

2019-06-02 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Jane Stephenson

Isaiah 44: 1 – 8; Ephesians 4: 7 – 16

'Hoping and Longing'

There was a recent survey – refreshingly not about Brexit – which discovered that the majority of people in this country are most joyful and happy on Friday evenings – and most miserable I'm afraid on Sunday evenings ... I hope I'm not about to contribute to this evening's misery! and of course it's **no** surprise that there is an upwelling of cheerfulness at the end of the working week, when we anticipate a couple of days off.

As a survey it was rather simplistic – many people **work** at weekends, or spend weekends alone; others, like myself now retired from regular work, may find that every day is now a Friday! Well ... probably not ... what is true is that as human beings we all have times of joy and happiness and of fear and worry ... we also, more importantly probably have a fairly constant and nagging longing for something that is difficult to define, but the absence of which can make us feel incomplete.

I would suggest that this sense of longing is something wired into us which we don't always recognise or seek to understand ... it is really the longing for God, always part of Christian life – it's a driving force.

In ordinary life if we long for the weekend, or for a holiday, or for a visit from a friend, or for some material gift we can usually either make it happen, enjoy the anticipation, or just resign ourselves to disappointment. In our relationship with God, however, I think we can sometimes fail to **use** our longing as a hopeful sign, or we forget altogether how much we want and need that relationship – and God himself also longs for a relationship with each of us. Sometimes it is God who has to seek our attention.

Now I used to attend a church where, on Ascension Day (about 7pm) a few people would assemble on top of a hill and let off a large firework – a rocket – and after a few words from the Minister on the theology of Ascension (and not on the health and safety of firing random rockets in open spaces) we would all descend. I suppose the event got us talking about the notion of Ascension, though not as I remember in a very profound way.

How helpful it was I'm not convinced **but** sometimes very visual events have served to bring God's presence to our attention – especially big ones – earthquakes, floods, storms, burning bushes ... and the understanding of the overwhelming power of Christ himself – his death on the cross, his resurrection from death – what can be more powerful?

And of course this last week, the Ascension of Christ to his Father, witnessed by **PTO**

the disciples ... a powerful description of the fulfilment of Jesus Christ as he returns to his Father ... and yet this event is not described in Luke or Acts as a fiery launch into heaven ... it is more written of as a gentle removal of physical presence with its promise to fulfil his people's longing for unity with Christ. The disciples return to Jerusalem joyfully and ready to prepare for the hope that is promised.

We too can return from this event with hearts open to the promise of his eternal presence with us in the Holy Spirit, which can touch each of our lives. There are, of course great actions and physical events recorded in the Old and New Testaments, but each of these has been a way for God to remind his people of his longing for us which matches and surpasses our longing for him.

We are stirred up by great events, but often our daily lives are slower, quieter, more dull – and yet it is often in these times that the true promise of God can enter our hearts – when we're not distracted by events, when we're empty. In a quiet moment, in any place it is perfectly possible to experience and express our longing for God – in the quieter spaces of day or night ...

After the Ascension the disciples do return to Jerusalem and they pray in a large group and talk quietly together – expressing their own hopes, fears and longings for their fulfilment as individuals and as a body which Paul speaks of 'this body' in the passage from Ephesians – everyone finds their role, everyone is offered God's grace – together and individually.

It is not then in the shouting, in the showmanship, in the firing of rockets that we necessarily find the promise of God, but often simply in the acknowledgement of our longing and of our need for him. Hear the words: "I **am** Yahweh" I **am** the promise, the source and the end ... I **am** Christ the friend and the comforter – be encouraged, be joyful even in your longing and let that joy in Christ shape your relationships, your words, your actions. The hope of Christ burns within us all – sometimes brightly, sometimes dimly – that is the fire of Pentecost which is the real and constant witness to our longing for God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.