

Sunday after Ascension, 16 May 2021

“What happens now? We are trying to keep up the pretence of solidarity and togetherness, we faithfully offer our praises in the temple, and talk about the bizarre things that have happened over the last few weeks, the ‘not quite the end’ feel of it all. But, in truth, it’s quite hard to keep the momentum going. Some of us are better than others at geeing ourselves up, but you can see the confidence beginning to drain from our faces. Although we’d like to think that he is still present in some way or other, all I am conscious of, at any rate, is a growing absence.

“None of us doubt what we have experienced over these last days: he *was* there, as real as you or I. And, you know, it felt OK; those gatherings in the upper room, the breakfasts on the beach, all seemed to be saying that it was going to be alright, that the horrors of *that* week in Jerusalem would recede into history. And as our renewed time with him carried on, it became more comfortable, more, dare I say, normal. Just like old times. And I am sure I wasn’t alone in thinking that it would be like this from now on.

“And then, as if things couldn’t get any stranger, he disappears. I don’t expect to see him ever again. So, what becomes of all those promises and teaching? Another false dawn? Without him, what are we? As I say, I would like to think that there is still something to hang on to, that this isn’t quite the end, that something else will happen. He did say something about power coming from on high, but I am not sure what this means. His words are becoming fainter; it is becoming increasingly likely that whatever we face in the future, we face without him, Alone.”

It is relatively easy to see the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost as a superficial interlude between one momentous event and another. We know what it’s all about, don’t we, we are waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit; our collective prayers are full of it. Just bide your time, and we will all soon be in a state of ecstasy with flames dancing above our heads.

But, to me, that is *not* what this period is about. Yes, according to Luke, the disciples were told by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem for power from on high to be sent to them, but they’d be forgiven for being a bit confused by this. They couldn’t see through the other end of the telescope as we can. They didn’t know what Pentecost would bring. Instead, I think they had a different kind of experience, and that this experience characterises times we all have at one time or another in our own lives: what these ten days are about is confronting and negotiating an overwhelming sense of loss.

Just think about it: the disciples had had a series of experiences with Jesus: being called, following him, listening to him, marvelling at him, deserting him; they witness his desolation on the cross, and then, lo and behold, he appears to them again after his death, feasting with them, teaching them about the scriptures. But then he departs from them, and it is clear from this departure that they would never see him again, promising that they will be clothed with power from on high, but not really knowing what that meant. But as time progressed from the moment of the Ascension, the impact of those

words must have begun to fade as nothing seemed to be happening. Between the making of a sound and the return of its echo there was only silence.

It is a hard and irreducible fact that all of us have to experience loss at one time or another. From the breaking of a child's favourite toy; to a parent waving that same child goodbye as they leave home to go to college or set up home elsewhere; to retirement, when all you have given your working life to, and which has given you a certain meaning to your life, suddenly stops; to the death of a loved one; from all these examples and many more, we will all, from time to time, face a moment of not being able to stay where we are. And those times are painful, challenging and can produce a profound sense of emptiness. What meaning does my life have now? How can I cope without seeing him every day? What will replace what is lost? No other toy will do. And we begin to search our past for those moments, sometimes gilded, when the comfort and reassurance of what life was like *before* the disruption ran like a thread through our happiness. The past can be another country, but it can also be a place we may sometimes prefer to live in than our uncertain present.

What characterises these times is something akin to a period of mourning, adjusting to the loss, adjusting to the disruption of a pattern that gave us meaning and belonging, not knowing in that moment what will become of us. How will we survive? How will we adapt? It is not easy. In many ways, many people's lives are defined not by what they have done or what they hope for in the future, but how they have negotiated the periods of loss they have encountered and felt.

You can see *why* the disciples endured this ten-day period. We can rationalise it quite straightforwardly: they had to detach themselves from a pre-understanding of Jesus, the one they gained during their physical time with him, in order to become the evangelists of the Gospel. They could not live in the past whilst undertaking the work of the future. But, of course, that is easier said than done. Even with our losses, we all try and carry on, we all try and articulate a hope in a future that, although not necessarily better, will be different, and is one in which we will have a part to play, finding a new presence to set alongside the losses of our lives.

But the espousal of that hope doesn't wipe away the scars of the past: Jesus still bore his wounds in his hands and feet. There will be moments in all our lives when we inhabit a particular dark space, a metaphorical ten-day period shedding tears of loss, but I would like to think, even in those moments, and perhaps especially in those moments, some vestige of a future hope will still allow its light to flicker in the darkness. Although caught in a vice of uncertainty, I would like to think that Peter and his friends, offering praises in the temple, still clung on to the hope that their remembrance of Jesus would not be the last sound they had of him. That there would be an echo to follow. Even in the bleakest moments, we still have an innate capacity – call it grace – to believe that there can be more.

We are still here. We still have a life to live. And we don't abandon the past; instead, we take its richness and its legacy with us into our future, learning, perhaps to be thankful

for those foundational memories whilst at the same time anticipating how they can prepare us for encounters we have yet to experience.

Inhabiting these dark ten days can be a chastening and lonely time. We know in those moments that there will be no more breakfasts on the beach in the same way as in the past. And yet, let us hope and pray that the love we had for the silent voices of our own past will generate its own echo, that the love that unites us to that same past, and which is not diminished by physical separation, will transcend the feeling of loss we suffer, and that the glimmering hope of the Holy Spirit will be for us all both the source and the fulfilment of that echo, which is both the gift and the consummation of all love.