

Sermon for Sunday 21 May 2023 – The Seventh Sunday after Easter

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Acts 1.6–14; Psalm 68.1-10,32-35; 1 Peter 4.12-14; 5.6-11; John 17.1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please do be seated.

The British have an international reputation for patiently waiting in queues. An American commentator observed when Her Late Majesty was lying in state that the record breaking queues must have been one of the most exciting things to happen for the British in years, because they must have enjoyed standing in line so much. So I wonder what you're like at waiting. Airport queues, maybe? Or waiting on railway station platforms, perhaps? Or supermarket checkouts? I have to confess to you that I'm not very good at waiting. If I have to wait at temporary traffic lights, it's not a good experience, I'm not good at waiting. But waiting is important. And waiting is something that we read about in the Gospels. People have to wait.

So we're nearing the end of the Easter season, and next week we celebrate Whitsun or Pentecost. And from the beginning of Lent, way back on Ash Wednesday, the 22 February, until Pentecost on the 28 May, we've been following a pilgrimage through the ministry of Jesus. And at various stages of that journey, we have to wait for the next part to unfold. So during Lent, we wait for Easter. And we're reminded as we journey through Lent of the time that Jesus spent in the desert when he was waiting to begin his full time ministry.

And he spent the time of waiting, praying, praying that he might fulfil his ministry faithfully, resisting temptation, having the strength to persevere to the end. And then between Good Friday and Easter Day, we remember the crucifixion and we wait. We wait to celebrate the resurrection. I imagine the disciples, in those hours of waiting, to be going through a sort of fear filled trauma. It must have seemed like every minute lasted a week, as they anticipated the temple police banging on the door to arrest them. Each minute spent grieving for Jesus must have felt like an eternity. And maybe we too might know what it feels like, knowing in our lives what it's like to wait as we process a sense of loss or failure or fear or hopelessness. It takes time, doesn't it, for those emotions to go away. We have to wait as we digest and process them.

Then on Easter Day, we celebrate the joyful resurrection of Christ, his victory over the powers of darkness, the gift of resurrection, life. And the season of Easter lasts 50 days until Pentecost, and during those 50 days, we have to wait. We have to wait for the risen Christ to teach us and to prepare us for what comes next. The question being, how do we live again after all that's gone before?

And then now in the Christian calendar, we're in another period of waiting. Thursday was Ascension Day, the day we heard about in our readings this morning when Christ ascended to heaven and the disciples were left to wait for the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ten days of waiting until Pentecost that we celebrate next Sunday. In the first reading we heard this morning, the disciples were focused on Jesus.

They want to know if this is the time when he's going to restore the kingdom of Israel. A bit like impatient children on a long car journey. 'Are we nearly there yet?', they are kind of saying to Jesus. They believe that God had called Jesus to be the true king of Israel. They'd been called to be disciples in part of this renewal movement. They hadn't expected Jesus to die such a violent death. Now he's back from the dead, so surely now is the time when God is going to renew the kingdom.

But Jesus tells them the time and the hour are not theirs to know. God alone has set them by his authority. Jesus doesn't know what that time will be and he doesn't worry about what he's going to do next. The question is, what are the disciples going to do next? And the promise is that the disciples will receive the Holy Spirit and then they will be empowered to go out as his witnesses to the ends of the earth; and as Jesus ascends to heaven, he tells the disciples, 'Stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' In other words, wait. Don't do anything yet. Why not? You might imagine, after all they'd seen and heard, that they were desperate to rush out and get on with it. But instead Jesus tells them to wait. So why do they wait? And what's the benefit of waiting?

We live in an instant society now, don't we? So we're not very good at disciplining and waiting, but waiting is important. So firstly, I think the disciples were encouraged to wait, in order to have some self discipline and maturity. They had to spend ten days quietly in silence and in prayer; praying for understanding, praying for the grace to point towards Christ rather than to themselves; praying for the grace to make the story they were going to tell relevant to others, to draw people in, to share love, sacrificially. Racing off without preparation might have done more harm than good. And then secondly, Jesus doesn't want them to rush out in his name in their own strength. It is possible to suffer burnout in ministry or for an initial wave of enthusiasm to sort of subside away. Ministry is for the long haul. It can be tiring, it can be exhausting, it can be boring even at times. If we try to engage in ministry on our own strength alone, it's like there's a danger that we might give up, become tired. So the disciples have to wait for the Holy Spirit and only then will they be able to achieve their mission through all the trials and the tribulations of this world, all the challenges and difficulties that are going to lie ahead.

And then thirdly, there must have been an emotional reason for waiting. Jesus has gone. The light that they'd focused on for these past three years has left them, physically departed from them. So they must have had a huge sense of loss, mustn't they? A sense of absence from Jesus at this point. And so maybe some time of mourning was important in order to close one chapter before they were beginning another. So those waiting days between the Ascension Day and Pentecost were important days of waiting. And the Book of Acts tells us that during those days the disciples were constantly devoting themselves to prayer. With worship and prayer they wait in expectancy and anticipation for what will come next, each day being a little bit more ready for the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit. And St John's Gospel tells us of the promise of power from on high, the gift of God's Holy Spirit, who will be their comforter, their advocate, their helper. Comforter doesn't mean feel better. Comforter in the old use of the word is an encourager. It's like being prompted – now you will be comforted so that you get up and get on with it. That's what it means by the gift of the Holy Spirit as comforter. So the Spirit is going to be poured out in a new way, a way that will give the disciples authority and power to spread the message of Christ Jesus.

Spirit will equip them for all that they're going to do. It will sustain them, give them courage, assure them of the presence of Christ Jesus with them.

So we are now a few days into our own remembrance of those ten days of waiting and we have begun to engage together in the season of Thy Kingdom Come. Ten days of Christian prayer going on all around the world as we pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit to comfort us, to help us, to fill us with the spirit of Christ Jesus. So what are we hoping for when the Spirit comes? What are we praying for and anticipating? Well, in Matthew's Gospel, John the Baptist sends a message from prison to Jesus asking, are you the one who is to come or are we to expect somebody else? And Jesus replies, Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf here, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. So thinking of those things, how are we going to do that in Lavenham? But elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus commands, love one another as I have loved you, as I have washed your feet, so you must wash one another's feet.

And we see in the life and the example of Jesus that he enjoyed the company of all people for their sake, didn't he? He welcomed, he loved, he befriended all those whom he met, particularly those whom the world had rejected and cast aside. He lifted up the lonely, the unloved, and he cared for them with compassion and understanding. He blessed the young, the elderly, the sick, the bereaved, the lonely, alike.

So as we pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit, what are we praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do? It surely is to become more Christ-like in our ministry together, to make him known, and to ask ourselves, what does the Kingdom of Heaven look like in Lavenham compared to what it looked like in the time of Jesus? Who are the blind, the lame, those who have leprosy, the deaf? Who are the dead? Who needs to have the Good News proclaimed to them? What does that mean for us?

So as we pray for these next days, these next seven days to Pentecost, let us pray that God will make the answer to that question clear to us, so that when the Holy Spirit comes next week, we too are equipped, comforted, to arise and to build his kingdom where we are and for his sake. In Jesus name, Amen.