

I often feel quite sorry for the disciples when we read passages from the Gospel and Acts, it is almost as if the writers who relayed the stories had it out for them, wanted to show them up as fools. So often in our accounts of the life of Jesus the disciples just don't get it, they just don't quite understand what Jesus means or what he is doing. Not only that but they are portrayed as weak and scared as they abandon Jesus at his crucifixion and often foolish at their unbelief or at the very least their slowness to understand. Our passage from Acts today is no different, yet again we see the disciples failing to truly understand what Jesus means, to truly comprehend the weight of what he had accomplished and the significance of what he was promising them. The few verses which precede today's reading tell us that Jesus had been with the disciples for forty days since his resurrection, presenting himself alive with many convincing proofs and speaking to them about the Kingdom of God. Furthermore Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father, to wait there to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. They are to wait. They are to be patient. Jesus orders them to be patient.

It is with these words of Jesus in mind, that the disciples ask him the question from the beginning of our reading from Acts: "Lord is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom of Israel?" The disciples just can't wait anymore, they can't wait to ask Jesus this question and they can't wait for God to fulfill his promises. And who could blame them? As Jews living in First Century Palestine, they were living under Roman oppression, they were living under foreign rule. But they were also living under the promises made to Israel by God through the Prophets, the promises that spoke of God restoring Israel, the promises of returning Israel from exile and the promises that God would raise up a Messiah to deliver them, a Messiah that would restore Israel to its proper place of glory and prestige in the world, as God's chosen nation. And the disciples had truly come to understand Jesus as Messiah, they had come to understand him as the fulfillment of God's promises, the one who would restore Israel to greater glory and remove the yoke of its oppressors. With this in mind, we can forgive the disciples for being impatient, for asking Jesus if now the was time... if now was the time that God would make things right in the world, if now was the time that God would restore the fortunes of Israel as he had promised to do. And yet once again, it is the wrong question, once again Jesus chides the disciples lack of understanding as he responds to them saying, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority."

I think that so often today that we in the church are just like Jesus' early disciples, are just as impatient and just as eager for God to reveal his plans to us. We want to know exactly what God is up to, we want to know if what we are doing is right, if what we are doing will be fruitful. We want to know that we will have success and I think just like the disciples we want to know when God will restore those glorious days past, we want to know when God will restore those glorious days when the church was filled to the rafters, we want to know if now is the time when God will restore our Sunday Schools so that they are busting at the seams once more, teeming with children and youth. We want to know just as the disciples did with Israel, when God will return the church to its rightful place in society, to its place of prestige and privilege.

We remember the glory days of the church in the midst of decline and indifference and I think we as the Church ask God, "Lord is this the time when you will restore your Church?" Like the disciples we too are called to wait, we too are called to leave the restoration of the world and the coming of God's Kingdom up to God, for it is God who knows the times and seasons he has set, it is God who will ultimately reconcile all things to himself through his Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus answer to the disciples question, and by extension ours, does not end there however, he goes to respond to his disciples saying "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And with those words Jesus left his disciples on earth, Jesus ascended into heaven, and the disciples stood their gawking. Jesus had given the disciples a purpose behind their waiting, Jesus told his disciples that they were not passively wait, that they were not to idly stand by and worship him until he came again, but rather they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit, that they would receive that power not for themselves and not for the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel, but rather so that they might be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Jesus had commanded his disciples into active waiting, into waiting with a purpose and waiting with a promise. The disciples did not know when or where Jesus would return to them, they did not know when or where Jesus' promise of the Kingdom of God would be

fulfilled, but they were given a mandate, they were given the mandate to be Jesus' witnesses in the world. They were commissioned to begin in Jerusalem, to begin where they were most comfortable and go out from there. To go out from that centre into Judea, and then to neighbouring Samaria which would have been challenging and finally the biggest challenge of all for the disciples, they were called to go to the ends of the world, to bring the Good News of Jesus as far as they could.

In response to all of this, the disciples could only stare. They stared up into the sky, hoping that Jesus might return, hoping that if they waited long enough on that mountain top he might just come back to them, if they waited passively there on the mountain Jesus might just show them what to do and how to do it. But instead we hear that two men dressed in dazzling white appear, two angels of God who ask the disciples "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come the same way as you saw him go into heaven." And with those words the disciples snap out of it and return to Jerusalem, return to Jerusalem where Jesus has commanded them to begin and they constantly devote themselves to prayer, actively waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit that they have been promised.

In the face of Jesus' continuing commandment to wait, I think that we too often respond as the disciples did, we respond by sitting passively by hoping that God will show us the way, that God will accomplish all that he has promised immediately, that God will make the world right in the here and now. I think that sometimes we can get caught up in the feeling that "If we just worship him well enough, if we just get out liturgy right, if we just read or hear the scriptures enough then surely we can wait here for God's promised restoration, surely we can wait here passively for God's promised Kingdom. When we in the church have those moments of passively waiting, passively hoping that Jesus will return, I think that angels' words to the disciples on the mountaintop speak to us - "Why do you stand looking up into heaven? Why have you not heard and understood what Jesus has promised you?"

Jesus has not asked us to impatiently build God's kingdom here on earth, but he also has not asked us to wait passively until it comes. He has called to actively wait for it, to actively wait for it and to be his witnesses, to be witnesses of that Kingdom which is breaking into this world, which is renewing and transforming this world. Jesus invites us as a Church and as followers of Jesus to be his witnesses to the ends of the world. As witnesses we are called to reflect the love of God that we have experienced in our own lives out into the world, we are called to share with the world the joy and peace that we have experienced through God's redeeming Love. We are called to welcome the stranger into our midst, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked. We are called to challenge the oppressive structures of this world, we called to pray without ceasing. We are called to care for our world as stewards of God's gift to us. And yes we are called to share the faith we have received with the world around us, in our Jerusalems, in our Judeas and Samarias and finally to the ends of the earth.

If Jesus' call to actively wait and witness to him and to his Love sounds challenging by our own power – it is. In fact I'd go as far as to say that on our own it is impossible, on our own we have no hope to accomplish what Jesus asks of us; however we must remember that we are not alone – not only do we have each other as the gathered Body of Christ, but we have also been promised that we too "will receive power by the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the Earth." Jesus promises us today that we will receive power to be his witnesses, we through the power of the Holy Spirit will be able to reflect the love and grace of Jesus Christ into the world, that we as individuals and as the gathered body of Christ in Grace Church are enabled each and every day to be his witnesses by the power of His life-giving Spirit.

Don't worry this doesn't mean that each of us has been called to go out on to the streets and do direct evangelism (though perhaps some of you have), but it does mean that as a Church we are called not to passively wait for God to fulfill his promises, but rather to wait actively: to pray constantly, to worship without ceasing and to share with the world around us the Good News that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that everyone can experience abundant life in Him. The task of witnessing to Jesus may seem daunting, it may seem like something too difficult to do in a world that so often doesn't want to hear about Jesus, but we are not alone in this, we are not alone as Jesus commissions us to be his witnesses. God has promised that the Holy Spirit will be with his church, God has promised that the Holy Spirit will be with each and every one of us as we are called to be witnesses each in our own unique way. As you go out today to be a witness of Jesus, remember always that we believe in a God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, and for that I say thanks be to God! Alleluia!