

Ascension Day

Assembly by The Rev'd Prebendary Mary Bide, Sub Dean, Wells Cathedral, May 2023

There are probably times when you want to say 'I just can't take any more'. I imagine that the disciples felt like this after the roller coaster of emotions following the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

For us, the time between Ascension and Pentecost is just another one of the church seasons, but for the disciples it was a time of real testing. What is amazing is that they did as they were told. They stayed in Jerusalem, even though that was a really dangerous and uncomfortable place to be. And most of all, they never gave up on prayer. They were dismayed. Yet they praised the Lord. They were afraid, yet they praised the Lord. They were impatient, eager to be getting on with doing something, yet they praised the Lord. And they waited. Waited for something to happen.

Waiting is always hard. Waiting to hear if you have passed an exam, Waiting by the bedside of someone who is ill, Waiting for that phone call or message.

We tend to occupy ourselves to take our mind off the waiting, because waiting is too hard.

But prayer is very much waiting upon God. We think of prayer as giving God a list of all that we want to happen, rather like a small child's Father Christmas list, - end the war in Ukraine, fix climate change, make so and so better, but prayer is really a conversation, and in order to hear God we have to be still, to sit and wait, patiently, perhaps for a very long time. And the prayer is as much in the waiting as it is in the talking and the listening.

We can't hurry God, we can't busy ourselves to disguise the waiting, or we may miss God's coming. All we can do is be patient.

Bernard of Clairvaux, writing nearly a thousand years ago, said:

'If you are wise, you will become a reservoir rather than a canal. A canal distributes its water as fast as it receives it; but a reservoir is content to wait until it is filled before overflowing, and thus, without any loss to itself, it communicates its superabundant water to others... in the Church of the present day, we have many canals but few reservoirs.'

Those words, written so long ago, are just as true today, perhaps even more so. For now we live in a time where all communication is immediate. Time is for doing. And somewhere along the line, we have lost the time to be. If we see a beautiful sunset or a rare bird, we rush for our phone to record it. The most sacred and intimate moments of our life are seen through a camera lens. But when we lose our sense of being, one morning we wake up and wonder why there is no joy in life, why we feel so empty and alone.

You may have come to this service thinking what a waste of time, I could have been

revising for exams, or practising for a concert or playing a game or reading a book. Instead, you are here, maybe just waiting for it to end. But do you know what, one of the things that happened to the disciples will happen to you. You will be blessed. To be blessed is to know that all hurt, all anxiety, all fear can be overcome, overcome by the love of God. Love that is for each and every person, regardless of who they are, what they believe, or how good or clever they are.

So, when we leave this service and get busy again, remember that you have been blessed, that you are loved, and that you will be given strength to cope with whatever life throws at you. Every time you wait upon God, even on those occasions when perhaps it wasn't your first choice of activity, it is never time wasted, instead it is the time when you receive God's blessing, when you are renewed, recharged, able to be that reservoir of God's love. Amen.