

Sermon for Sunday 24th May, 2020, 7th Sunday of Easter: Acts 1:6-14

I have used a commentaries mainly by William Barclay and elements from Tom Wright as a basis of this sermon.

A former colleague of mine from the military lives nearby who seems to need excitement and stimulation. Whilst serving on a parachute unit together, he took up amongst other things; sky diving, ice climbing, caving. After leaving the regular military he became a contractor working in Iraq and Afghan and when that finished he became a security advisor organisations such as Medicins sans Frontières, so whether it comes from pleasure- or from crisis - he seems to thrive on activity, on doing things - on solving problems - on adrenalin. And he is not alone

The time that exists between one crisis or another, between one activity or another is regarded by people like him as **dead time**, as time that is lost - time that is unimportant, time that doesn't count.

Even people who are not adrenalin junkies find it difficult sometimes, difficult to face a period of time in which not much is happening, a period of time in which they must wait for a promise to be fulfilled, for an event that they are looking forward to take place. Sound Familiar?

Today's scripture reading from the Book of Acts tells us how the disciples found themselves in this kind of situation - how they found themselves having to face a period in which they would simply have to wait for Christ's promise to them to come true.

After the resurrection Jesus visited his disciples on several occasions. He taught them, he encouraged them, he commissioned them to do a job. Then - on the day of his ascension into heaven, when they were anxiously asking him when his kingdom would be established, when the next instalment of the divine plan would take place, he tells them that it is not for them to know the times or periods established by God - but that they should go back to Jerusalem and wait,

- wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit,
- wait for the power they would need to witness to him there, and in Judea and all of Samaria, and ultimately in all the world.

For many, waiting is a dreadful thing. Just ask any child. Or anybody waiting for the hairdressers to re-open !! But it doesn't have to be like this.

Living between times, between occasions in which all of our hearts, minds and energy are absorbed in significant affairs can, in fact, be quite special. In these periods of enforced isolation loads of people say it can be a pause that refreshes - a time in which we gain strength - a time in which we quietly grow and are prepared for that which will come next.

When I was in the military I spent a time commanding Support Weapons Flight firing the 81 Mortar and the GPMG in the sustained Fire Role, this weapon operated by a two man team could lay down 750 rounds of 7.62 per minute to a range of 1500 metres and chop through breeze block walls with ease. However the barrel would heat up, could cause jams and damage.. there were two simple solutions to overcome this problem. You could either change the barrels - or you could stop firing for a while, the latter not being recommended by the guys you were giving covering fire to, but to carry out this operation with an almost red hot barrel, without pausing in the firing required teamwork and trust within the team.

God knows that we too need periods of rest - periods of waiting - periods in which we can be changed - refreshed - and renewed, otherwise we, like those machine guns, jam up or explode.

And God provides to us periods of time which, to use William Barclays phrase, are **times between** - periods in which we can be strengthened and prepared for what is to come next.

The prophet Isaiah says that

***those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength,
they will mount up on wings like eagles,
they will run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.***

In this perspective - waiting is a positive thing, the time between the making of a promise and its fulfilment is a time which is, or can be, highly beneficial to us.

But living in the times between, in those times between one phase of our lives and the next,

- between maybe one job and another,
- between the time when maybe the first child has married and the last has yet to enter school
- between the period when a relationship has ended and we have yet to find another, these times can be difficult for us if we do not know how to wait in the manner recommended by God's word.

So how should we live in the times between?

It is recommended that the times in between are meant to be active times - not passive times; times in which we are meant to work at that which is in front of us, - rather than at that which is yet to come.

When Jesus ascended into heaven before the eyes of his disciples, an angel visited them and asked them:

"Men of Israel - why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you saw him go into heaven."

The Russian psychologist, Pavlov who pioneered in the techniques of conditioning did experiments with dogs, by ringing a bell and then giving meat he was able to prove that dogs and indeed people could be taught to automatically respond to key signals. He graduated to longer and longer between the bell and the reward and that's when he finally ran into a problem. It seems that after a certain period of time the dogs would react but - because their attention was so firmly fixed on the reward after the bell rang that their entire nervous system would begin to shut down. They concentrated so much on what they were waiting for that they had no energy left and would fall asleep.

We are not dogs - our attention is not supposed so focussed so much on Christ's return - or on the next thing that we want to have happen in our lives that we end up forgetting what else is going on, that we end up falling asleep on the job.

In the times between, Scripture tells us our eyes are meant to be fixed on the present moment that God has given us and what it is God wants us to do with it **and** in it. We are called to live now in the way God intended us - rather to live in the future.

The disciples heeded the word of the angel who asked them why they were looking up toward heaven, so they returned to Jerusalem and waited there for his promise to them to be fulfilled.

And while they waited - they devoted themselves to prayer.

Which leads to the other important part of learning how to live in the times between: - where we are called to live as Christ has shown us how to live - in obedience and in connection with Him and the Father.

The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in his poem "The Psalm of Life":

***Let us, then, be up and doing, with a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing, Learn to labour and to wait.***

When the disciples returned to Jerusalem - they not only stayed together but joined with Mary, his brothers and many others, and they sought to be one as Christ had prayed that they would be. Together they prayed - and in so doing, they prepared themselves for the job Jesus had promised told them that they would do, when the Holy Spirit came upon them.

In times between people often do take the opportunity to prepare themselves for what is supposed to happen next.

Between jobs they may go take up Further Education or try a new skill.
Between bouts of hard work they may sit down and actually relax and rest so that they have the strength to go on.

There are many ways to prepare for what we believe is coming next, but in the end - prayer is central.

As Jesus told the disciples

"you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you - and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria - and to the ends of the world"

Prayer is so important because it is this which prepares us for the gift of the Holy Spirit - it is this which allows us to be open to the power of the Spirit.
There are no gimmicks

It is the Holy Spirit which enabled and guided the ministry of the disciples, and it is the Holy Spirit which enables and guides our own particular ministries as his followers, our own witness to Christ - indeed it is the Spirit which allows us to be fruitful with our lives.

As John says - *it is the spirit which gives life...* (Jn 6: 63)

We all need to make ourselves ready to be used of the Spirit; that Spirit which may come, as it does so often - sooner than we think.

How do we live in the times between?

Well we need to remember to focus on what is happening now, not on what is going to happen later.

We need to follow God's commands and keep connected with him through prayer so that we are strengthened and prepared -

In the times between - we need to trust and have confidence that what God has promised will happen.

- whether that promise is of a spiritual gift,
- or a promise of a new way of living our lives.
- or a promise to use us in some particular way in his service.

We need the confidence, not because this will change what God promises.

No - we need this confidence because when we have it, we open ourselves up to the peace of God and the other blessings that God has for us - right now - now in the time between all those other promises and the time of their fulfilment.

To return to Isaiah's words - those words that say -

*those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength,
they will mount up on wings like eagles,
they will run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

Notice in this promise the words - will and shall - and the total lack of any grey areas. It is not - they who wait for Lord **might** renew their strength,

it is - they **will** renew their strength

it is not - **maybe** they will walk and not faint -

It is- they **shall** walk and not faint..

Unconditional promises - attached to a simple statement of condition - the condition which says - Those who wait for the Lord -

In the times between,

The times of waiting, we need to trust in the Lord to come through,
To remember his resurrection and his ascension into heaven to be at the right hand of God,

To remember what he has done for us all in the past and wait, with firm hope for the next act - the next promise to come true.

At this time, more than ever we need to trust in the Lord, and live today and every day in the way he has asked us to - to be connected to him and to his word by prayer and meditation with our fellow Christians and in obedience whether alone at work or at rest.

Praise Be To God, this day and the in the times between.

Amen