

## Sermon by Revd Stephen Baxter on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020

“Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem - They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

The reading from Acts provides a privileged glimpse of all of the first members of the church...reunited, huddled together waiting expectantly for the promised gift of God’s energising, catalytic spirit which will launch the church, as we will celebrate next week at Pentecost.

Fired up by the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, this unpromising group of ordinary Galilean minor businessmen who had abandoned and betrayed Jesus have come back together, united as a cohesive team.

They have been joined by the women who faithfully supported Jesus and waited at the cross and attended his tomb; joined also by the brothers of Jesus who had seen him as an embarrassment during his ministry and by Mary, his mother the model of courageous, devoted waiting. In this core group of witnesses we see the first members out of whom the church grew without high profile support or big financial backers or slick political operators or PR wizards.

It may not be a helpful metaphor but, for me this scene always brings to mind the football dressing room before perhaps a cup final...the team huddled together...deeply excited and nervous...feeling a strong bond...mutually exhorting each other to believe in themselves...so that when they walk down the tunnel and appear on the pitch the animalistic roar of 80000 will provide the adrenalin rush that will take them beyond themselves and inspire an electric performance.

From this group the church that will be inspired by the rush of the spirit has grown such that around a third of the world’s population -2.4 billion - identify as Christians, with remarkable growth throughout the last century. Clearly many have a loose commitment to the faith is variable, but the growth particularly in China and South America has been of practising rather than nominal Christians.

The departure of Jesus from the Mount of Olives and his return to his Father must have caused range of emotions – bewilderment, perhaps an element of bereavement, a sense that Jesus was leaving without completing what they hoped he would achieve. Hence their rather desperate question to Jesus as he leaves...’ Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ A question informed by the deeply rooted cultural belief that the Messiah would win a nationalistic and political victory and overthrow the oppressors of Israel, despite all that Jesus had taught them. A question that shows that the apostles – meaning those who are sent – always remain disciples – meaning students – continuing to learn about Jesus and his mission.

As Peter Delaney told us last week in his wonderful sermon, a key part of the message of the Ascension is that the apostles have to grow up, mature – it is now over to them/over to us – just get on with it. To make the quantum leap from being a group supporting each other in an upper room to being a missionary force that confronts the Jewish establishment, that converts through preaching, this group has to grow up pretty swiftly.

We will celebrate the transformational power of the spirit next week, but this week I’d like to focus on the two forces that sustain this group and that are critical to its growing-up....joy and prayer. The penultimate verse in Luke tells us that after Jesus was taken up into heaven, they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. The over-riding emotion is not one of loss but of joy...they realised they had known, experienced, witnessed and were totally convinced by the full power, glory and love of God himself in the person of Jesus...what other over-riding reaction could there be but joy.

Growing up often seems to involve the suppression of focusing on joy...learning to cope with the complex supposedly sophisticated paraphernalia of western life is a serious business – being joyous is frivolous and missing the point. Jesus emphasised that we need to approach him like a child....child-like...retaining a capacity for wide-eyed joyous, spontaneous acceptance of what is good. True growing up in many ways is really about becoming truly childlike. I love Picasso's memorable statement "it took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child." Learning to apply the spontaneous, natural brushstrokes.

A childlike joy was at the heart of the early church and helped bring it together, with differences and past histories forgiven and put aside.

And they were bound together through praying...knowing that Jesus is heaven providing a direct link with heart of God. With the promise and also uncertainties of what lay ahead they fortified each other through prayer – that incredible, privileged direct interaction with the maker of all.

The word crisis actually means a decisive point from the Greek word for decision. There are a number of crises...decisive points along the journey of our lives...birth...weaning...school...puberty...leaving home...commitment to another...midlife crises... The virus has created a crisis for many in the normal sense of the word...fear, debilitation, loss, grief. I hope that for many of us we will use these times as a crisis in our lives of learning...a decision point, when, perhaps initially in small ways, we learn to recapture a greater capacity for joy...make joy a priority...joyous appreciation of God's creation...joy at simple things.

A fellow member of the city clergy mentioned that lockdown has ensured that in future he won't walk just past City taverns...I won't embarrass him by mentioning his name but he makes a good point. Making space to enjoy the simple things...deriving genuine joy from the good in others. In the Cof E we don't always do joy that easily...but let's make it a priority celebrating what we have been given, celebrating above all relationships, giving thanks, above all for the real ultimate freedom through forgiveness we have even if we feel our freedom currently constrained.

And like the early church, pray, pray about all our concerns, pray that we will know joy and appreciate joy, knowing that Jesus prays for us to his Father.

May we remember that we have the responsibility to be the joyous face of Jesus in his world.