

Good morning everyone and welcome to this short reflection for Pentecost Sunday.



You might be reading this transcript or listening via the Audio link on the church website, but either way you might like to just pause for a minute and read from your bibles from Acts 2:1-47. I won't be referring to all of it directly but it will help if you've read the portion. Before we start let's take a minute to pray.

Heavenly Father, we come before you, much like those early disciples, locked in and afraid. Draw near to us we pray, whatever our situation, whether in lockdown alone or with others, and as we read and reflect on your Word may you slowly craft for us a garment of praise that will bring us through this pandemic stronger and more sure than ever of who it is we serve and in whose strength we serve. In Jesus' name....Amen.

I was lucky enough to celebrate New Year in Vienna in front of St Stephens' cathedral with a crowd of people probably numbering a couple of thousand. We were so jammed up against each other, that on the stroke of midnight when we were meant to bring in the New Year with a mass Viennese Waltz, you could barely move, that kind of proximity seems unthinkable now. Wherever you celebrated or marked the turn of the year, I bet you never in a month of Sunday's envisaged where we'd be now.

Our world seems to have shrunk to the size of our living rooms and we have acquired a very strange new vocabulary: lockdown, self isolation, social distancing, are you Zooming? ...even our churches have shrunk physically to the size of a small screen as we meet together online via Zoom. Many are saying we are living through extraordinary times, but we are not the first to do so and most likely we won't be the last. There is nothing new under the sun in human experience as the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us. Today's reading is from the book of Acts, chapter 2 and seems especially relevant to our strange times as we see God's Spirit break through similar clouds of fear and despair that many might own to in our day, to offer hope, joy and purpose. From the perspective of Good Friday the disciples would certainly never have imagined the situation they'd be in on the day of Pentecost, and from the perspective of lives shrunk to the inside of a locked room they never would have imagined that they'd be celebrating anything ever again never mind the resurrection of their friend and master, and let alone in the company of 3000 new believers, but God is a God of surprises who knows how to give good things to his children. Sometimes, however, we have to go on a bit of a journey with Him before we get to our destination and often that ends up being somewhere we never could have envisaged for ourselves. The disciples had been on a journey, and not a very pleasant one at that. Let's remind ourselves what they've been through up to the point when we meet them in the Upper Room at the beginning of chapter two.

The Journey

On Good Friday Jesus had been ripped body and soul from their lives and Easter Saturday found them in lockdown, literally in a locked room covering in grief and fear. They'd lost their best friend and teacher, he'd been the centre of their universe for 3 years, they'd left everything for him and staked their lives on him being the Messiah. Now he was dead, executed like a criminal, and buried in a borrowed tomb. At the end he'd been public enemy no 1 and they were now guilty by association. Then there was the survivor's guilt, after all they'd abandoned their best friend in his hour of need, Peter denied knowing him not once but 3 times.... All they could hope for now was a safe uneventful return to their fishing boats, and that didn't look likely in the present climate. **What a wreckage of hopes and dreams.** There are many at the moment looking at the wreckage of their hopes and dreams and wondering what there will be to return to when this pandemic is over.

Resurrection was most probably the last thing the disciples were expecting, the gospels indicate they weren't even convinced Jesus would be crucified despite him telling them many times, and when Mary found the empty tomb she was convinced Jesus' body had been stolen, no, crucifixion and resurrection weren't part of their script...and yet on the 3rd day, what he said would happen, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,' happened. [John 2:19-22 \(NASB\)](#)

There then follows a period of 40 days during which Jesus appears to them and many others individually and in groups, invading their spiritual and physical lockdowns again and again calming the storm in their hearts and minds, just as he calmed the waves on the Sea of Galilee, dealing with their doubts, strengthening their faith and reorienting their focus and trust toward him. Forty days is often used in the bible as a time of testing, or preparation before some great work

of God and when the forty days are over the last thing Jesus says to them before he ascends to heaven is that they are to **wait** in Jerusalem for a power that will come on them from on high and which will enable them to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. So they now have an unshakeable conviction that Jesus is alive and a faith that he is who he says he is. To all intents and purposes they are more ready for ministry than they've ever been. What a change in the space of forty days..... and yet there was even more to come as Jesus had promised, for conviction alone wouldn't accomplish what he had commissioned them to do. In Luke's gospel account we are told that after the ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy and spent all their days either in the temple praising God, or gathering for prayer in the upper room with Mary, the other women and Jesus' brothers. What Jesus' presence with them over those forty days had accomplished brings to mind these prophecies from **Isaiah 61**:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to.....comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Jesus had indeed during those forty days done all this for his grieving and fear filled disciples. This is the language of celebration, a description of things associated with feasting and celebration, the crown, the brightly coloured garments, the precious oil poured on guests at joyous feasts.....no more sackcloth, no more ashes, no more mourning. A complete reversal. A foretaste of what was to come.

And this is how we find them in Acts chapter 2, v1. in their Upper Room , faithfully **waiting** on the Father, as they've been told to, keeping close to him in prayer and worship, trusting those last words of Jesus to **wait** for the power from on high that would enable them to carry his message to the ends of the earth, a task that must have seemed outlandishly impossible in human terms. But..... God is a God of the outlandishly impossible isn't he? Forty days on, we've gone from death, despair, fear, betrayal, grief, and recrimination, to resurrection, joy, and a sense of anticipation, and here it comes...Acts 2:2-4

And suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Did you notice the words "**And suddenly**"? The bible is peppered with those moments in both the OT and NT. God moving suddenly, unexpectedly, breaking into the normal with something abnormal, breaking into the natural with something supernatural that only he can accomplish, turning lives upside down or right around. Why not go on a journey of discovery as Hugh encouraged us to do a few weeks ago and try and find as many **and suddenly** moments in the bible as you can. Do you remember for instance, the story of Saul in Acts 9? Saul the scourge of the new church, fresh from participation in the stoning of Stephen, on the way to start a new wave of persecution amongst the converted Jews of Damascus, has his own **and suddenly** moment when he has a blinding vision of Jesus. God breaks into his normal, and unexpectedly turns his life upside down, turning him from number one persecutor of the church to its greatest preacher and yet again when he's locked behind prison bars with his friend Silas, **and suddenly** there is an earthquake and the prison doors fly open and they're both set free..I expect many of us can bear witness to God's **suddenly** moments in our own lives, through answers to prayer, unexpected provision, maybe even metaphorical prison doors flying open.

The disciples had been told to expect a movement of God but they didn't know when this would happen so they **waited**. I wonder why God so often makes us play the waiting game? It's another well worn biblical theme. Could it be that while we wait we learn many things we couldn't learn otherwise? Patience, forbearance, trust, dependence? Abraham and Sarah had been told they'd have descendants as numerous as the stars, but had to wait until a ripe old well past child bearing age before Isaac appeared, Joseph had some prophetic dreams when he was a teenager but it wasn't till his early thirties that he saw them come true, and only after significant trials, the children of Israel wandered and waited 40 years in the desert, and then 70 years in Babylonian exile before coming home to the Promised Land. There's so much waiting in the bible, so we shouldn't really be surprised when we find ourselves in God's waiting room.

Two months have passed and we're still waiting for life to begin again and for the uncertainty to end. Waiting for a time when we can do church like we used to, meet together, sing together, pray together....waiting for a new Pastor into the bargain, waiting for the oil of joy and a garment of praise instead of the Spirit of despair. The bible says that hope deferred makes the heart grow sick, and there are many in our midst and known to us who are battling despair as a result of the deferred hope this pandemic has brought on, and as the curtain lifts on lockdown at some point in the future, there will be many more who might end up on our doorstep desperately in need of hope.

But we don't know when it will all end, do we? And we don't know when we'll get a new Pastor. In the meantime how do we wait without giving in to despair when the wait seems interminable? How do we keep on 'running the race' while we wait? The waiting ended for the disciples whilst they were running their race, the Spirit came whilst they were praying, and whilst they were worshipping. Is there something in this for us as a church? **Are we waiting well?**

We come now to verses 14-36? Peter stands up and preaches with such power and conviction, that 3000 people are 'cut to the heart' and come to faith. This is the same man who ran from a servant girl and denied knowing his best friend 3 times, a man well known for his bluster, bravado, and impulsivity....so what's happening here? Peter, the unschooled fisherman, the hothead, the mouthy one speaks and 3000 fall on their knees filled with the Spirit? He may already be a different man to the one who denied Jesus 3 times because he's been on a journey with his Risen Lord and is now convinced of the resurrection, and Jesus' claims to be Messiah, but it's the infilling of the Spirit that gives his words clout, and the power to convict. Joel's prophecy had come true, a new age had been ushered in, the baptism in the Spirit was now available to all who would believe down the ages, not just to a chosen few, not just to prophets and kings, but to everyone who would repent, be baptised and believe, including us.

What are we to make of this? Is it part of our experience? Do we even want it to be? We talk about a desire for more of the Spirit in our church profile and yet we recognise our hesitation, after all fire burns, and wind turns things upside down. In the bible, fire is used as a refining, purifying element, burning away what isn't needed, and wind or the breath of God is often described as a life giving, creative force, but neither can be contained or summoned at will. We may well find the description of the Spirit as our comforter and helper easier to contemplate, and less threatening, but we can't pick and choose what is on offer. There's an element of trust needed here. Do we trust the Father to give good things to his children if they ask? Do we trust that the creativity, imagination, and boldness that a move of the Spirit would bring into our own midst would be a good thing? For we can be certain that if this is what we pray for, things won't stay the same, we can depend on the Spirit doing new things we could never have foreseen, or have known how to pray for.

As we **wait and worship** and **pray** for our own **suddenly** moment as individuals, and as church, may we take courage from that locked room of frightened individuals, who ultimately did what they were told and waited well, prayed well, and worshipped well, and took the fullness of everything the Spirit offered .

Let's pray:

Father we confess we are sometimes uneasy at the thought of what you might ask us to do, or become if the wind of your Spirit were to blow in our direction, but we recognise that something is afoot, you are at work beyond the walls of our physical buildings, strangely your church has become more accessible to those who would never darken its doorsteps, and it seems you may have already sent us out without us even noticing it. So show us what's next, show us where the wind of your Spirit is blowing and prepare us in this lockdown 'waiting room' to seek out and accept every good gift you have to offer us so that when we emerge we will be serving you not in our own power but in the power of your Spirit. In Jesus name.....Amen