

Are we nearly there yet?

Acts 1:6-26

Are we nearly there yet? The dreaded plaintive cry from the backseat of the family car! We've all heard it; hey most of us have probably even said it! Are we nearly there yet? The cry that sends shudders into the hearts of all parents, you've got a five hour drive to your holiday destination and you have just about made it to the end of your street, are we nearly there yet? What do you say, how do you respond? I used to work with one chap who was a coach driver in his spare time, he would always respond to this question with "about 20 minutes". Trust me I have known some very long 20 minutes in his company.

This is precisely the question the apostles were asking Jesus at the start of our reading, are we nearly there yet? Despite spending so much time with Jesus, despite that fact that He had been appearing to them over a period of 40 days they were still asking the wrong question. John Calvin brilliantly describes this question with, "There are as many errors as words in this question." All the parts of the question show that the disciples were still expecting some sort of earthly kingdom. A kingdom, like the Roman Empire or the latter British Empire, a kingdom that can be marked clearly on a map and is to do with land and wealth. They were still talking in political and economic terms. It was this thinking that lead James and John in Luke 10:37 to ask, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." The apostles were still thinking solely in worldly terms, they had not as yet understood the true nature of God's kingdom.

The Jewish people of the time, the apostles included, were looking for a Messiah who would come and lead them in some sort of fantastic military campaign, a leader who would restore the fortunes of Israel and be a mighty leader in the same vain as king David had been so many years before. The apostles undoubtedly thought that Jesus was that leader not least when He was raised from the dead, surely now no nation could stand against them, victory was certain. The problem was that they like many Christians today had not understood what the kingdom was and is.

The people then had restricted the idea of the kingdom to being a physical thing, a thing of flesh and blood of money and of politics. To an extent this is true but it is only part of the story. People through the centuries and we modern rationalistic people, people who are more influenced by Greek philosophy than by scripture as a rule, have come to divorce the physical from the spiritual that is not what scripture teaches. The two aspects are intimately woven together and should not be separated out.

Think of a golf ball, the inside of the ball is bouncy and spongy, the outside is hard. The inside knows nothing of the outside but the outside incorporates and includes the inside. That is how it is with the spiritual and the physical. We in the physical

know little or nothing of the spiritual, but the spiritual is all around us influencing us and shaping us, just as the outside of the golf ball shapes and influences the inside.

When Jesus answered the Apostles' question He did so in a way that would open up their understanding to the wider reality. He tells them in verse 7 and 8, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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."

He begins by reminding them of something He has already taught them, namely that it is not theirs, or ours, to know the when and the how only the Father knows that and He, as yet, isn't telling. The second part is interesting, for it speaks, as we have heard before and will hear again of the now and the not yet. Jesus tells His disciples that they are going to receive the Holy Spirit and that when they do they will receive power.

Clearly if they, and we, are going to exercise power then there is an extent to which the kingdom has already come. Kingdoms have associated with them the concept of power, no kingdom, no power, simple. So then, the kingdom has already in some ways come, when Jesus ascended into heaven and claimed His place at the right hand of the Father then the new kingdom was ushered in, not until He comes again will that process be complete, so we see and feel the tension of the now and the not yet.

These two verses, 7 and 8, have yet more to teach us about the nature of kingdom, the Apostles' and by extension we, are told to be my witnesses. When a new king was crowned in ancient times then heralds were sent throughout the kingdom to announce the good news that a new king had been crowned. Good news because a properly constituted form of government is better than anarchy, something that some of our contemporaries would do well to ponder I think.

So Jesus was telling them and us, that a new king had been crowned and that it was necessary to share this good news to His kingdom, to the very ends of the earth. It is this sharing of the Good News that is at the heart of the book of Acts and that must be at the heart of all churches that bear the name of Jesus. It is a direct and unconditional command of The Lord Himself that we go and witness. If any church no matter how big or small, how young or old, of whatever denomination or flavour, whether it be an established church or one of the fresh expressions of church doesn't grasp that this is the most fundamentally important aspect of their being then they have missed the very nature of the gospel.

If the concept of witness and of mission is not the heart beat of a church then that church is not a church. Remember that the church is God's plan for the world, it is through the church that He will redeem and renew this fallen and broken world, if the church does not obey, then just as we heard in the final part of our series on the I am sayings, it will be pruned and thrown into the fire!

The church of God is ever expanding ever increasing, the Apostles' asked if it was at this time, Jesus answered it was not for them to know, but clearly it was from that time forward, the now and the not yet, it was for them and it is still for us to be the ones who carry the message ever onwards in time and space.

Jesus' apostles then witness His ascension, they see Him go up into the clouds and then disappear from view. They also hear of the fact that this same Jesus will come back in the same way. As Paul tells us in 1 Thess 4, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

Jesus will come back in the clouds just as He went away. Heaven is not up there somewhere, it is all around us, the spiritual realm, that we as yet don't see, but one day will see perfectly. Jesus was hid from their sight by clouds and will return in clouds, the clouds speaking of the presence of God, like when He led the Israelites into the promised land and like when the cloud descended on the mountain when the 10 commandments were given, or like the cloud that filled the temple when Solomon dedicated it. Jesus ascended into the heavenly realm in order that we could receive the promised gift of the Spirit, the gift we will look at next week on Pentecost Sunday.

The Apostles' having been chastised by the angels stop wasting their time looking at the sky and instead go and get on with two immensely practical things. The first one is that they sorted out who was to replace Judas. They did this by picking people who were qualified for the post, people who had been with Jesus and saw Him ascend, used the scriptures to understand what needed to be done as we see in Peter's speech, prayed about the decision and then cast lots in accordance with scripture to make the final decision.

All of these aspects of testing are still open to us except for the casting of lots. This is the last occasion in scripture where we find this method employed and the reason for this is that after this occasion the Spirit had been given. We as God's people must listen to what the Spirit is saying on all aspects of personal and corporate life, that is one of the roles of the Spirit to show us God's will.

The second thing the Apostles' went off to do was even more important, they prayed. This was some prayer meeting, the scripture tell us in verse 14 that "they joined together constantly in prayer!" The time from ascension to Pentecost is 10 days! That is a lot of prayer. It is on this basis of continued and faithful prayer that the Spirit is given those 10 days later.

Prayer is the bedrock of a worshiping and witnessing community, it is in prayer that we meet the Father; it is in prayer that we are confronted with our sinfulness and needs, is in prayer that we receive, forgiveness for that sin and encouragement in our needs, it is in prayer that we receive the power of the Spirit. So the question is

then how seriously do we take prayer? The Apostles' took it very seriously and the result was a life changing, world changing event, do we take prayer that seriously?

As I have been pondering, praying and reading over the last few weeks, I believe that the Lord has challenged me about both my personal prayer life and our corporate prayer life. I know I don't spend anything like enough time in personal prayer, part of my journey, my pilgrimage, is to spend more and better time with the Lord each day.

I am also aware that half an hour of family prayer in the Carey room on a Wednesday plus whatever time we spend in our service praying is insufficient. I believe that we as a body are being called to a 24 hour prayer day. I think that this may also involve St. Lawrence's for I believe that we need to be united as Christians in this place, seeking to serve Jesus and making His love known. This doesn't mean that we all have to pray for 24 hours but it does mean that there will be somebody here praying throughout that 24 hour period, so my question to finish this morning is, are you up for it? Can you, can I, respond to the challenge of God and show to Him that we are serious about serving Him in this place, that we do want to be His witnesses in this place and that we want to be used as His hands and feet and see his kingdom grow? I pray that we can!