

For many of us the lockdown has been a **fruitful time** spiritually, just as it's been challenging. In Peter's words -- we've been *humbled*; grown more *disciplined* in prayer; able to *cast our anxieties on God, because he cares for us*; and *resisted the devil* in inevitable spiritual struggles taken place; had more time to meditate on the scriptures, perhaps read a spiritual classic or 2, seen good stuff on Netflix, Stan, YouTube.

But this phase of lockdown seems to be passing. Now comes the time to start thinking about how we recover from lockdown. What will be the new **shape of things; the church**? It will never be the same as it was. Covid 19 has accelerated change; probably banged another big nail into the coffin of Xndom as we knew it.

Elderly people may be less willing to comd out, to gather; new habits formed; numbers lowered; parishes and dioceses taking huge financial blows. But along the way we're learning new skills; new ways of meeting and communicating. God is **'rebooting'** his church ready for mission in the 21st C. -- painful, stretching though it is for many of us.

It will be a struggle. I believe we'll need **supernatural help** in a way we haven't perhaps since back when Emperor Constantine kicked off Christendom in 313.

It's interesting that in Acts 1 Jesus tells his followers not to go out into the world -- not to even try -- until they have the power of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't always occur to Christians that in proclaiming and living the gospel of God's Rule in a hostile world, **we need supernatural help**. Without which....

It's **not easy** to preach / live / enact a life of radical repentance, egalitarianism and alternative allegiance in a culture like ours.

By nature we tend to be too tentative, private, self-centred to be able to live the Jesus Way.

We need **help**: encouragement, guidance, strength; God's supernatural moving and shaking, to be able to make the shift away from bourgeois respectability (which has most of us in its grip) to the great alternative: the radical, loving, dependent life of Jesus.

We see in Acts 2, once the Spirit filled them at Pentecost, that the **disciples were indeed able** to live Jesus' Way. Previously reticent ones could preach; **non-trained ones** could heal and cast out demons; the church community could **share** food and other material things to the extent of selling private real estate to share according to need.

They found they could -- imperfectly --live under God's direct Rule as Jesus had taught. **But** only with help from the Holy Spirit: *Do not leave Jerusalem, Jesus had said, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For...in a few days you will be baptised with Holy Spirit.*

The **disciples get excited**. God isn't finished with them yet. The Kingdom of God didn't fail with Jesus' sudden execution. Now, with his Resurrection, they're being **transformed** with renewed hope that the kingdom is coming after all: "Lord," they say, *'is it now that you are going to (bring about) God's rule from Israel?'*

Jesus says: **'Don't worry** about the timing: God's going to empower you play a major part in bringing his Kingdom *on earth*: as **witnesses** to Jesus, *not just here in Judea, but to Samaritans* (whom you can't stand), *and from there out into the whole world.'*

So Jesus' final message before he leaves:

- *You'll receive power when the HS comes on you; and*
- *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, end of the earth.*

And then... the **'ascension'**: Luke takes Jesus off the scene in two sentences. *He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.* And with Jesus gone they're left to wait for *the promised gift.*

The 'Ascension'... as with each of Jesus' post resurrection events, there's an element of mystery involved. Take it overly literally and you're in trouble, with our modern knowledge: still in the solar system!

No. *Hidden by a cloud (received from their sight)* is Bible-speak for **transition** into God's heavenly dimension. When people go into or come out of heaven there's often a *cloud* involved.

For us heaven is **'out there'** in the unseen. 'Ascending' in the Creeds is not a helpful word today: 'taken (up) into heaven' (NRSV) is better. Jesus leaves the world of time / space for the unseen eternal dimension, 'heaven': beyond the veil; God's realm (one day to be reunited with a 'new earth').

Luke's telling us here is that the risen Jesus has departed for the last time, having told his followers to **wait for the Spirit** before they set out to play their part in Jesus' on-going mission in the time before he returns just as he left.

What will be doing in heaven? John's 'good news' gives us a glimpse of what Jesus will be doing once he's returned to be with *Father in heaven.*

From there Jesus is able:

- represent us there
- defend our cause in heaven
- intercede (pray) for us, constantly
- mediate for us, so that we have **unbrokered** access to God.

We have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ, the righteous one. (1 Jn 2:1).

How will he pray/intercede for us in heaven? *Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name.....protect them from the evil one.....sanctify them by your word.....may they be brought to complete unity so that the world may know you sent me.* (Jn 17: 1-11)

Protect them? Well, it's a hard world: hated Jesus and it will hate his people. We'll suffer, as he did. But under the **protection** of Father. *They can kill your body, but....* Peter: *you've suffered for a little while, God in grace restores, strengthens (re)establishes us.*

Jesus prays that as we grow in **holiness**, we'll grow also in **unity** with each other; all to the **glory** of Father and Son, which was Jesus' starting point in prayer. (Father and Son are very big on *glory*)

So **Jesus is there** for us in the heavenlies as our *mediator* and *advocate*. In his place to earth comes the HS as our minder / muscle (*paraclete*), empowering us to continue Jesus' ministry on earth.

With the wind of the Spirit behind them the early disciples found that their mission prospered through *a demonstration of power*; Power through HS gifts for **healing** / community / **sharing**; advocacy for the poor and disadvantaged; justice in line with the coming Kingdom.

How do we go about seeking the Spirit's power for us today in this upsetting time?

vs 14 They all joined together constantly (fiercely) in prayer. Prayer for what? For *the baptism of the Holy Spirit* (vs 5), ready for whatever the Spirit will bring. Acts 1 tells us that the price of Pentecost is prayer! Much prayer, intense prayer, patient prayer, pleading prayer... Help!