

# While you're waiting ...

*A sermon on Acts 1:6-14 & John 17:1-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 May 2023*

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## Message

When God closes one chapter before opening another, the time in between is a time for prayer and entering into the life of God.

## Sermon

Today we enter the last week of the season of Pascha, the great fifty day celebration of Christ's resurrection victory over the powers of death. The fifty days ends next Sunday with the Day of Pentecost. Last Thursday night, we gathered to celebrate the feast of the Ascension, the day when Jesus, after walking resurrected with his disciples for forty days, was taken into heaven to be everywhere present. On departing, he told his followers to wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

We don't really face the situation that these disciples did, the time of dilemma, of in-between, with Jesus gone, and the Spirit not yet come. We live in the time of the Spirit. The promise has been realised – the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh. God is with us everywhere and always, as close as the breeze on our cheek.

We're not really faced with the question of how to live in the in between, in the time of waiting. But then again, sometimes we do face similar in between times, don't we? God doesn't always feel as close as the breeze on our cheek.

Many of us experienced the covid lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 as one of those weird in-between times. So much of the life we had long taken for granted was suddenly lost, and the promise of renewed freedom to come felt very uncertain and difficult to hold onto. We were told to wait. In fact we were legally ordered to wait. But exactly what we were waiting for or when it might arrive was far from clear. For us in this church, the waiting produced very unexpected fruits as the Spirit came, blowing away many of our old ways of doing things and ushering us into a whole new way of being and doing church.

That was a big collective "in between time" for us as a church, but those strange in between times come to all of us in various ways at all different times, sometimes to all of us together, and sometimes to any of us, one at a time.

Sometimes we have had a time when God felt very close and everything was clear and we plowed into what God was calling us to do. But then it's over. The mission is completed. We look to God for the next step and God pulls back and says "Wait". And suddenly we find ourselves standing with those first disciples gazing into the sky and thinking, "Jesus, what now?" And it always catches you unprepared, doesn't it? For these first disciples, they'd only had a few weeks to get used to the idea that Jesus was back after they'd seen him killed, and now he's gone again. How do we relate to God in the times when God tells us only to wait?

In our gospel readings over recent weeks, we've been looking at a long speech from Jesus in the gospel of John, a speech usually known as the "farewell discourse". It is the account of what Jesus said to his disciples to prepare them for his departure, for life when he was no longer physically with them.

Much of what Jesus says in this farewell discourse is about relationship, about the relationship between Father, Son, Holy Spirit and us. It often sounds quite complex. If you took a pen and paper and tried to draw it – Father, Son, Spirit, us, and drew lines between them – you are in me and I am in you and they will be in us, and I have given to them and you gave them to me, etc. etc., you would end up with a very messy piece of paper, and you may not be any the wiser. Which is perhaps the point of it all.

When we are drawn into the life of the Trinity, into the eternal dance of love that is the inner life of God, there's not much point trying to describe it or explain it. We are drawn into the ultimate mystery, the mystery that lies at the heart of the universe, at the centre of life and meaning itself. What's important is not that you can draw it or explain it, but that you open yourself to it. What matters is that you allow yourself to be captured up in the dance of love and drawn into the life of God.

And never is this more important than in the in-between times. Maybe that's even what such times are for. When we're on active service for God in the world, we don't always have the time for deepening the relationship. We are caught up in activity and there's no quiet spaces for quality time to just love and be loved in God.

Sometimes that busyness is a problem of our own creating – we may be too addicted to tasks and accomplishments, or we may be fearfully hiding from stillness and solitude – but that's not always the case. Sometimes God has called us to take on tasks that involve a period of full-on activity, and in such times faithful discipleship can mean putting on hold our desire for quiet spaces of retreat and throwing ourselves into the tasks at hand. It's not healthy as a permanent lifestyle, but sometimes God may call us to it for a burst for some purpose. But then the necessary burst comes to an end.

When God has closed off one chapter of our activity in the world, and has not yet opened the next chapter, we are given a gift of time-out. But unless we can learn to appreciate it as a gift, we may anxiously squander it and fail to receive it as the generous gift of a loving God.

“This is eternal life,” said Jesus, “to know the only true God, and to know Christ, whom God has sent.” This is the essence of life for us. It is for this relationship, for this dance of love that we exist. Sure we are called to reach out to the world with God's love and mercy too, but that mission finds its source and its energy from within the dance of love, the life of God. And that is found and nurtured, just as our Acts reading said of the Apostles between Ascension and Pentecost, in constantly devoting ourselves to prayer together.

It would be false to try to separate this prayerful intimacy from the more active commitments of our faith. It is a bit like the relationship between two lifelong lovers. The relationship can't survive without plenty of quality time for gentle intimacy; physical, emotional, and thoughtful. But you can't set that apart from the rest of a shared life. It doesn't happen in a vacuum. The busyness of employment and homemaking and community building and paying bills and raising children and social service and socialising and caring for others is all part of the real stuff of our relationships too.

We can't keep all that stuff out of our love lives without making our intimacy contrived and escapist. But if the busyness of living crowds out all opportunity for relaxed intimate

engagement, we will burn out and lose touch with one another. If love is to flourish and grow, we need the gift of “in-between” times, the pauses between chapters of activity.

So too it is if we are to grow in intimacy with the elusive and yet ever-present lover we have in God. The work of mission and ministry and community building and peacemaking and justice seeking are all parts of the real stuff of that relationship. But they are not all there is. We are not just anonymous employees in God’s multinational industrial corporation. We were created too to love and be loved, to partner God in the intimate dance of deep passion and joy and ecstasy.

Of course, sometimes these times do not feel refreshing and renewing when we are in the midst of them. Like the first disciples waiting for Pentecost, it sometimes feels as though God is absent and avoiding us in these times. We can easily be tempted to flee back into busily doing and doing and doing to cover the discomfort of our unrequited yearning for the God we feel unable to reach in the silence.

And yet the yearning too is part of the dance, and it is frequently only with hindsight that we can see how God was holding us and wooing us and waltzing us in those times. This can be similar with human lovers too, for often when we have the time and space for intimate retreat, we tremble with fear and hold back and imagine that the other is somehow hiding and playing hard to get. And yet even in the waiting and yearning and hoping together, there is nourishment and life.

So thank God for the gift of “in-between” times, the times for retreat and waiting and not knowing what whirlwind will blow in next. Accept them as quality times for prayer, for love, for growing into the mystery in God. Accept the times of prayer, the seasons of discernment, the times of waiting. Welcome them as times for blessed solitude, for resting in the unknown.

A new chapter will open soon enough. God will call you to new missions and all your energies will be called on again. And when that happens you will know why you needed the in-between times to nourish your soul and refresh your life and fill you with the power of God’s Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.