

Ascension Day Talk 2020, Acts 1:1-11 – ‘What happens next?’

When I was a child – say, 10 or 11 years old – my favourite TV programme was a Question of Sport. I’ve been a sports nut all my life, and I love quizzes, so a sports quiz for a sports-mad 10 year old is about as good as it gets. It’s still running now, and Sue Barker miraculously looks the same age as she did 25 years ago. But back in the day, it used to be David Coleman asking the questions, with Emlyn Hughes and Bill Beaumont as team captains.

One of my favourite rounds was ‘What happens next?’ The format is obvious – a piece of film plays and then stops and the teams had to work out what happened next. It was, as you can imagine, something fairly odd – a dog running on the pitch, two batsmen colliding as they went for a run, the tennis player smashing the ball against the head of the net-caught umpire. (As an aside, wasn’t that a great job, having to sit for 3 hours touching the net for each serve? Another vital role lost to technology...)

I didn’t usually get it right, but the fun was in the imagining. Something unpredictable was coming, you just didn’t know what it was.

In a way, Jesus and his disciples play an ancient version of this exercise in our Ascension Day reading. Jesus has just told them to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit to fill them. Something unpredictable was coming, and the disciples didn’t really know it was. So **they essentially ask Jesus what happens next.** Or in their words: ‘Are you about to restore the kingdom to Israel?’ In their understanding of the scriptures, this is what happens once the Messiah is revealed, and it betrays that they still have a lot to learn about what the new era that Jesus brought into being was going to look like.

But nevertheless, they ask: ‘Jesus, what happens next?’ And much like a Question of Sport, Jesus presses the pause button and says, effectively: ‘I’m not going to tell you. Or to use his words: **‘That’s not for you to know. You just need to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit.’**

We live in uncertain times. The lockdown has made fundamental changes to our lives for a season, but we all sense that even as restrictions ease, whatever we go back to won’t be the same as what we left. We’ve got off the treadmill and many of us, frankly, aren’t too keen to get back on. Our planet isn’t too keen on the old treadmill either. We’re all asking ‘what happens next?’

And I want share today that I think **Jesus’ answer to that question in 2020 is the same as he gave his disciples 2000 years ago:** ‘That’s not for you to know. You just need to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit.’

Waiting is hard – very few of us like waiting. We’ve got used to a lot more of it in the last few weeks – whether it’s queues to get into shops, or to get our internet connection good enough to talk to someone, or just eke-ing out some important household item which we know we can’t replace for a few days. But there is a pay-off. Waiting develops both gratitude and endurance. We learn to be more thankful for what we have, and more able to last, either with or without it.

Jesus knew that – and he knew that his disciples were going to need to excel in both gratitude and endurance for the ministry that lay ahead. But most of all, he knew that what they needed was to be filled with the Holy Spirit – to be soaked with God’s love and power, with his truth and humility.

And **it’s what still need more than anything else**. The truth is that none of us knows how the next few weeks will play out, let alone months or years. And, perhaps, it’s best that we *don’t* know. Instead, we need to hear Jesus’ words to us again: ‘Wait for the power of the Holy Spirit.’

It is the Spirit of Jesus that will lead us through this current season and into the new one. It is the Spirit that will show us the new ways God is at work. It is the Spirit that will give us new hope, new creativity, new energy to partner with God in his plans. It is the Spirit that will enable us to walk with God, in His love and power. It is the Spirit which will show us how to be the Church in a changed culture, how to adapt and still be authentically God’s people for this new season in which we find ourselves. And which will not only sustain us, but will empower us to reach and bless *others* with this same love. We will be witnesses, heralds of this new thing for the whole community, for our city, for our nation.

For all of this, we need the Holy Spirit. The other voices are useful, and there are lots of them at the moment. But only one really matters – and it’s the one we need to wait for with renewed longing.

This Pentecost we need, our nation needs, the world needs, an outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit more than ever. The Spirit that both fills us with God’s love *and* leads us into mission. The Spirit that shapes us and our community in new ways, enabling God’s kingdom to come more and more in our land.

So what happens next? I don’t know – but let’s wait, and be filled, and trust that God will continue to lead us wherever he wants. The wind blows where it pleases, and there is no safer place to be than in the centre of God’s will.

Amen, come Holy Spirit. Amen, come Lord Jesus.