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Christ Church West Wimbledon

Sermon :

“Waiting – Ascension and Pentecost,” May 16, 2021

SERMON

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I expect that many of you, like me, feel that we have been spending a great deal of time, over the last fifteen months, just waiting. Waiting for the latest Coronavirus infection figures, waiting for the next Government announcement, and now, at last, waiting for the most restrictive of the lockdown rules to be lifted tomorrow. And then a further wait, in hope and trepidation, for 21st June and beyond.

During lockdown, there was not a lot for most of us to do, except:

- Staying at home;
- trying to keep ourselves and others near to us safe and healthy, both physically and mentally;
- Trying not to let things slip;
- carrying on doing all those useful activities we have always done;
- and maybe even adding some more new hobbies or responsibilities.

All within the narrow boundaries of the coronavirus rules and guidance.

But from tomorrow, it will be different. We'll be able again to invite a few friends into our home, and as many as thirty people to parties in our gardens. We'll be able to attend exhibitions, and large outdoor events, and have a pub or restaurant meal inside, rather than on the pavement.

But in church terms, we will still be in a period of waiting though, of course, a lot more positive than the coronavirus kind. We have just had, last Thursday, Ascension Day. On that day the apostles gathered together to hear Jesus's last words to them as a bodily presence, and watched as He was drawn up into heaven. A key feature of those last words was the promise that they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and with it they would be able to be

the witnesses of Jesus – representing Him and spreading His teaching, throughout the whole Earth. As Christians, we are waiting, with, the apostles, for the coming of the Holy Spirit, even while our secular lives are beginning to get back to normal.

Coming back to the apostles, Luke's account of the Ascension makes it sound quite an abrupt departure, without much of an explanation of how the gift of the Holy Spirit would change things, nor even when it would come. All in all it must have been quite confusing, even frightening, for the apostles. But with a firm hope of something remarkable that was about to happen. And something remarkable does happen, of course, at Pentecost, ten days later.

In many ways this period between Ascension Day and Pentecost has a lot in common with those other periods of waiting, in the church calendar: Advent, leading up to the Birth of Christ; and Lent, leading up to His death and resurrection. And perhaps it has even more in common with Easter Saturday, with the very recent and raw departure of Jesus, but with the promise of His return in one form or another.

Pentecost is the third most important Christian Festival, after Easter and Christmas, marking the birth of the church. Whit Sunday, as it was called in my childhood, was a day when my mother, a serious, but not particularly regular church goer, made absolutely certain that we all went to church – the only other two being Christmas and Easter days.

Ascension Day is not easy to categorise. Clearly extremely important, but also an ordinary working day, when employers expect full hours and commitment, without concessions. Many of us are not able to go to church, having other important obligations, albeit every-day types of obligations. Hopefully, we'll be able to at least partly make up for that today, thinking about the importance of the Ascension: this key point where we lost Jesus' bodily presence on Earth, but knowing that God, in His three persons, is always with us.

So for the next week, let's treat this as we would Holy Week or Advent, thinking and praying about the good news, the celebration of which is coming next Sunday. Preparing for Pentecost with prayer and contemplation – and maybe also with the preparation of a really good special meal – as we would do at Christmas and Easter.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.