

SERMON – Rev Anne Taylor
The Sea & Its Tides Sunday after Ascension 24/5/20

I love everything about the sea. From the salty smell, to the sand, the shells, the sense of freedom, even a soaking wet sandy dog. I love the idea of sailing but I was not blessed with sea legs and just about manage the ferry across the Irish Sea. I do enjoy a walk by the sea, whatever the weather, whatever the time of year. The sea seems to instil a sense of peace and timelessness. Even if the waves are crashing on to the shore, you know it will not always be like that. There will come a day when all will be calm. It seems to say, difficult times, testing times, times when everything seems to be crashing upon us, these times will pass. A few weeks ago I mentioned Julian of Norwich, the medieval mystic. She wrote something similar, “All will be well. All manner of things will be well.” There will be days of calm and rest and peace.

One of the things about the sea is the tide with its regular rhythm of ebb and flow.

And in a sense there is a rhythm of ebb and flow in in our 2 readings this morning.

After Jesus ascended, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room in which they had celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus; the Upper Room where Jesus had appeared to them after the Resurrection; the Upper Room in which in 10 days’ time, the Holy Spirit would descend upon them and fill them with the presence of the Risen Jesus.

In his Gospel Luke records Jesus telling the disciples to stay in the city and to wait for the renewing of the Holy Spirit. And as they waited, as we heard in our epistle, they constantly devoted themselves to prayer. Their prayer was a preparation for the active ministry that awaited them after Pentecost.

And that became the rhythm of their lives. Just as the tides are regular in the rhythm of coming in and out so there should be a similar rhythm to our lives as Christians.

There is a time for prayer, reflection, for quietness and rest. As Isaiah says, “In returning and rest you shall be saved. In quietness and trust shall be your strength”. (30:15)

In another chapter he writes, “Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.” (40:31).

So the disciples waited prayerfully after Jesus’ ascension – waited for the equipping and empowering of the Holy Spirit which was to come on the Feast of Pentecost, 10 days later.

But the gift of the Holy Spirit was not an end in itself. Rather it was a means to an end – to strengthen them to go out and be the church, to minister in the name of Jesus and to draw all people to the knowledge and love of God.

Their waiting was not about withdrawing from life, but about witnessing to Jesus in the rough and tumble, in the trials and testings, in the ups and downs of life.

And that second element of the Christian life is reflected in our Gospel this morning. Jesus says, “And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world.” And later in the chapter he says “I have sent them into the world.”

Their waiting in the Upper Room was for a purpose. The Holy Spirit was given to them to enable them to serve.

Their waiting, their withdrawal was not to be a permanent state but only that they could better witness to God's love as shown in Jesus.

And that is to be the ebb and flow of our lives too – waiting on God in order to witness to the world.

The great doctor, explorer and missionary, David Livingstone was a man of faith and prayer. He set out for Africa in search of the source of the Nile. Nobody heard anything from him for 4 years and people were anxious. A reporter for the New York Herald, a man called Henry Stanley, was sent out to find out whether Livingstone was alive or dead. He eventually found him in modern day Tanzania, near Lake Tanganyika and greeted him with the immortal words, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." Stanley spent some time with David Livingstone and later wrote, "If I had been with him any longer, I would have been compelled to be a Christian – and he never spoke about it at all."

Could the same be said about us?

Just last week a friend sent me the letter the new Archbishop of Armagh sent to church members. Like Nathan going to St. Giles, there was no big service of induction, no introductory sermon setting out hopes and dreams, no speeches of welcome and expectation. Added to that, General Synod had been cancelled due to the coronavirus. So he sent a letter to say what he wanted by way of introduction.

In it he spoke about "pastoral evangelisation". He said that what we were about was not a "competition for souls" but rather what he wanted church members to show in their lives was a "caring, patient, even perhaps quiet drawing of people to Jesus" by looking after and looking out for others in their need, whether physical or spiritual.

To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, we need to be aware that what we are speaks more loudly than what we say.

And I know from personal experience that more people have found God because of pastoral care than gimmicky campaigns.

And that is within all our reaches.

The ebb and flow of the Christian life is Prayer and Action.

There is a time for waiting and a time for working
There is a time for seeking and a time for serving
A time to be fed and a time to feed others.

It's what Jesus himself did – going apart to be with God before being a part of people's lives and ministering to them.

We're lucky to be living beside the sea. Let's learn the lessons of the tide as we seek to be effective witnesses to God's love in Jesus.