

Night Prayer

May 2022: Waiting and watching: the time between Easter and Pentecost.



What did the Disciples actually do in the days that followed the resurrection? For that matter what did Jesus do also? The immediate days after the resurrection seem to have been fairly momentous experiences for the first believers as they came to terms with visits from a Christ in bodily form yet who could also appear and disappear at will. But there are gaps between these visits and even longer gaps after the first week elapsed, before the believers (it's not clear how many) were collected together to witness what we call the Ascension (celebrated this year on May 26).

Well, we can only surmise what they were doing, but it doesn't seem unreasonable to assume there was a lot of speculation and discussion about what the events of Easter implied, there was a lot of uncertainty, of hanging around wondering what to do next – of waiting. And we can be fairly sure from our own experiences of waiting that some of us are more patient than others.

Hymn

'Wait for the Lord'

This is the Taizé chant sung for us by the choir of St David's Church with Nigel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M89oWjt0Ok>

We pray

Lord Jesus,
many of us are waiting for you:
the war-torn are waiting for peace,
the hungry are waiting for bread.
the refugees are waiting for a homeland,
the sick are waiting for healers.
Have you forgotten us?
O Lord, come quickly, we pray.
Amen.

(a prayer from Sudan, 21st century. Posted on Bruce Prewer's Homepage.)

Poem

Many of us are familiar with the poem 'Kneeling' by R S Thomas, which ends with the words, 'the meaning is in the waiting.'

This poem is also by R S Thomas and may not be so well known.

Sea-Watching

Grey waters, vast
 as an area of prayer
that one enters. Daily
 over a period of years
I have let my eye rest on them.
Was I waiting for something?
 Nothing
but that continuous waving
 that is without meaning
occurred.

 Ah, but a rare bird is
rare. It is when one is not looking
at times one is not there
 that it comes.

You must wear your eyes out
as others their knees.

 I became the hermit
of the rocks, habited with the wind
and the mist. There were days,
so beautiful the emptiness
it might have filled,
 its absence
was as its presence; not to be told
any more, so single my mind
after its long fast,
 my watching from praying.



In 'Laboratories of the Spirit', 1975.

Reflection

Thomas was an avid bird-watcher and spend many hours at the coast-line attending to what he saw.

He just asks one question – was I waiting for something? The same could be asked about those first believers and indeed about ourselves. Thomas may not be sure exactly what he is looking for, but knows that the rare bird (of meaning) can easily be missed if we have given up on the looking.

Perhaps the believers had also given up looking, as the one late post-resurrection experience (John 21; 1-14) at Lake Tiberias could indicate that the disciples had gone back to

being fishermen. Jesus might be a rare bird, but he seems to have come to the believers. It is God who seeks out us. There is grace despite our lack of faith.

Worship song

'O Love that will not let me go.' Sung by the Celebration Choir accompanied by the Band of the Sheffield Salvation Army Citadel. Words are on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biHQVoAUTtU>

Patience or action? – the paradox of waiting.

Wait for the Lord - or get on with it? Remember the parable of the talents. Hiding the money in the ground and not risking using it gets condemned. Jesus is very clear that we all have an active role to play in bringing about God's kingdom. In the R S Thomas poem, although he equated looking with waiting, looking itself is an action, and so for that matter is praying. We are called to be alert to possibilities, like sighting the rare bird, which can lead us to take additional action. How we achieve this alertness depends much on our personality, temperament and preference for risk or caution.

That's all very well, you might say – Actually I'm well aware of many areas where action is needed – God doesn't seem to be doing anything about it – but I'm not sure there's anything that I can do either.

Prayer

Holy One, it is strange
to think of doubt at the same time
as we are crying
'Hallelujah! He is risen!'
But we are living with it.

We feel it when
we watch the news
and see what is happening
in Ukraine.
We ask ourselves
why you would let this happen?

We feel it when
we see a distraught parent
mourning the loss of a child,
and again we ask ourselves
why you would let this happen?

We feel it when
we make careful plans

and they suddenly go awry,
and again we ask ourselves
why you would let this happen?

We wait for answers
but none are forthcoming
so we sit in the silence
and then we realize that
whatever is happening
you are with us.

And suddenly
our questions
don't matter.
your answers
don't matter,
our doubts vanish
with the knowledge
of your presence. Amen

(Rev Kathleen Burgess Presbyterian church in Canada)

Reflection

The ending of this prayer takes us back to R S Thomas's words:
 'its absence
was as its presence.'

There seems to be some mystic quality to this – something that defies logical explanation. And yet the events that occurred at the end of this period of waiting for those first believers were just as strange and mystical – the Ascension and then Pentecost.

Worship song

'Heaven shall not wait', sung here by Ruth and Joy Everingham. Words are on screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHMt3YJHbZE>

Ascension

Luke 24:50-53

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Acts 1:9-11

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”



The Ascension of Christ
Giotto 1304-06

Reflection

Why do you stand there looking into the sky? Luke might have added: ‘What are you waiting for?’ ‘You are here in this world – get on with it!’

This strange story seeks to make clear that the Ascension was a physical act. One moment Jesus was there with his friends, the next he was not. This act of physical returning to the Godhead is a continuation of the story of incarnation. God does not despise the human body – rather God embraces it, inhabits it, and glorifies it, making human flesh part of the Godhead! This means that the needs of the body – for food, clean water, sanitation, shelter, and loving, intimate touch – are all part of the Gospel and are included in God’s gift of salvation.

The Ascension also comes with the promise of the Holy Spirit’s power which tells us that God is not absent and removed from us, but continues to be completely immersed in the world and in the lives of human beings.

The Ascension is the necessary next step in Christ's life, ensuring that God remains involved with human beings, that God's presence continues to be available to us, and that we know that everything that makes us human – including our physicality – has been embraced and welcomed into God. It is not so much showing that Jesus can defeat the world but rather about Christ drawing all things into the life of God.

Ascension moves us on to Pentecost – but you must wait until next month for that!

Hymn

'The Head that once was crowned with thorns', sung here by the choir of Norwich Cathedral. Words are on screen.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw2U_sf02II

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you speak about gathering all things together,
of unity and reconciliation,
of love and sharing,
of filling all things with yourself.

You invite us into a conversation, not a conquest,
into dialogue, not dominion,
into the power of love,
not the love of power.

We praise you, Ascended One, for refusing to hoard your power and glory,
for refusing to remain aloof and removed from creation,
and for including the likes of us
in your cosmic community.

Amen.

Closing commission and blessing

People of God,
let's not just stand here, gazing into heaven
as the disciples did after they saw Jesus leave.
Instead, let's take up the mission Jesus left us:
to be his witnesses,
to tell everyone we meet who Jesus is,
and how he has changed us.

And may the grace of God,
the love of Jesus Christ,

and the presence of the Holy Spirit
go with us all.
Amen.



*Zenos Frudakis
(American,
1951–),
Freedom, 2001.
Bronze, 16th
and Vine Streets,
Philadelphia.*