

## WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

Acts 1:1-14

Psalm 130

What are we waiting for? It's the eager cry of people who have got an idea and want to get on and make it a reality. It's the cry of the man who has just got up courage to ask his girl to marry him and she has accepted. (She may tell him what they are waiting for, if she has a different kind of wedding in mind....) It's the cry of the family who has finally found the house of their dreams, and want to move in yesterday (and it may be that their banker will tell them what they are waiting for...) It is the cry of the church which has got a vision for taking the good news to their community, in word or in deed, and having finally found agreement, wants to get on and get out there.

A few years ago, when our children were younger, we made a mistake on Easter Day. We had seen an Easter Egg Hunt advertised at Traquair House, and we thought it would be nice for the children to have a quiet afternoon scampering round the grounds looking for an egg or so. But that wasn't what happened at all. The organisers had decided that they would have the "hunt" for the little ones, on a lawn, and that they would just roll out hundreds of smaller eggs, for the children to gather up. Not much hunting was required. It was all to begin at a certain time, and the attitude of the crowd was very much a "what are we waiting for" one - in the sense of "Oh why are we waiting?" The time came and the children were supposed to make their sweet and gentle way onto the lawn. But the organisers hadn't reckoned with the greed of many parents. When the signal was given many large adults hurtled forward and began scooping up the eggs into their bags and boxes, so that the children were in danger of being trampled in the rush. "The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley." Sometimes we need to do a bit more planning, a bit more explaining, a bit more waiting if things are to work out right.

Impatience is a common human characteristic. You know the old saw: Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can, seldom found in woman but never found in man! Jesus disciples are very human. They were back then and they still are, and so they are impatient. Jesus is giving them what will be a final instruction - to wait in the city until God gives them the promised Holy Spirit. But they don't want to wait. It seems to them they have been waiting long enough - "Is this finally the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" All along this is what they have been expecting, and all along Jesus has been trying to tell them that he isn't going to do what they are waiting for: they are waiting for the wrong thing. They are still seeking their own agenda.

This is the last time that the disciples will ask this question - either of Jesus or, it seems, of themselves. When they do, in due course, receive the Holy Spirit, they seem finally to come to understand what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God, and how that was far greater than national boundaries.

What are you waiting for? It could be health, or strength, it could be finances or retirement. Waiting for you might be the reminder that you are somewhere on an NHS waiting list. I spent time this week with someone who told me she is waiting to die. It could be that you are waiting for the birth of a baby - your own or someone else's.

What are we waiting for? As a church is there something we feel we need to do or be or achieve? The disciples thought they knew what they were waiting for, and so the way they asked Jesus was very much in terms of their preconception. When you

pray, when we pray, do we tell God our solutions, or do we bring the problems and situations before him, exploring them with the guidance of his loving presence?

What the disciples certainly didn't think that they were waiting for was Jesus to leave them. Leave them? He'd only just returned from death! Now he could get on with the work of restoring the Kingdom to Israel. Why would he go away again? But Jesus knew that they couldn't get on with bringing the Kingdom to the world until he had left them, had returned to his Father, and God had sent the promised "other advocate" (John 14:16) Jesus had to ascend, to go up, before his disciples could begin properly to grow up.

As we said to the children, we often associate progress with the idea of moving upwards - whether in school, military service, business, family status or whatever. (Just as an aside, and there's no charge for this - when we think of Jesus going up to heaven, we talk as if heaven were literally upwards from here, rather than in another plane of being altogether. And because of that it can seem that Jesus was getting promoted to heaven. He was attaining a new level. But of course, he was simply returning to the level he had before. He was always God's Son; his place was always at God's side.) When Jesus ascended to heaven it could seem that nothing had changed. He went to where he had been. The world looked much the same as it had before he came: Romans in charge, and so on. Nothing had changed - but everything had changed. He himself was changed, by becoming one with us; the world he came to and left was changed for all time. There was now good news to be told, there was, there is, hope for the future - always. His disciples were about to discover that because Jesus went up, they were about to be changed. "The Word," said John, "Became flesh and dwelt for a time among us..." (John 1:14) And the world will never forget or revert to what it was before.

Jesus went up and the disciples are left gaping with open mouths. But that wasn't what they were told to do. They were told to wait. And so God sends someone along pretty smartly to tell them to stop their vacant gazing. Already they have lessons to learn about waiting. Too often we can see it as a vacant, inactive time. If you are waiting for a bus, there's not a lot else you can do, especially if it's raining, other than stand and gaze hopefully in the direction the bus is to come from. And think of some waiting rooms you know: the rows of chairs, the thumbed, glossy magazines, most of which have very little content, the feeling of time in limbo.

But waiting time need not be dead time. If you are waiting for an operation, you can still do things, by keeping a fit as possible, or by preparing for the fuller life that will be open to you when the surgery is over. If you are waiting for a wedding or for a baby there is a lot that must be done in the meantime. Even in waiting rooms we can be prepared to make use of the time. I have written sermons in garages while my car has been repaired, or in dentists; I have been able to read and do preparation on public transport - the time of waiting to arrive. Waiting is a large part of life. When one of my friends was ordained she was given a book - a children's book by the late great Dr. Zeuss, of the Cat-in-the Hat fame. "*Oh, the Places You'll Go*" promised the title. And the book takes you on an imaginary journey to places. One of them is described like this:

*The Waiting Place...for people just waiting.*

*Waiting for a train to go*

*or a bus to come, or a plane to go*

*or the mail to come,*

*or the rain to go  
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow  
or waiting around for a Yes or No...*

We all do a lot of waiting. When Jesus told the disciples to wait, he wasn't telling them to go into limbo however. The disciples past and present, need to learn about creative waiting. They are waiting to grow up, but you don't do that just by looking upward. The psalmist, who was in the depths of despair, had it about right when he said "I wait for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning." He knew where to turn his gaze, where to focus his life in his waiting.

The Bible is full of people waiting for God, and full of injunctions to us that we also should wait on God. Most of us don't think of a person of faith as someone who is waiting, but that is what faith is: faith waits for God to take the initiative, with trust that he will. Doubt sees God as a problem to be solved, or a difficulty to be overcome or come to terms with, but faith waits.

And so the disciples return to Jerusalem, in obedience to their Lord, and they wait, not idly, but in prayer. A very active waiting. When we meet together for prayer, we usually sit around with heads bowed, but these were Jews. They would pray standing with hands and eyes lifted towards the sky. The posture would be much like their stance on the mountain, when the angel told them not to gape idly that way, but their purpose was quite different. Now they were gazing heavenward, but letting their waiting faith put down roots. They were allowing their faith to grow, they were setting aside their own ideas and waiting for God to take the lead, putting themselves in the place, in the frame of mind, to be ready when that time came.

What waiting will you do this week? What waiting rooms will you visit? What times, that might seem dead time, limbo, will you know? Jesus calls us to wait for God to work, and creative waiting is our remit. The disciples used their waiting time to pray. God grant that we too develop this habit, praying for ourselves, praying for our world, for our church, for our parish. "I have no time to pray" people say: but there is so much time given to us, time to wait, time to pray, time to be in the presence of God.

It's good to be enthusiastic, to cry "What are we waiting for?" and move forward with confidence. But if we are to be sure that what we do is God's plan, is God's good gift, not our own, then we must also be prepared to wait.