

7 Easter 2015

According to the Church's calendar, we are still in the period named "after Easter", but these days between the Ascension and Pentecost are a bit strange, a bit no-man's-landish. This is reflected in the behaviour of the disciples. They have been told by Christ to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Well, four days later, nothing has happened, so what do they do? They have an election.

Now we all know that having an election is a good thing, it takes up lots of time and energy, and gets everybody running around. But this was an election with a difference. Candidates had to fit specific criteria – to have been with Jesus from his baptism to his resurrection, just as the other eleven disciples had – so that they could join that special band of apostles and witness to the events of Christ's life. They whittle the 120 people down to two – quite an achievement in itself – and then vote – not by putting a cross on a ballot paper, but by casting lots, drawing the short straw, rolling a dice. Ah, maybe that's how we should do elections – the outcome may be a bit more acceptable than the shower we have ended up with this time.

There is a very subtle subtext, though, to Luke's narrative. Waiting in the wings, several chapters on, is a young man named Paul. Though not a companion of Jesus through his years of ministry, Paul will meet the risen Jesus, will become as powerful a witness to his resurrection as any of the 12 apostles, and will

lay claim to apostleship for himself in many of his letters to the early Church. Is there, therefore, a hint of disapproval in Luke's tone as he describes this curious election?

Now, I don't want to spoil your expectations, but despite the election of Matthias, the waiting for the Holy Spirit continues. It will go on for another week, a week of settling in for Matthias, a week of ... what? Frustration? Joyful prayer? Deep conversations about everything they got up to with Jesus? Grief that he is no longer physically with them? Or simply hanging around? That is what we can do this week – hang around, loiter with intent, wait with joyful expectation, look for the signs of the Spirit.

The Vicarage dog, Cassie, has a natural tendency to lean. In the first photo we saw of her, she is leaning up against the wall of a house. With us, as she waits for food, walks, attention etc, she will lean against us, and turn her deep brown eyes in our direction. She is hanging around as close to us as she possibly can, and getting a bit of physical support in the meantime.

Hanging around Sunday, as I have christened today unilaterally, is an opportunity for us to do a bit of leaning too. Leaning on Christ, leaning on the Church, leaning on the people of God, leaning on prayer, leaning on the Bible – leaning on just about anything that will support our weight. As Cassie sidles up to us and leans into our legs, so we can inch up to God and lean into him for comfort, rest, re-assurance, hope, love. As Cassie turns

her big brown eyes to us, so we can turn our eyes to the God who loves us so much that we can know that we are individually and collectively chosen by him to be the recipients of his love – for that is the thrust of Jesus’s prayer that we read from John 17. That prayer is recorded so that we can lean into it, take comfort and support from it, gain encouragement and be enthused by it, revel in the warmth and permanence of God’s love.

So, we are permitted a week of leaning, and then, next Sunday, wham! Pentecost comes with fire and wind, energy and thousands of words. Pentecost impels us outwards, onwards, continually. Maybe we need this week to do a bit of leaning, so that we can be prepared for everything that is coming our way. Maybe we need this week to prepare us for the shattering transformation that only Pentecost can bring.

The Vicarage dog will still lean against walls, cupboards, sofas, doors (but they can move, which is most disconcerting), given half a chance, but her preference is to lean against humans, her people. We too, the children of God, can lean against abstract elements of our faith – prayer, Scripture, grace – or we could also lean against each other as we experience the comfort and support of the love of God expressed in each other. Find ways this week to lean on each other – tea and cake are fairly effective, I find – in shared activity, shared conversation, shared prayer, shared silence, whatever brings you into contact with

the warmth and solidity of God, into contact with the generosity and re-assurance of God’s love.

God has great things planned for us, with the relaunch of his church on Pentecost, next Sunday. Take some time this week to prepare for the onslaught with each other, so that, when it comes, we may all be ready and delighted to share our experience of God’s extraordinary love with those with whom we come into contact.