

## **Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension Day 13<sup>th</sup> May 2018**

**Readings: John 17:6-19 and Acts 1.12,14-17, 21-end**

### **Changing the scenery of our lives**

Ever since we moved to our Yateley home 20 years ago we have wanted to remove the Leylandii hedge that partitioned our front garden from the alley which forms a thoroughfare for locals who wish to get to the 'main' road and the footpaths that lead onwards to the local school. The hedge had had its behaviour firmly controlled on several occasions, had served it's purpose but was no-longer useful.

On Friday, thanks to a local tree surgeon it was removed, a moment I've been yearning for, for years, and now we wait. The stump-grinder and fencing specialists are booked. In the mean-time the litter picker has been exercised, and the species list of native hedgerow trees is being considered for the autumn. The scenery has changed, the era of the old hedge is definitely behind us.

Between our Gospel and the passage from Acts this morning, the scenery has likewise changed. The family relationship between Mary and her beloved Son, and the daily teaching of his disciples by Jesus, has been permanently broken - as Jesus knew it would be when he had prayed to God on their behalf in our Gospel. Jesus' Ascension initiates for them a period of acclimatisation to a new view of the world, and their place in it, without Christ's physical presence. They had to come to terms with the emotional roller coaster of the last few weeks. This included their grief (which for Mary would have been particularly difficult), perhaps feelings of guilt, and consideration of the part their friend Judas had played in the drama, including his own violent reaction to that role. They could have sat and dwelled on the past in a negative and destructive way, wallowing in self-pity, rehearsing again and again the nuances of what had happened, and each other's role in it.

Instead, we find them engaged in a period of active waiting and yearning... for... something; the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the one who would guard and protect them (John 17:11-12). Jesus had modelled for them what it meant to pray into something that was about to happen, that was about to change the world, that was going to require their whole-hearted commitment to the Kingdom of God. We would not have our Gospel, this conversation between the Son and his Father, this prayer of Jesus for his disciples, if that were not so.

In that prayer they had heard Jesus describe themselves as not belonging to the world, but to God (John 17:14), who would be glorified not just in his death,

resurrection and ascension, but in THEM. After all that they had heard, experienced and witnessed, got wrong, cried over, sometimes even got right and rejoiced in, God was going to send THEM out into the world (John 17:15,17). They knew that their task would be to witness to his resurrection (Acts 1:22), to live lives that didn't simply focus on the cross but on it's purpose; the forgiveness of sins and the offer to the whole world of a new relationship with God.

So in this period between Jesus' Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit (the timing of which would have been unknown to them), the disciples set themselves aside from the world, and committed themselves to an active waiting on God in what we see as prayer and practical preparation. In the part that wasn't read, St. John recites Judas's sad demise, but only for historical completeness and our human curiosity. Among the faithful gathered in Jerusalem, there are no recriminations, no recitation of what they all know, only an understanding of what Judas's role in their shared mission has been, and what scripturally their reaction to it should be. They draw a clear and distinct line under one of the most difficult elements of the recent past in a remarkable way. Using their God-given gifts of discernment they select two candidates to replace Judas's position among them, and then they acknowledge their dependence on God by leaving God to reveal who is to share with them the role of proclaiming the work of God in Jesus.

Here is an example of giving a spiritual dignity to dealing with the difficulties of the past and preparing for a vitally important task. It is both practical and prayerful. Some might suggest there is a creative tension between these two elements, others that both action and a contemplative waiting on God are works of prayer. They put themselves as a corporate body in good order, and demonstrate their trust in what Jesus has taught them; that they should commit themselves whole-heartedly to being God's people, set aside for his work.

God has a habit of changing the scenery of our lives, helping us to complete outstanding tasks in preparation for a new phase of our lives with him. As individuals we all know of things that have happened in the past. Some may have grown out of all proportion to their purpose or significance. Others are no longer relevant to where we are now, what we are capable of now, or our current purpose in God's kingdom. We may carry emotional burdens and concerns, relating to bits of our own past which we may or may not be proud of. Likewise we may have been affected by how others have impacted on our lives; different and difficult situations may have taught us unhealthy responses to certain behaviours in other people. We may recognize these things impact our relationships, both existing and new ones. We may also have had periods of mental or physical ill-health, either now healed or with which with faith and hope we are learning to live. How do we set all these

things aside in an appropriate fashion, drawing a line under them without dwelling on their significance in an un-healthy way?

Answering that question may be something that we need to respond to in the quietness of our own hearts and homes. It may require a practical outcome or result, or simply be a conscious decision to face a new phase of life purposefully, and acknowledging what Jesus' has taught us. Whichever, it is likely to require prayer, and that may be something for which we will require the support of others. We must not hesitate to seek prayerful support from people we trust. Symbolic actions can help, physically writing, drawing or creating something relevant that can be thrown away, burnt or otherwise prayerfully set aside. Whilst we do indeed wait a week for the Feast of Pentecost, we live as those already blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit with us, and we do not have to wait to turn to God asking for its power to be gently revealed in changing the motivation and focus of our lives.

But this is a corporate task too, as the body of Christ in this community. This week, have been starting to pray and plan our parts as we start to respond to the need to move forward with God in his mission here in Eversley, as well as in Darby Green and Frogmore. He and I have started to consider what it is that needs to be set aside from the past in these churches, and what the narrative of our future mission under God is. There will be incidents and histories that need to be laid down, and moved on from, before God can do a new thing through us, and we have to ask ourselves if we're prayerfully prepared to do that, and how it is appropriate to do so.

We are of the world, and in the world, but we do not need to behave as the world does, hanging on to old ways of doing things and past hurts. As those who have been taught to pray by Jesus, who have stood at the foot of the cross and watched as he suffered with and for us, who can bear witness to the resurrection because we know ourselves forgiven, the challenge now it to live in the expectation of experiencing Jesus' being glorified in us (John 17:10). That is what our role in joining in with God's mission on earth is. If we are to truly live as witnesses to Jesus' Ascension, and in anticipation of his coming again in glory to complete his work, we have to prayerfully set aside what is past, and consider ourselves as the gift of God to him (John 17:6-9), to share in the new work of his Kingdom, in our lives and in this place.