

The momentous events of the resurrection of the Ascension of Christ were followed by a gap in the action. Jesus' close friends returned to Jerusalem and lived in community, devoting themselves to prayer. Jesus' mother and the other, closely associated, women are there too. It sounds like a monastic house, almost? We can imagine the air of expectation and the sense of waiting for the gift Jesus has said will be sent?

In liturgical time, Pentecost comes about 10 days after Ascension. Pentecost was a Jewish agricultural festival coming 50 days after the Passover season. All the pilgrims were gathered in Jerusalem for that festival, when the spirit descended upon the Apostles. So, it can't have been long after the Ascension that the gift of the Spirit was actually given?

After Pentecost the new church, which we saw in the reading from Acts of the Apostles, was fired up with missionary zeal. Visits by Peter and others to different parts of Israel were made and Paul was commissioned by the Spirit of Jesus, to go to the Gentiles. The story of the good News of Jesus Christ spread across the Mediterranean. Then, in A.D. 70, Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans, following a revolt, and the church was scattered. But, far from getting rid of the church, the effect is quite the opposite. As the death of Jesus on the cross leads to the growth of the church, so the destruction of Jerusalem leads to the spreading the Christian story even further and wider in the world. By the 12th century much of the known world had become Christian.

Even though the story about Jesus Christ spreads after Pentecost there is, through many of the letters in the new Testament, a further sense of expectation that Jesus will soon return in glory and the world will be renewed in a very dramatic way. That is what Jesus foretold and it was the expectation of the Early Church. There was hope in preparation for the 'End Days', which continues right up into our own time. On the MSN website Baba Vanga, described as the "Balkan Nostradamus" by her followers, due to her supposed powers of foresight, predicted that in 2020 we would see the end of the world, Vladimir Putin would be assassinated and there would be a Tsunami in the New Year. On the website 'Religious Tolerance' there are 21 predictions that "the end" will come during or after the year 2020. It says, "*Christians have predicted several events that many believe are related: the second coming of Jesus, the war of Armageddon, the arrival on earth of the Antichrist, the Tribulation, the Rapture*". They list over 80 other predictions that the end of the world would happen before now, but none ever came true.

About a 3rd of the world's population is Christian, today. The Church in the developed world, rather like the early church in Jerusalem waiting on the gift of the Spirit, seems to have gone into a lull, where it is now waiting for the return of Jesus? We are a community of prayer, constantly meeting and celebrating the Lord's Supper, it seems? Jesus says he doesn't know when the end will come so how will we? There have been so many predictions over the last 2000 years and there are always cataclysmic events that seem

to be going on in the world that people are quick to associate with the final days of Earth? We only have to think about events in our own time now?

It is interesting that the birth of Jesus, as it is foretold in the Old Testament, is a huge event where a mighty warrior Messiah will come and lay waste to the enemies of Israel. But the arrival of Jesus, the actual Messiah, happens almost in secret, and certainly in obscurity. A few people are told but, largely, the birth of our God as a human being goes unnoticed. In Mark's gospel, especially, Jesus' true identity as Messiah is repeatedly denied and those who know are ordered to keep silent by Jesus. Even Jesus' arrest and trial are marked by Jesus refusing to openly declare himself as King or God. He goes to a criminal's death on a rubbish dump attended by just a tiny few of his friends. The Resurrection is revealed to a little over 500 people, we learn from Scripture, and the Ascension happens in front of only his closest disciples, apparently? Similarly, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is just to that small group. Certainly, 3000 are baptised on the day of Pentecost and the growth of the church begins, but the dramatic experience of the raw power of the Spirit of God seems only to have been for the very close circle of disciples?

I wonder if all of the prophecy of the End Times that we pick up in places like the book of Daniel, Mark chapter 13 and the Book of Revelation might actually turn out to be more like that of the birth and Messiahship of Jesus? Universe-shaking events prophesied, turned out to be very different when they came about upon earth. They were no less awesome or powerful, no less mysterious or divine, they were just very different to what people were expecting or maybe people wanted? Perhaps we like the idea of a dramatic experience of the raw power of God? Perhaps we want real excitement? Then the thing becomes about the 'experience', not about what it actually means or what it requires of us? Today our world is changing so that everything is (or was) about experiencing travel to exotic places or exciting events. We have now got so much 'stuff' that we can't buy any more, in the developed world, so we crave novel experiences. Maybe that's what all the predictions of the end of the world are about, nowadays?

What if we are waiting for the 'rapture', earthquakes, wars, the 4 horsemen of the apocalypse and so on and it has all actually happened already? Maybe it did happen and that's what the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. was about? Eventually Rome fell and the Christians triumphed. What if climate change, the hungry poor and the continual wars are all 'judgement' and God is waiting to see how we Christians will respond to it? What if God is letting us be responsible for our actions, according to the standards set by Jesus? Can we stand up to them by those standards? Can we live in the Spirit of Jesus and speak to the Powers that do evil in the world today? What if God is waiting on us to see what we will do next? What if our actions today determine whether we end up living in a kind of hell on earth or in a kind of heaven? We still await the return of Jesus, as foretold by angels in the Acts of the Apostles, maybe the end times have been going on since not long after Jesus' Ascension and we have just been too self-obsessed to notice?

7th Sunday after Easter 19 – 05 – 2020 Giles Kendall