

Followers of the Way

Sermon: 5 December 2021

Preacher: Steve Campbell

Waiting and Witnessing

Acts 1:1-11

Advent... countdown to Christmas. Children wait, long, hope for the day to come, and count the number of sleeps until it arrives!

I remember that same sense of waiting expectantly, not for Christmas, but in the summer holidays. We didn't go on foreign holidays, the most foreign place we visited was the Isle of Man! But usually it was day trips to the beach.

If it was Bangor that was OK, 13 miles less than half an hour. Usually, however, we went up the north coast to Portrush... 60 miles, an hour and a quarter! To a child sitting in the back of a car that seems like an eternity! And my siblings and I would rhyme off every few minutes – 'Are we there yet?'

It did my father's head in, so Mum would turn around and say, 'If you're really good and quiet we'll go to Morelli's for an ice cream.'

Well that shut us up – Mum gave us something to look forward to and we were able to wait quietly with hopeful expectation for our ice cream!

The disciples, too, were waiting with hopeful expectation. Jesus had just spent 40 days with them following his resurrection and teaching them about the kingdom of God. Now the time had come for him to return to heaven.

Apostles were waiting for Jesus to return, it looked as if they were expecting him to return immediately as they were standing gawping up at the sky. It took the two men in white, presumably angels, to shake them out of their doldrums. Yes, they were to wait with hopeful expectation for Jesus' return, but they weren't just to sit idly by and do nothing (as some in Thessalonica were seeming to do!) They were to get on with the task for which Jesus commissioned them – to be his witnesses.

Before he left them, he gave them one last instruction – they were to wait... They weren't to leave Jerusalem until the promised Holy Spirit came upon them.

They weren't told how long they were to wait, only that it would be a few days. Were those disciples like us children in the back of the car repeating, 'Is He here yet? Is He here yet?'

They only had a ten day wait, till the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came and endued them all with power. The believers, who numbered about 120 at that time, were all together in one place. Some think they were in the same house where Jesus shared his last supper, others that they were in the temple at the time.

What matters is that they were all together when the Spirit came upon them in power and gave them ability to speak in other tongues; languages that they had never learned! This was not a

heavenly tongue, but the languages spoken by all the foreign visitors to Jerusalem.

Luke enumerates them for us in Acts 2:9-11 – from Rome in the west to Mesopotamia in the east, Pontus in the north to Arabia in the south. They all heard the Spirit-filled believers speaking God's praises in their own Mother tongue! How amazing was that?

It made me think of what it must have been like at the Reformation:

Worshippers attended Latin Mass but didn't understand what was being said. Then when the Bible was translated into English and read from the lectern, the people could hear God speaking to them in their own Mother tongue!

So the disciples were endued with power from the Holy Spirit to speak in other tongues, but for what purpose? Jesus had already told them before he was taken up to heaven - '... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8)

What is a witness?

One definition – 'to have knowledge of an event from personal observation or experience.'

Obviously only the original apostles were eye-witnesses to the Risen Lord Jesus, but every believer can witness to their experience of salvation through faith in Christ. The Greek word for 'witness' is of course 'martyr', and many of those who spoke

on that Day of Pentecost were martyred for their faith; and many, many more since.

As crowds gathered to see and hear what was going on at Pentecost, the scoffers were there among them – they are always there when something good is happening – and they were dismissing this as a drunken display.

But Peter stood up among the apostles and rebuked the scoffers, in effect saying, 'Don't be stupid, how could these men be drunk? It's only nine in the morning!'

What is happening, Peter declared, is the fulfillment of prophecy and, quoting Joel, he goes on to explain how Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah.

Those who heard this message were cut to the heart and asked, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

The same Spirit who empowered Peter and the apostles to witness also brought conviction of sin.

The answer they were given - 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' Acts 2:38

Repent... turn around... stop going your *own* way, start walking *God's* way! This message of repentance towards sin and faith in Jesus is as much for us today as it was for those in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

Through the Spirit-empowered witness of Peter, and the apostles and those early believers, the Church grew and 3,000 were added

to their number that day. This wasn't just an isolated occurrence – in Luke's summary of the Church in those early days he says, '...the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' (2:47)

Oh for that to be true in our day!

Lambeth 1988 declared 1990s a Decade of evangelism. How successful, I'm not sure... but it put evangelism on agenda, and every Anglican Church was compelled to organize some sort of Parish witness or evangelism. It got people talking and made them aware that the Church is supposed to be evangelising!

Witnessing is not just for apostles, but all believers – 'Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however,... began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.' (Acts 11:19-20)

There are some who take this responsibility very seriously and are passionate about witnessing. I've come across many street preachers in my time who witness to passers by preaching the Gospel to them. I must confess, as a believer, I am usually put off by these folk – heaven knows what unbelievers are thinking! They certainly are passionate in their witness, but sadly lack compassion.

We need both – passion and compassion.

Cosmin: brought up in orphanage.. Communist Romania. He experienced no love in his childhood, only hate, rejection and

pain. When Communism collapsed and the country opened up, missionaries came to the orphanage; but many came proclaiming, 'God loves you,' dropped a food parcel and left. Cosmin couldn't understand this – 'If God loves me why am I living like this in filth and pain?

But a couple from Northern Ireland came as missionaries; they didn't just say, 'God loves you' and leave, they stayed and displayed the love of God. They got their hands dirty with these messy children, they walked the long, hard road with them. They walked with Cosmin for eight long years: loving him; helping him make sense of the pain and suffering he experienced; listening to his questions, fears, doubts and frustrations. Until he came to know the God who loves him in Jesus Christ.

Today, Cosmin is married with a daughter and training for ordained ministry in Ireland.

That couple who went to Romania were passionate about witnessing, but also showed compassion to those they witnessed to.

So, this Advent season we wait – wait for Christmas to celebrate the birth of our Saviour, his first coming as a vulnerable human baby; but we also wait with hopeful expectation for his second coming as Judge of the living and the dead.

And we don't just wait idly doing nothing, but fulfilling Christ's commission to be his witnesses in *our* Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria

and the ends of the earth; after all, that's why we are here,
because someone witnessed to us!

So we wait, and we witness, all the while praying, 'Maranatha,
come Lord Jesus.' Amen