

Sermon on 24 May 2020

Acts 1:6-14, 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11, John 17:1-11 / All pictures made by Sabine apart from the Kingfisher (Wiki Commons)

The disciples *'were constantly devoting themselves to prayer'*, men and women alike. What else could they do? Jesus was gone. Gone were all those blissful days when Jesus had appeared to them, concentrated just on them, answered all their questions, made them feel at the centre of God's world. It had seemed normality had returned after traumatic times, and now the disciples wondered whether the new Kingdom was imminent: *'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'* Typical of Jesus, they did not get an easy answer: *'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set'*. However, Jesus did not leave them without hope: *'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.'*

Good Lord! What was this supposed to mean? Carrying on regardless without Jesus? Scary! So what else could they do other than retreat to the upper room, which was so full of memories, stick together and pray. We do not know the words they used. Probably the Lord's Prayer, quite likely the Psalms. Maybe aloud, maybe quiet, maybe even holding hands, trying to comfort and strengthen each other. We might envy them there: In our current crisis situation, we cannot enjoy the joys of physical contact with our brothers and sisters in Christ, but there is one thing we can do likewise: we can pray.

Easy, you think? Well, for some of us. More difficult for others. Some do it regularly as a discipline, others only when they feel like it. Some like to say many words, I guess to beat the onslaught of all secular noises around us; others feel all these words drown the still small voice of God. For me personally, prayer is mainly about listening.

The best way for me to shut up and listen is to go out. Last Sunday, Anna took us on a virtual walk to Athens and the Areopagus; today I will take you on a virtual walk to a place in County Durham.



For me, prayer is more a place than a concept... The closest I feel to God is while walking outdoors ... I go along a path like this, inhaling the fragrances of earth and vegetation, listening to bird songs chirping all around me, seeing the sunlight trickling through the fresh lime green of leaves... My whole mind is filled... with gratitude that I am allowed to perceive this glory; with wonder: that there is so much loving detail poured out in abundance, regardless whether somebody beholds it or not; and with awe: that I can be a part of this world, which is constantly empowered by the Creator. I have no words, I just listen.

There is glory in the tiniest detail, each leaf is singing out the glory of the Creator.



Jesus' prayer in today's John reading, which follows his farewell discourse, resonates in my memory: *'Father, I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.'* What humility and obedience: Jesus does not claim that he made all these disciples. Whatever is given to him is a gift of the heavenly Father. Jesus simply and gloriously did the work appointed to him. Now about to face the hardest test of all, going through the dark valley of death, but speaking here in this prayer as if he had already completed the task: *'I glorified you on*

earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.' The word 'glorify' appears five times in this prayer, pointing to the extent of the consuming passion with which Jesus followed through his task: to glorify His Father. There is an intimate connection between Father and Son here, which transcends time and space: *'Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.'* Glory has been there from the beginning of time, because glory is a characteristic of God. How do we know God? Through all the things Jesus said and did. Heaven is reflected on earth, like the sky is reflected in tranquil waters.



In our reading, Jesus gives a kind of progress report: Through making known His Father's name, all believers know now about God in a way they did not before. Previously, people thought of the name of the Lord as unspeakably holy, and not to be pronounced, and God a total mystery. Now, through Jesus' work, it is all out in the open, without a shred of doubt, and Jesus' followers know now absolutely for sure: Jesus was sent by God, and to know Jesus, is to know God, and to know God, is to have eternal life.

Is that so? Job 14, verse 2 comes to mind: *'Mortals ... spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure.'*



Is our life like that? Blooming in glory one day, and gone the next? Living through a crisis, there are indeed days when it feels like that. But not so, says Jesus: *'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.'* We are so blessed as Christians: By knowing God, we are partakers of God's glory, and are given eternal life. Life would be so much easier if we would manage to live in this recognition all the time! Jesus knows, how hard it is, so he implores the Father *'to protect them in your name ... so that they may be one, as we are one.'* If we stick together, we can be witnesses *'to the ends of the earth'*, filling the space with God's glory.



Unity makes strength. It bears witness to our understanding of God's unifying, reconciling work in Christ. I do wonder why despite such a powerful statement, Christian unity seems such a hard thing to achieve.

Back to prayer: More than ever at this time of the year, we find ourselves in a similar position as Jesus' followers: in between times. Jesus has gone, but the Helper, the Holy Spirit, has not come yet. Normality has gone, and we find it hard to cope. If only we could feel His lead beside quiet waters, refreshing our souls!



To connect to, and flourish beside the streams of living water, we need prayer more than ever: *'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done'* These lines from Matthew Chapter 6 find their resonance in Jesus' prayer in our Gospel reading, only transposed into the Johannine key, which offers us layers and layers of meaning, impossible to fully explore on one Sunday morning. It is all about perspective:



Close up, and overwhelmed by tough times, things might become challenging and claustrophobic like being trapped in an almost impenetrable barrier of reeds... But if we take a step back, widen our perspective, we get a sense again of God's glory, which has been there since the beginning of time.



Prayer gives us hope and perspective: Thy Kingdom come – Alison will tell us more about this global and ecumenical prayer movement, where thousands of people all over the world are praying for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, especially now in these 'in-between times'. We do well to remember that our religion started with a small number of ordinary and bewildered people, who believed in Jesus. Jesus in return believed in them. So with these two beliefs, in God and in humanity, the world can be transformed. So do not be daunted by human weakness! Jesus trusts each and every one of us.

Jesus' handful of followers, huddled together in the upper room, concentrated on the task given to them by Jesus: pray. And they knew the most important thing with prayer: Be expectant! Things will change, but in God's time.

Before we leave this virtual walk now



I would like to share with you one of my favourite poems by Anne Lewin.



Prayer is like watching for
The kingfisher. All you can do is
Be there where he is like to appear, and
Wait.
Often nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and
Expectancy.
No visible signs, only the
Knowledge that he's been there
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But when you've almost stopped
Expecting it, a flash of brightness
Gives encouragement.
Prayer is like watching for
The kingfisher.

Amen.

Kingfisher Picture: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Common_Kingfisher_Alcedo_atthis.jpg
Poem: <https://mbird.com/2017/08/prayer-is-like-watching-for-the-kingfisher-ann-lewin/>