

**Easter 7**  
**Waiting upon God**  
**Acts 1.12-14**

*“Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet... All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”*

Fr Peter Groves

Our scripture readings offer us pictures of prayer. The gospel passage, from John 17, is sometimes known as the “high priestly prayer of Jesus”. It comes at the end of a long series of discourses, but it marks a break and an ending of what has gone before. The evangelist makes a point of introducing these particular words of Jesus in a particular way: “When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee...” Jesus adopts a physical posture – he looks upwards – and then he begins his prayer to the Father.

The action of the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, follows on immediately from the narrative of the Ascension. Jesus has been taken into heaven, taken from the physical presence of the disciples, and they respond as they have been instructed. Jesus has told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father. After Jesus is removed from their sight, they are immediately upbraided by two men clad in white robes, who ask them “Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking at the sky?” Luke’s gospel, the original to which Acts is the sequel, is the gospel in which the witnesses to the empty tomb are met by two men in dazzling apparel, who challenge them with the words “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” The reaction to the resurrection of Jesus and the reaction to his Ascension are clearly paralleled. Something has happened beyond your comprehending, but the correct response is not to stop and stare, but to go and do something, to get on with living out the consequences of these earth shattering theophanies.

The doing which is now required of the disciples, is to wait. We might think that odd. Surely the events to which these chosen few are the witnesses, the events which enact nothing less than the salvation of the world, call for some dynamic response? Well, yes, they do, and that dynamic response is precisely to wait, and more specifically, to wait upon God. The English word “wait” has, over time, become a word which indicates stasis, lack of action. Don’t do something, rather wait. We are apt to shout “wait” to the enthusiast desperate to rush into things, to the child running on ahead. “Wait” indicates an injunction not to act, more than an instruction to do something. Rarely have we felt this ordinary sense of “wait” more strongly, than at present. Restricted by our current circumstances, we are “waiting” for things to change, and we are understandably frustrated at our own passivity, even helplessness, in the face of the current crisis.

However, our word “wait” is close, in origin, to another English word – watch – and that word is rather more

positive. You may at Christmas time hear people talking or singing about “waits” – bands of carol singers – who take their name from medieval “waits”, pipers and other musicians who contributed to town life by playing when required, to welcome visitors, or to sound important times and moments. This use of wait, the sense of watching, suggests an active stance of expectation, or anticipation. We watch for something that is going to happen and the implication is that if we do not watch, we will miss it.

The gospels are full of the language of watching. Jesus often instructs his disciples to watch with him, to stay awake and not be caught by surprise at the coming of the Kingdom of God. The disciples, of course, are poor at watching. At the greatest crisis of his mission, Jesus finds them sleeping in the garden while he has been struggling in prayer to discern the father’s will. Those who are sleeping need to awake, or they will miss the drama of the passion unfolding before them.

At this time in the church's year, the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost, we join with the apostles in their task of waiting. But if we see understand waiting to be something merely passive, we are not imitating those first followers of Jesus. They gather in the upper room in prayer, to wait upon God by opening themselves to his presence and the working out of his purpose in their lives, and in the world. The promise for which they wait is the outpouring of the Spirit which gives birth to what we now call the church, but that outpouring, that decisive act of God the Father, is not the end of their waiting but the beginning. The fulfilment of God's promise is the empowerment of the apostles to begin the task of preaching the gospel, the task which we have inherited from them.

Waiting upon God is what every Christian is called to do in prayer, just as did those first disciples and the mother of Jesus. However we say our prayers, whether we are joining with others in set liturgical forms, or whether, separated by the closure of our churches, we are praying alone or with our families.

Whether we are repeating familiar words such as those of the Lord's Prayer, whether we are simply keeping silence and trying to focus on Christ, whether we are reflecting upon the desires of our hearts and asking God to fulfil them, we are waiting upon God, offering ourselves to his presence in our lives. However good or bad our waiting, God's presence is unfailing. We may not discern it in that moment, we may not realise until moments, hours, days or years later what the Lord was unfolding for us, but nevertheless our waiting will be rewarded.

These individual acts of waiting upon God – every little act of prayer, every silent reflection, every petition or repetition – are patterns of our whole Christian lives. We cannot, by definition, understand the incomprehensible love of God which animates us. However, at some times more than others, in certain contexts and through certain experiences, more often than not with hindsight, we will recognise that God is at work, and that recognition will indeed be a gift. But the reward of our waiting does not mean that that

waiting has come to an end. Waiting is rather the basic Christian attitude, the openness to the presence of God which ought to underlie everything we do.

Waiting upon God is no easy task at the best of times; in these particular locked down days the call to see waiting as an action is an irony as much as a challenge. But God does call us to wait, however active or inactive we are. He calls us know him, to acknowledge his presence in our lives. He calls us to the realisation that we are never alone in this world, that we depend for every moment of our existence upon God's intimate love, closer to our selves than any part of us. If we are able to learn this attitude, even momentarily, we will understand that Christian waiting never comes to an end, because being conscious of God in our lives is being conscious of something creative, of something which is always calling and leading us on. The Christian life is a life, something dynamic, something which is done and within which things happen. Far from being something static, waiting upon God turns out to be

following, to be answering the call to be a disciple, to be one who learns, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and be taught by him ever more about the mystery of our own individual lives.