

ACTS 1:6-14 Preparing for Pentecost

We had a great gathering at the rectory last Sunday afternoon. The bring & share lunch was great fun and the fellowship & discussion around the choosing of a new bishop was really worthwhile.

Once the survey has been collated & criteria set by the committee, they will then call for nominations. Anyone can nominate anyone really, and then the committee will vet the nominations and create a short list according to the criteria. The final decision will be made by the Synod in November.

However, once the choice has been made, we have a period of waiting between the election of the bishop and when he or she is installed in the Cathedral. It can be an unsettling time in a way; we have the promise of a new bishop, who we will look to lead us into the next chapter of our life in this diocese, but at the same time, he or she is not yet in place.

It reminds me, in a way, of the interval between the resurrection of Jesus, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The interval between the Resurrection and the empowering of Pentecost is not usually something we spend much time thinking about. We focus on the resurrection - and perhaps the Ascension gets a look in, and then there's Pentecost. But we don't tend to give the intervening period between these events much thought. Yet it was a crucial time for the disciples. And the things the disciples discovered during this period are just as crucial for us.

For the disciples, those intervening days from the Resurrection until Pentecost became a time of **steep learning**, of **serious grappling with their human-ness**, and of **great expectation** of what God was about to do.

For the disciples, it was a time of intense preparation to receive God's promise of power through the Holy Spirit.

We SO need that preparation ourselves if we're to continue to grow in our own ongoing experience of Pentecost. When was the last time we got excited about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our midst?

Let's see if we can fan the flame a little, as we look at this passage.

The first area of preparation for the disciples during this period - was learning.

In verses 2 & 3 that preceded our reading this morning, we read that Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of 40 days, providing them with many

convincing proofs of his resurrection and teaching them about the Kingdom of God.

It would have been a very intense time of learning.

The disciples would have had so many questions! One is recorded. In v.6, they asked Jesus: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Though the disciples had learned a great deal sitting at Jesus' feet over the previous three years, and even more during this heady time after the resurrection, it's evident they were still a little confused. Their question revealed that they still hadn't quite let go of their cultural belief that the Messiah would physically deliver Israel, and reestablish a glorious Kingdom on earth. And they wanted to know the plan.

Jesus' reply steered them back to the Father's plan. He said, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

He didn't try to correct their confused thinking. (I think he was out of time at this point) - Rather, he reminded them that they would receive power when the Spirit came upon them, and they would be witnesses for him. This was the last thing he said to them before he was taken up to heaven.

Jesus had said that one of the roles of the Holy Spirit was that he would teach them everything, and remind them of all he had said to them.

Like the disciples, our learning continues throughout our Christian walk. In this life, we'll never reach a point where we can sit back, thinking we've got it covered. It doesn't matter whether we've been Christians 20 or 30 years, or our whole lives, there will always be more to learn - if our minds and spirits remain open to God.

I once read a story of a great theologian, who, as he was dying, said that he had spent every day of the last 40 years of his life, studying the Word of God. The thing that stood out for him the most from these decades of study, was the sense that he had barely scratched the surface in his knowledge of God.

I wonder if we can articulate (to ourselves) the latest thing that we have learned about God, or learned from God about ourselves or our church? If new insights are few and far between, then we need to address that.

Stagnation in our Christian lives is an indication that we've perhaps become too comfortable, and maybe we've even switched off. Just as Jesus directed his disciples to wait for the Spirit, so it is as we wait ON the Spirit, that our desire to learn more of him can be kindled.

Part of waiting on the spirit is to pray. Let's pray that God will teach us. Then make ourselves available to participate in God's answer. Let's ask our questions of each other. Being part of a Bible Study or Bible discussion group is a great idea. Let's keep reading, inquiring, pondering! We need to keep learning if we're to keep growing in the Spirit.

Another thing that the disciples would have grappled with as they prepared for the coming of the Spirit, was their human-ness.

This isn't spelled out in the reading - but I imagine when they returned to Jerusalem after the Ascension of Jesus, that this would have been a time of prayer and reconciliation for the disciples.

We know they prayed. We read in v14, **“that with the other disciples, including the women, they constantly devoted themselves to prayer.”**

We can't spend many hours in prayer without coming away touched by God and transformed. That's why as clergy, we are expected to make a prayer retreat at least once a year. It provides the time and space for God to do some work in us!

Think about the disciples for a moment, and some of the issues they might have faced:

- There may well have been residual criticism for one another: Peter had denied the Lord, Thomas had doubted & James and John had been self-serving and argued over who was greatest.
- There was a real mix of people amongst the believers whom Jesus had loved and accepted - but I wonder if the disciples could truly share Jesus unconditional love for all, given a lifetime of Jewish conditioning that Gentiles were unclean?
- Had the disciples really worked through their feelings about sinful Mary Magdalene, or the Pharisee Nicodemus - his lot had been instrumental in Jesus' crucifixion. Was he really one of them? What about the rich Joseph of Arimathea? How committed was he really? What about all those socially unacceptable people whose sins Jesus had forgiven, and who had been welcomed into the fold?

All of these people met together in the temple daily to pray, shoulder to shoulder for hours on end. I imagine there would have been a great deal of conviction, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation happening.

What powerful preparation for the coming of the Spirit!

Again, we might ask ourselves, how long has it been since we did any real work with the Spirit of God on our own issues; and on the relationships in our lives and in our church? Are there people we need to forgive, or be reconciled to, or whom we simply need to love and accept into our circles? If we, with the Spirit's help, can open ourselves to his work, his power will flow!

Thirdly, from this passage, we know that there was **great expectation** amongst the disciples, as they waited for the coming of the Spirit.

How do we know this?

The very fact that they were in Jerusalem showed they believed Jesus' promise. Jerusalem was a dangerous place. It is where Jesus had been arrested & killed. The authorities were still really twitchy. Yet they stayed, in obedience, and in great expectation that the promise of the coming of the Spirit would be fulfilled.

And we know they had great expectations, because they prayed! Prayer is hard work. Especially amongst such a motley group of people. Especially for such a long time! But they prayed, and they prayed. They prayed for 10 days straight. As our young millennial friends would say, they were PUMPED!

The disciples' great expectation was borne out in their conduct. They obeyed, and they prayed.

We could learn a lot from that.

The promise of the Holy Spirit is for us also. In Ephesians ch 5:18 we read, **"be FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT"**. It's a command. The tense there is more accurately rendered, "Go on being filled with the Spirit."

As Christians, we are baptised with the Holy Spirit when we surrender our lives to Christ. But we are commanded to go on being filled with the Spirit.

How do we do that?

1. We ask. Jesus said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

2. And then we can further facilitate being filled with the Spirit as we open ourselves up to God in the same way the first disciples did:

By seeking to learn as much as we can

By praying and opening ourselves to forgiveness and reconciliation

And by living in great expectation of the fulfilment of God's promise to fill us with his Holy Spirit.

We celebrate Pentecost next Sunday - the birthday of the Church! Let's go into this week with great expectation that Pentecost will be a way of life for us, and for the church, as we seek to continually be filled with the Spirit.

Let's pray