was nailed to the cross. That must be the end of it, because no one survives a Roman crucifixion, but somehow, three days later, they knew Jesus was alive.

He wasn't quite the human being they had lived and worked with for three years, he wasn't with them all the time, and they were realising that the future would be very different to the past. He'd been with them for three years, now he was alive, but what did that mean. How did they explain it to their families? I wonder what they felt, was Peter's wife giving her husband a hard time about whether he was going to get back to the fishing boat and earn some money? Perhaps I am being very unfair to Mrs Peter.

What does the future hold for them? What does the future hold for Israel? After all, Jesus was the Messiah, he was God's chosen one, surely he would be the one who drove the Romans out, renewed the religious life of their country. 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'

But Jesus, being Jesus, does not give them an exact answer. 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.' That can be so frustrating. We want God to sort it all out. Where is God in all this evil, why isn't God taking charge – how can God let it happen.

This is just where we are now. I want to know the times, I want to be told when I can go and see my kids, when I can have a train ride, when I can reopen our churches (and I'd better not suggest that that's my order of priority, train before church, though seeing the kids is top priority). I'm not sure who to trust, who to believe - like most of us I'm frightened and confused. I can understand exactly how those disciples felt.

Jesus doesn't give them the answer they want, he won't tell them how God has it all planned - Jesus does not say that God is not involved, he says that God gives us the power that we need, because he is using us to be his power in this world.

'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.' Don't expect God to do it all, God is giving you the power to be his instruments in this world. Do I have the faith to believe this?

Perhaps the disciples were excited – I will be God's witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to all the ends of the earth – wow, I've never been that far, this is going to be great. Tradition has it that Thomas, my favourite disciple, ended up in India - when Jesus said they'd be going to the ends of the earth, did he think "I'll head east?"

Perhaps, there was a bit of them which said, I don't want to go that far. I've never been further than the trip between Galilee and Jerusalem, I'm rather scared by it all, and Jesus isn't here to push me, encourage me, protect me.

The disciples were human - good days and bad days, excitement and fear, hope and despair. Jesus understands, and disciples are friends together. Jesus knows they will cope, and the Holy Spirit is on its way in an amazing way - but that's next week's story. "When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight." A bunch of very human disciples – standing there, gazing towards heaven, wondering what they will do now.

"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.'" Which is the polite way of saying, don't just stand there, there is work to be done.

"Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away." I went onto google to find out how far that was, and got so many different answers, ranging from ½ a mile to 24 minutes by bus. At that point, I decided the difference didn't really matter.

What matters is that they go back together to "the room upstairs" – I wonder if this is the same upper room where they had eaten the Passover meal seven weeks earlier. We are told the names of the eleven - 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. I love the way Luke names them, this is important – this is a faith based on human experience, on real people.

"All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." This is not

just eleven disciples, this is not all male, this is Mary and Jesus' brothers too, the family are involved.

These people were constantly devoting themselves to prayer - and that makes me pause. For them prayer was the basis of all this, they did not know what was happening, where they were going, what the future held - so they prayed. Can I honestly say my prayer life has been better in lockdown? Can we? (After all, prayer is not just something the Vicar should do). We are not churches where there are regular meetings for prayer, week in, week out. Two or three people meet on a Saturday morning in St Edmund's, a group meets once a month in Darley Abbey - that's it. When I have tried to suggest we should meet regularly, when I've tried to put time in the diary, it hasn't worked. We have PCCs that are much happier discussing the painting of a church ceiling or new choir stalls, than we are discussing meeting for prayer. I was told last week I should be producing a list of church members so we can pray for them individually - told this by someone who obviously wasn't listening when we did all that work about data protection, and getting people's permission to hold and share their data (I'm simply not allowed to produce a list of people we can pray for without asking each of them if it is acceptable for me to share their data).

I will produce some prayer suggestions - St Edmund's magazine hasn't gone to press yet, so we can get it in there, and I'll get it on the website too. Will you use it in your individual prayer, and when we start being allowed to meet, will you encourage me, encourage us, by strengthening our foundations.

There is work to be done – in this church, in our society, across our communities. There is a lot of work being done. We have seen how an evil act has released a huge amount of good – and we give thanks to God for so much. Christians, Muslims, men and women of all faiths and none. Ordinary people who have done amazing things.

We have also seen an increase in the number of hate crimes reported this last week – because humans are evil just as much as they are good. The evil increases when people are afraid – the power of the devil is very much at work.

To make a better world, we have got to do more than express outrage. To make a better world, we have got to do more than clap. To make a better world we need to talk, we need to challenge, we need to ask how we live globally – we need to face questions of inequality through the whole human race, and inequality and resources here at home.

I have to believe that the power of Christ, the power of God, is greater than the power of Satan – and we have to work in that belief. Christ is risen, Alleluia – and that must make a difference. Amen.