



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Waiting, watching, working

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Acts 1:1-11

1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach **2** until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. **3** After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. **4** On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. **5** For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." **6** So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" **7** He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. **8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." **9** After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. **10** They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. **11** "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are not only written by the same author, but are the only two books in the Bible that are addressed to an individual. This person has the endearing name of Theophilus, which means 'lover of God'.

In the early words of the Acts, Luke tells Theophilus that he is taking up at the point he left off in the earlier gospel. Acts, then, is a sequel to Luke, with no suggestion there is a third book to follow later.

In this first chapter, there is a sense of anticipation as the disciples wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension, largely ignored by the majority of Christians, provides a necessary transition from the early ministry of Jesus of Nazareth to the Christ who is Lord of all.

It is a very appropriate passage at our Mission Anniversary for it captures a sense of mission which was true for the early church and remains true for ourselves and the task to which God has called us in our day.

If there was to be any success in the mission of the early church, they would need to acknowledge that what they were to do was not in their own strength, but in the strength of the Spirit, soon to be given to them.

Acts 1:8

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

One of the special things about being grandparents is observing the little ones as they grow. Two of our grandchildren who are brothers, like many boys, have a great interest in super-hero characters.

It was most amusing to watch a two year old trying to arrange his fingers into the correct pattern to emulate Spiderman. He sat for half an hour trying to fold the fingers appropriately before he burst in front of us to zap us with a web to capture us.

A much earlier model that has been repeated in our own generation is Superman. You will recall every time Clark Kent transformed himself into Superman, he would go into a telephone booth and strip off his business suit, having worked as a journalist at The Daily Planet, and display his official Superman clothes that indicated just who he was.

This character first appeared in 'action comics' in April 1934 and the story has been maintained down the years. If he is to stop trains and lift skyscrapers, he needs to be properly clothed in the outfit that revealed his true identity.

The Christian community and the mission we all share resonate with the underlying message of this comic character. The early church, and each successive expression of that mission, would not be able to fulfil its calling unless it was properly clothed with the Spirit of God.

It is the gifting of the Holy Spirit which enables us to carry the authentic marks of Christ and his witness into the world. At Wesley Mission, we want to affirm that truth in every way, as we gather at this special anniversary.

I have chosen three words – Waiting, Watching and Working – to help to define the experience of the early disciples and to remind ourselves of some of the critical aspects of our own mission today.

They set the rhythm that maintains our purpose. In the same way that individual lives need a regular rhythm to be able to gain the best out of life, which may include recreation, rest, prayer and worship, so the mission of Jesus Christ amongst his people has a clear sense of rhythm.

Those who work with me know that I treasure the word 'mission'. It is a word that is far deeper than its secular usage – for us, it is bound up with divine purpose.

WAITING – AN IMPERATIVE TO RECEIVE

To understand the gift of the Spirit, we recognise that there is an unavoidable sense of waiting which is required.

Waiting is one of those words that paint a picture in our minds which may be different for each of us:

- Just think of the waiting for examination results, whether academic or medical. It can be a very tense experience.
- There is the waiting in the dentist's surgery. This can be an anxious time, often worse in the waiting than it is in the experience itself.
- There is the waiting to see the growth of plants that we have set early in the spring.

In this section in the first chapter of Acts, we are reminded that there was a period of forty days (v.3) when Jesus appeared to the disciples and spoke to them about the kingdom of God. It was he who had instructed them in the following way, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about." (v.4)

If the disciples had not been instructed to wait, they might have easily shoved out of port on their mission without the appropriate wind for their sails.

One of the most important pieces of advice for any young Christian leader is not to get ahead of God. One writer put it this way: "The Spirit of God provides both the direction for ministry and the power. To act without the Spirit's presence provides a sure prescription for failure and frustration."

The forty days of Lent introduce us to great actions during Holy Week which will change the world irrevocably. The forty days after Easter will be, for the disciples, such an important period for they thought they had lost Jesus and were both excited and perplexed to see the Lord again. During this time, Jesus Christ pointed the disciples into the future, where God would do something refreshing and new amongst them. He is always pointing us forward.

The apocryphal story is told of a man who, when walking along the beach one day, comes across a proverbial washed-up, used magic lamp. When the genie answered his rub, he told him that the lamp contained but one remaining wish. The man pondered for a moment, and then requested a copy of the stock page from the newspaper exactly one year later. In a puff of smoke, the genie was gone, and in his place was the Financial News as requested. Gleefully the man sat down to analyse his trophy, knowing the sure winners a year ahead. As he glanced further through the newspaper, he found the obituary column and his own name was top of the list!

Waiting carries with it many aspects of integrity. It was Will Rogers who humorously said that you should so live that you wouldn't be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.

Waiting is not just something that was experienced by the disciples as they anticipated the coming of the Spirit. There is no doubt that there is an urgency about the Great Commission of Jesus, but emphasis upon this urgency must not be at the expense of waiting for that gift of the Spirit which makes all the difference.

WATCHING – AN INDICATION OF HOW TO ACT

In the biblical context, watching was so important. During those forty days, the disciples were not sitting on their hands; they were observing all that was happening and then, when filled with the Spirit, they could respond to the given circumstances of their situation in a way that was both appropriate and dynamic.

In the Christian life and also in our engagement in a Word and deed ministry, we have to be a people that learn the very sensitive and careful balance between 'waiting', 'watching' and 'working'.

Perhaps watching is the most difficult aspect of all, for it is closely aligned to:

- Discerning what we should be looking to do in our mission throughout the community.
- Discovering fresh opportunities, as and when they arise and seeing where they align to our calling.
- Delivering a mission which is appropriate to the social context of Australia today.

The biggest challenges in Australia are not primarily economic, though there will always be economic factors; the greatest challenges are not the fact that we live longer; but the issues that centre upon quality of life.

The deepest aspects are about human dignity.

We encourage people to live on a large map and to be concerned about the bigger picture. Despite all of this, it should concern us that the value of individuals has become cheap and expendable.

- Think of the unmentioned fact in every terrorist act – that what matters is not the underlying political issues, but the fact that lives are just superfluous.
- We are continually talking about the devaluation in comparable terms of the price of the dollar. What really is a matter of common concern is the devaluation of life.
- Life cannot be destroyed anywhere without the cheapening of life everywhere.

I was brought up in a community in the North-West of England, when all the coal mines were closing. I later ministered in Wales and the North-East of England after all such mining activity had ceased.

I heard of a plaque in one of these mining villages which read: “In the year 1832 the Lord terribly visited the colliery of Robert Clark and the above named were called to meet their maker.” There is nothing unusual about the plaque except that all twenty-three names listed as having perished are under the age of 9 years.

The practice of young children working down coal mines would be unthinkable today, but there are equally repugnant abuses of the poor and the marginalised groups within our community that demand we rise to the call of mission today.

We can rightly affirm the fact that the Christian community across the whole world has been part of dignifying human life for children and families, but there is so much more to do.

WORKING – INSTIGATING OUR MISSION FOR GOOD

Our own particular tradition is defined by the two words ‘Wesley Mission’ and both are important. The latter talks about the real incentive that gives us purpose; the former defines how we do things around here.

From the earliest days, John Wesley was actively engaged as both a preacher of the gospel and a man who was passionate about social righteousness. When I consider this man, I remember that in a day when churches did not do these things, he was:

- Promoting schools and orphanages
- Creating lending societies
- Visiting prisons and what were known as mental asylums
- Publishing small books for women and men who could barely read

This was the defining culture of the Methodist, empowered by a heart-warming experience of the Spirit of God. I am not sure that John and Charles Wesley would fit easily into the life of the church today. John would have been considered overbearing and authoritarian and Charles was far too fearful and over-sensitive – and yet both of these men had a heart cry that originated in the gift of the Spirit.

We talk about Word and deed and in some ways this has its roots in the religious experience that the Wesleys embraced and commended in their own day. For John, emotion, reason, will and action were all of a piece.

It was John who shaped the words “Go not to just to those who need us, but to those who need us most.” I find those words challenging and certainly ones that ought to help set the priorities and purpose of a modern-day Wesley Mission.

Such a mandate finds resonance with the words of Jesus who, when he was describing the nature of our Christian discipleship, taught his followers, as recorded by Luke the author of the Acts, to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

John Wesley was willing to wrestle with the challenging social calls of his day. For the defence of a nation, he said he would raise an army himself, but when the French prisoners were treated badly at Knowle in Bristol he was swift to raise with those in authority serious concerns regarding their treatment.

When I think of John Wesley there are two endearing pictures of him in later life, which never leave me:

- Firstly there is the picture of John Wesley walking the streets of London in the freezing snow, begging for money to help the poor.
- Then, there is the picture of a very old man who we observe writing to William Wilberforce on the matter of slavery and encouraging Wilberforce not to give up until such a scourge was driven from the earth.

On my desk at home is a small calendar which shows John Wesley standing at the water’s edge as Thomas Coke set out for the New World. Words then and throughout John’s ministry could be captured in his engaging phrase ‘Offer them Christ’.

I wonder what that looks like today as we examine the task before us. We are aware of living in a setting where:

- Many competing cultures cry for attention
- New communication channels bring urgency to our doorway
- Christianity is set in the context of a world of great faiths
- In such a diverse and complex setting, the stark need is that we are prepared to go

In the inner-circles of this great city, amidst the hundreds of thousands of people who constitute the lower economic groups of this metropolis, the challenge for the church is enormous. The call of God must be to stay in the city and discover how it is we can offer Christ and compassion today.

Some men who had been drifting in a rubber boat on the vast Pacific Ocean recollected later that the greatest source of strength and hope that came to them during those tortuous days was the assurance that they were being sought. Such is Jesus’ picture of God as One who seeks the lost.

Last week, Carol and I had to be in Melbourne on Wesley Mission business and found ourselves engaging in that wonderful sport of grandchildren-story-swapping. The friend we were talking with told me of how his two-year-old granddaughter (the terrible twos as some people describe it) shouted to her father, ‘Daddy, come here!’ He said, ‘Now, what’s that special word that we say.’ She responded, ‘Quickly!’

There is an urgency about our mission, not frenetic urgency – rather the desire to share good news and hope today.

As I draw to a close on this 203rd Anniversary, I call us back to our priorities and want to do so by alerting you to some very challenging words that I have carried with me throughout my ministry – and those words are:

“What is it in your life that it takes Jesus Christ to answer?”

I often express concern that I never want Wesley Mission to be thought of merely as a welfare agency or a community which was begun by the church and somehow lost its way. I ask the very same question about our life together and our mission in the wider community – “What is it in our life that it takes Jesus Christ to answer?”