**Sunday 21st May 23, St. Margaret’s; Acts 1:1-14; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11, John 17:1-11. Are we nearly there yet?**

If you’ve ever been on a car journey with children, you will be very aware of the persistent question: **“Are we nearly there yet?”!** That has certainly been our experience over many years of travelling from High Wycombe to Yorkshire to visit family. And as we got closer to ourdestination, there were certain signs which told the children that we were indeed nearly there – the narrow, hilly lane with lots of “whee” moments, the first sight of the sea and Scarborough Castle from the top of the hill.

This morning I want to talk about that question “are we nearly there yet” with regards to the disciples in the period between Easter and Pentecost, and to ourselves in 2023. I think the answer is: “Yes, and No”.

I have to say that preparing this sermon has had quite an effect on me! It’s still very much a work in progress, and I have leaned very heavily on Bishop Tom Wright’s thoughts as I prepared.

When we read the Old Testament we see plenty of instances of people who would be asking that question: the Israelites waiting to be freed from slavery in Egypt, David waiting to become king, the Israelites 70 years in Babylon, the prophets, for hundreds of years pointing towards the coming of a Messiah. I’m sure you can think of more.

 In his lifetime, Jesus was recognised by many as the fulfilment of all those prophecies, he was the Messiah, the One who would rescue the kingdom of Israel from the oppressive Roman rulers. But how would he do that?

The disciples were obviously expecting an earthly king who would overturn the Romans. Remember when James and John’s mother came and asked for her sons to be placed at Jesus’ side when he became ruler? But they were all to be disappointed. Jesus was killed. And even after the resurrection the disciples had the same expectation, when they asked whether this was the time when He would bring in his kingdom:

“**Are you at this time (ie, now) going to restore the kingdom to Israel**?”.

They must have been so confused. First He was alive and doing all the wonderful things that proved he was the Messiah, then he was killed and their hopes were dashed, then he was alive again, but not quite in the same way – he could eat, drink and communicate as usual, but he could also appear and disappear at will, even in a locked room.

And now he’s telling them to wait – for what?! I really like that account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples by the lake, especially the verse that showed Peter’s frustration and sense of failure: **“I’m going fishing”,** in other words: “let’s get back to normal; the last three years were obviously a waste of time; I have a wife and family to feed!”

So what is going on? What and where is the Kingdom of God?

Last Thursday we celebrated the Ascension, when Jesus said his final earthly farewells and returned to his Father in heaven. So where do we think heaven is?

* The place where we will be when we die if we’re good enough?
* A separate entity in the spiritual world where God lives?
* The word Ascension implies going up, doesn’t it?
* Is heaven a glorious isolated kingdom somewhere above the clouds?

 Bishop Tom Wright’s view is that Jesus’ death and resurrection transformed the disciples’ dream of the kingdom. Jesus came to renew and restore the kingdom, but not in the way the disciples were expecting. This was to be a different kind of kingdom, embracing not just the Jews but the whole of humanity. He says that Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension is not preparation for a heaven which is a separate place where God the Father reigns, but the transformation of this world, bringing it under heavenly rule, not in the future, but here and now.

Next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, remembering the time when the disciples’ waiting time was over and they received the power of the Holy Spirit, which enabled those one-time frightened, frustrated men and women to be bold in sharing their experiences of Jesus and their conviction that He was God in human form, with the reality of the resurrection and the ascension bringing about the melding of earth and heaven.

Tom Wright says that Death worked backwards in the resurrection.

* Heaven and earth have become two interlocking spheres of God’s reality.
* “From the ascension onwards the story of Jesus’ followers takes place in both dimensions”. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the direct result of the ascension.
* Pentecost was the event when God “transformed the earth with the power of heaven, with the promise that one day in the future Jesus will return and fully unite the two dimensions”.
* We’re now in the in between time, the waiting time, and there are signs, if we can detect them, that some transformation is taking place.

To return to the car journey analogy, and the question: are we nearly there yet?

Of course, even after two thousand years, we’re still not there yet, but the signs of the final destination are there.

We’re still waiting and expecting, but the Holy Spirit is busy working through Jesus’ followers – that’s us, we are his followers here and now!

* So how does God, through the Holy Spirit, manifest himself in our lives?
* How much do we consciously acknowledge His presence in our lives?
* It’s really important that we don’t leave Him at the door when we leave church?

That Holy Spirit power is available for us, as it was for the disciples 2000 years ago; our prayer and worship influence our lives, not just in church but every day, personally and relationally. Last week’s Gospel reading: John 14 – “you know him for he lives with you and will be in you”.

Finally, some words from today’s 1 Peter reading, which are as relevant for us today as they were when they were written: **“the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you**……cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you…… and the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever Amen.”

My prayer is that as we come to the Pentecost celebrations next Sunday, we will be open to renewing that Holy Spirit gift in our lives. Amen.