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Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : Sunday after Ascension ~ 28 May 2017

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There is a legend about Jesus' re-entry into heaven after his ascension. The first person he met was the Archangel Gabriel: "Welcome back, my Lord" smiled the Archangel bowing low "have you completed what you set out to do?" "I think so" replied Jesus. "You successfully organised a church to carry on your work and teaching?" "Well" said Jesus "I left behind eleven men to really start things moving" "Eleven men" gasped the Archangel "Is that all?" "That is all" replied Jesus quietly. "These eleven men that you chose; were they men of great importance and scholarship?" asked the Archangel a little hoarsely. "No" said Jesus, raising his eyebrows and smiling a little, "in fact they were very ordinary work-a-day men. But I taught Peter, James and John about the kingdom of God; I taught Thomas about faith; and all of them were with me as I healed and preached to the crowds." "But what if they should fail? Surely you must have other plans to make sure your work was not in vain. All that suffering on the cross would be wasted." The reply of Jesus was firm and confident: "I have made no other plans".

And thus was the church begun – depending upon ordinary human beings to continue the work, to spread the word. And we, here and now, are the latest in that long line of ordinary human beings called, whether we know it or not, to continue that work as disciples today. What a task. What a calling. What a responsibility. Yet maybe we should not be too overwhelmed or frightened – particularly when we remember that it is in God's strength that we can rely, for we are never alone – God is with us. Note too the last bit of the Acts reading from this morning, as Luke, the author, records it: "When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer". "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer". And it is prayer that is the crucial and most important aspect of our faith – as it is of many faiths. Prayer is what we are called to do – for without prayer nothing will happen or work properly. It is almost always when we can do nothing else, that we can at least pray.

One new strand of this is starting right now. 'Thy Kingdom Come' is a global prayer movement which the Archbishop of Canterbury is inviting people around the world to join. He is calling on Christians to pray that more people might come to know Jesus Christ during a focused time between Ascension and Pentecost from now until 4<sup>th</sup> June. The hope is that people will commit to pray with God's world-wide family - as a church, individually or as a family; and that people will be transformed through prayer by the Holy Spirit, finding new confidence to be witnesses for Jesus Christ. One simple idea is for us to promise now to pray for a few minutes at 5pm every day for perhaps five people we know

who we pray might grow in their faith, who might turn to Christ. We don't have to tell them we are praying for them. We can just hold them in our thoughts and leave the rest up to God.

For, as I have said, it is prayer that marks us out as people of faith. When the news broke on Tuesday morning of the terrible and evil bomb attack in Manchester, many millions will have prayed – because there was nothing else we could do. I was at a meeting of local clergy early that morning and all we could do was pray. Later that same morning, three of us were here, as always on a Tuesday at 11, to pray. Andrew Nunn, the Dean of Southwark Cathedral has written this moving prayer:

*'In the midst of life we are in death.' Lord, in a place of pleasure, terror struck, in a place of life, death came. Hold us in our shock and grief, comfort the distressed, heal the injured, calm the anxious, reunite the separated, console the bereaved, and give rest and everlasting peace to those who have died, for your love never fails and through the darkness your light always shines. Amen.*

I've found myself repeating these words from an Iona liturgy: "Goodness is stronger than lies; Light is stronger than darkness; Love is stronger than evil; Life is stronger than death".

After his ascension, Jesus left human beings to carry on his work of spreading goodness, light, love, life. And maybe it is the word 'beings' which is crucial – for as someone has put it we are human beings and not human doings. Sometimes we just have to try 'to be' much more than we have try 'to do'.

But finally do remember one important point. We don't actually have to use words to pray. For many it is enough to be still, quiet, silent. Of course in our noisy busy world there are few places where we can find stillness, quiet – but maybe that is exactly what a place like this lovely church is for – to be a house of prayer where we can find stillness, quiet. I yearn for this to be known as a place where prayer has soaked into the walls. Yes, lots of words are spoken, lots of music is played and sung – but also this must be a place where quiet and stillness abounds. I found this the other day which spoke to me as it might to you:

"Be silent. Be still. Alone. Empty before your God. Say nothing. Ask nothing. Be silent. Be still. Let your God look upon you. That is all. God knows. God understands. God loves you with an enormous love, and only wants to look upon you with that love. Quiet. Still. Be. Let your God love you".