

**REFLECTION FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
(SUNDAY AFTER ASCENSION/ALDERSGATE SUNDAY)
(24.05.2020)**

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ACTS 1: 6-14 & JOHN 17: 1-11

As human beings we're forever looking backwards or forwards, we're forever between times. And life in the Church only serves to illustrate this perfectly, it seems to me. In our worship we're forever doing one or the other - looking backwards or forwards - and sometimes we do both.

For weeks during Lent and Holy Week, what did we do? We looked forward to Easter. And what've we done for much of the last six weeks? Yep, we've looked back to it and reflected upon it.

Today sees us looking backwards and forwards once again. Our Gospel reading takes us back to Maundy Thursday - the night in which Jesus is betrayed and arrested. Thursday just gone was Ascension Day, of course - a pivotal moment in the post-Easter Jesus story, as the resurrected Jesus leaves his friends once again in order to return to the Father. Our reading from the Book of Acts invites us to look back at that today. But in that same reading there's also the promise that something equally remarkable is about to happen - and hearing Jesus' words to his friends assuring them, 'you'll receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' reminds us that next Sunday is Pentecost - the day when Jesus' followers would experience an outpouring of God's Spirit, equipping and empowering them that they might continue his work; the day on which the Church would be born. And so we begin to look forward to that day of celebration.

We don't have to go to church (whatever "go to" means these days) to know that we humans have a tendency to look backwards and forwards. Most people know that they're forever between times, especially at the moment.

With life on hold and the majority of people still in lockdown - or, if you prefer, sheltering in place - there's a tendency to look *back* to a way of life now lost and look *forward* to a day when that life (or something closer to it) might return.

Some people, I know, have set themselves some impressive targets for these days and look set to emerge from lockdown life with homes, gardens and bodies that have been transformed. Having painted a bookcase, pulled a few brambles out and decided that any more time with Joe Wicks was more likely to produce a torn hamstring than a ripped physique, I've reset my sights somewhat lower. I have though decided to de-clutter this study a little and this week has seen me throw 7 years-worth of worship material and sermon printouts into the recycling and shred 10 years-worth of bank statements.

But even those actions became a wistful experience as I remembered particular services led in particular places, as I pictured some of the people in those churches, some of whom I'll never get to see again. I found myself sighing on more than one occasion as records of past purchases reminded me of football matches, rock concerts and holidays paid for - of those times themselves and how all such experiences are currently beyond us. I was meant to be at a gig last night. We were meant to be going on holiday this week. Ho hum.

But, even without a COVID-19 pandemic, it was perhaps always thus. Every moment of our lives is a between times moment, every single moment comes after the one before and before the next one to come. Even the way in which we date human history makes reference to an event or time and what came before and after it. It's in our DNA as a species to approach life in such a way, it would appear. And for the most part it serves us well enough, I guess. It reinforces the idea that everything has its time and that all times come and go. In hard times it allows us to see that good times will come again. In good times, it teaches us that we need to make the most of and cherish such times because they won't always be with us.

But maybe it's not always that helpful to look backwards and forwards quite as much as we do, particularly these days. There are times when it's far more fruitful to focus on and be alive to the present moment than it is to look to the future and speculate as to when we might get to watch football again, or return to church or be able to go on holiday or whatever it is that we most long for. Because who knows when that might be or indeed how many times we'll get our hopes up and have them dashed before that day comes? And, in any case, if this pandemic has taught us anything then it's surely that we can't plan for and/or control the future quite as well as we thought we could.

When Jesus' friends come together on what is to be the day of his ascension, they do so with questions about the future on their lips. 'When will God put things right? Is it now?' Jesus silences them. 'These things are for God to know, not you' he says. But he isn't dismissing their concerns. Nor is he

denying them a role in God's future. This is the Jesus who, on the night of his arrest and with his own life at risk, prayed not for himself but for his friends. In John's gospel there is no personal prayer of anguish in Gethsemane. Instead we're offered the prayer that begins with the words that we heard earlier. Here, and in what follows, Jesus asks that his friends might remain connected and be protected. In Jesus' final words to his friends in Acts, he outlines how this might happen: God's Spirit will be with them. They just have to wait a bit longer for it to arrive.

Jesus then disappears from their sight. He is gone and they're alone once more but this time they're not left bereft for, as Steph said on Thursday, 'this is no Good Friday'. Things have changed. And although Acts doesn't see them skipping off into the sunset, praising God, as Luke's Gospel does - there is a quiet trusting. Jesus' friends are prepared to wait to see what happens next, believing that whatever that looks like, God will be with them. They go home together and, as they've lifted their lockdown restrictions a little, other friends and family members join them - and together they constantly devote themselves to prayer. Presumably they want to stay alert - so that they're ready for this Holy Spirit thing whenever it arrives.

We can deduce from their story, I think, that the time they spent in prayer helped Jesus' friends to overcome their doubts and fears; helped them to trust that God was with them, that the future was in God's hands; helped them not only to be open to the presence of God's Spirit but also to be ready and willing to be swept along by her, to further Jesus' work in the world.

Now I don't want to steal Steph's thunder for next Sunday but here's the thing - we don't have to wait another week for God's Spirit to be poured out into the world. It wasn't that a little bit was released into the world on that Pentecost Day long ago and that on every subsequent anniversary we get a little bit more. It isn't a whisky festival that we're celebrating here. This isn't a God's Spirit is already with us. Here and now.

So, my thought for the day is a very, very simple one. As we seek to take each day as it comes, to be alive to the present - and as well as caring for those around us, of course, and as well as immersing ourselves in whatever activity it is that helps us through each day (be that work, baking, DIY, colouring, reading, gardening, running or whatever), devoting some time to pray each day might just help us to live in and experience the 'now' a little more.