

Sermon for Sunday 28 May 2017 (Sunday after Ascension Day)

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April was quite a month. Firstly, it marked the eagerly-anticipated arrival of our new vicar, Jackie after an interregnum of some months. Then, of course we had a joyful celebration at Easter, long-awaited during the Lenten weeks of preparation. On a personal level, two of our grandchildren had birthdays in early April; these as you might imagine, were also long and eagerly awaited. Leo, reaching his 9th birthday, had the count-down marked out in weeks, days and, towards the end, hours and minutes. His life focussed very much on the “before” and “after” of the great day –especially as he knew he was having a new bike and the “after” bit was going to feature riding it during the school holidays. Jasmine, celebrating her 5th birthday measured her count-down in the number of sleeps beforehand—quite a good way of actually getting her to bed, it has to be said --- and her focus was on the day itself , which she knew would involve lots of presents and a bouncy castle party....”and you can come, too Granny and wear your party dress!”

For any big event in our lives, those that we know are going to happen, it seems to me that at least part of the enjoyment is in the waiting for it --- the planning, the preparation, the anticipation. There’s a process of counting-down and of looking-forward ; of leaving something behind as we embrace the future.

So on this Sunday, which falls between Ascension Day and Pentecost, that’s exactly where we find Jesus’ disciples. During their years with Jesus, they’d experienced many events that were totally unexpected, not at all anticipated. Others Jesus warned them about and tried to prepare them for – his death and his resurrection. But these were so far beyond their understanding, so frightening, that the only possible reaction was to ignore them, until they actually happened. Now, re-united with their resurrected Lord, believing in the impossible and beginning to understand finally his power and his glory, they witness his return to his Father... a scene wonderfully depicted in the stained glass of the window which faces us every time we enter this church.

Whether or not the disciples knew that the ascension was about to happen, they greeted it, not with fear or sorrow, but with joy and amazement. Perhaps the reason for this was that they knew beyond all doubt that they now had other things, other great events to wait for, to prepare for. Jesus had promised a helper, the Holy Spirit who would clothe them with power from on high. Filled with the Spirit, they had a job to do; “You will be my witnesses,” Jesus had told them. And finally, they believed that Jesus would come again to complete his kingdom on earth. “This Jesus will come again” was the message of the angels as Jesus disappeared into the clouds.

Filled then with hope and anticipation, the disciples returned to Jerusalem to wait and to prepare. They couldn't know how long the wait would be, either for the gift of the Spirit or for the coming of the kingdom in the final return of Jesus. In fact Jesus had told them, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set." They couldn't measure it in count-downs or in the number of sleeps, but they knew that this time they had to be ready. And so they prepared in the best way they knew – they worshipped, and they prayed. They met together to support each other and they were alert to any signs that the great events were about to occur. And of course, ten days after the ascension, the first of the promises was fulfilled as the Holy Spirit came among them in wind and fire.

The fact that the Christian family world-wide will celebrate that event next Sunday, at Pentecost, is because the disciples went on faithfully in the power of the Spirit to do what Jesus asked of them and to be his witnesses. While they counted –down to the promised heavenly coming of his kingdom (a ticking clock which lasted the rest of their lives) they continued to proclaim the coming of his kingdom on earth. The disciples handed on their task to the generations who came after, until now, of course, when the baton is placed firmly into our hands.

Yes, we have events to prepare for, and a commission to fulfil. True, we are on a count-down and the clock is still ticking, but we believe there still remains time to anticipate, to plan and to get ready. Like all our Christian forebears, we don't know God's timespan for the final coming of his kingdom; we don't know when Jesus will return in glory. What we do know is that the Holy Spirit can equip us to do the work of sharing the news of God's kingdom on earth now. Following the example set by the disciples, we must meet together, we should worship and we must pray. And our prayer in the following days should be – "thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven.

This is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples and it's the prayer that our archbishops have asked us to use as we join with Christians of all denominations world-wide, marking the period between Ascension and Pentecost with an intense and unified movement of prayer. We have, in Jasmine's terms, seven more sleeps until we celebrate the feast of Pentecost – and this year, we're not only praying for personal renewal through the gift of the Holy Spirit, but asking that more and more people will feel its powerful presence and changing grace within their lives. We pray not only for the now, the immediate celebration, but we pray for the future also. We are asking for God's kingdom on earth to increase as the Holy Spirit brings new life both to the church and community with joy, healing, reconciliation and hope.

"Thy kingdom come" - it's a huge ask, a huge prayer. And in view of the state of the world we might think it a hopeless ask, an impossible prayer. Yet as the first disciples were alert to the signs of change, so must we be; if we look, signs

of God's kingdom on earth are daily around us. We rejoice in the beauty of the natural world, the love that we share with those around us and in the Christ-like interactions that are witnessed in the darkest of situations. Yes, even in the unimaginable evil of the Manchester bombing and its aftermath this week, there were signs of the kingdom. Christ's love and care was in the countless acts of kindness, in the unselfish behaviour of passers-by, in the bravery of the rescue services and the calmness and professionalism of policemen and women. It was in the care and concern demonstrated by the on-duty casualty sister... and in the unity of an elderly Jewish lady praying for the victims supported by her equally grieving Muslim neighbour. God's kingdom is here on earth – and we pray that it may grow yet more and that we may play our part in revealing it to all those who have not yet heard of its message of hope and healing.

So , in the words of a famous song “something's coming, something good ... I've got a feeling there's a miracle due!” We have something wonderful to pray for and something wonderful to celebrate and we want to invite the whole world to join with us – and in their party dresses. ..or gear! As we prepare for and anticipate the event, both the one due to arrive next Sunday and the one due to arrive - well, God only knows when – let's use our time wisely so that we 're ready whenever. Let's pray together and individually, over the next few days and always, silently or aloud –but always with confidence and trust ... Lord, thy kingdom come.

Amen.