

Transcript of Reading and sermon – Ascension Day 21 May 2020

“A little while” and “a little while”

John 16: 16–18

¹⁶ Jesus went on to say, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.” ¹⁷ At this, some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,’ and ‘Because I am going to the Father’?” ¹⁸ They kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.”

Luke 24: 44 – 53

⁴⁴ He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

“A little while” and “a little while”

Good morning, Good afternoon and Good evening friends. I’m not sure when on Ascension Day you will be watching this video clip. Greetings from brothers and sisters in Christ in Somerset West, South Africa who are sharers with you in the social isolation and in the confinement caused by the global Covid19 epidemic. Neil Meyer and I are making use of the cheap airfares by swapping pulpits for this Ascension Day service.

In one of his books, Philip Yancey wonders what the world would have been like if Jesus had not been raised from the dead. Surely the disciples would not have forgotten him? They might not have had the courage to preach the Good News but they would surely have remembered his teaching?

After three years of working and walking with Jesus across Palestine, he might not of been the Messiah, but still he was their friend. He had impressed them as the wisest teacher ever and had demonstrated powers that no man could explain. After a while, their emotional wounds would have healed and they would probably have sought ways to memorialise him. Jesus would've lived on in the same way as Socrates or Confucius or any of the other wise men.

Things surely would have been different. (Philip Yancey. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan. 1995 pg 225)

I kind of wonder what things would have been like if Jesus had not ascended. He would have been there to supervise the setting up of his Church. He could have overseen the spread of the Gospel. He could've continued to challenge the Pharisees and everything would have turned out just right. None of the fumbling that went on after his Resurrection.

The time between the Resurrection and the Ascension was always going to be just an interlude, a brief interlude.

Sitting around the table that last time before his arrest, Jesus made a peculiar announcement: “a little while, and you won't see me anymore and then a little while, and you will see me”.

Frederick Beuchner speculates that their mouths must have been dry with fear and they must have been thinking a little less clearly than usual and he adds, “in the disciples case, the thinking was not at all clear at the best of times”. The sound of Jesus's voice was partly drowned out by the thumping of their hearts”. It sounds to me much the same as when I hear something shocking, my ears kind of haze over and it takes a bit of time to hear normally again. (*A room called remember*. Harper Collins. 1984. pg 91 – 103)

“a little while and you will not see me anymore and then a little while and you will see me” - A strange little sentence about leaving and returning.

Developmental psychologists tell us that a child learns to fear when a mother or a father leaves the room. He or she who was once present is now absent and there is no evidence to suggest that she or he will ever return again ... but the child learns hope when the parent is experienced (as a pattern) to return every time he or she leaves.

Fear upon Leaving.
Hope upon Returning.

“A little while and you won't see me anymore and then a little while and you will see me”.

I have found this “little while” we have been isolated/tucked up in our homes excruciating.

The disciples do the human thing and they home in on the leaving. Their hearts are filled with fear and so we find them staring, in Luke 24, at the blank blue sky.

Fear ... Fear ... and more Fear

And they might have still been standing there, had it not been for the encouraging words the angels spoke.

Did they remember his words? “A little while and you won't see me anymore and then a little while and you will see me”

It is those “little whiles” that are so frustrating because we hate to wait. Isn't waiting is what lazy people do?

We are the “now” generation – Instant meals, fast food etc.
Everything is instant.
Everything is fast.
We want service and we want it now.

And yet our God waits.
Abraham was promised the land – but it did not come in his lifetime or even his son's or his grandson's or even his great grandson's lifetime. Four hundred years after Joseph, the land was given to God's people!

Our God waits and he waits for the fullness of time. And he calls us to wait also.
“a little while”, says Jesus, “and you won't see me anymore and then a little while and you will see me”.

The fear of his leaving must soon make way for the expectation of his return. Frederick Buechner writes:

Once in a while things flicker up out of our lives like a flame out of the ashes we'd thought were long since dead, and by flickering we see things, or we think we do, that for a second or two make not all the difference in the world to us maybe but enough of a difference to stay in our memory like a dream ... once in a while someone (reminds) us, (someone) who has seen him plain somehow and known him, because they are such people in the world, people whose lives flicker with life that they have seen, and whose words and lives make

our scalps tingle, make us believe that there actually was a Jesus once and in some sense still is. (A room called remember. Harper Collins. 1984. pg 91 – 103)

“A little while” ... “a little while”.

And so, here we are my friends, deep in the midst of that second “little while”, working and waiting, holding out for his return. And, in the meantime, he has entrusted the Church, the world and indeed the universe - into these hands of mine those hands of yours. And what a royal mess we've made of it at times.

Living two millennia after the disciples, writes Philip Yancey, I look back and marvel at how little difference the Church has made in such a world. Why did Jesus leave us alone to fight the battles? How can it be good that He went away?

We have made a mess of it.

The author Annie Dillard once wrote: “What a pity that so hard on the heels of Christ comes the Christians.” Or what about the line from the movie “Heavenly creatures”, “its like heaven only better”, the two girls muse, “there aren't any Christians!”

The second “little while” is for us and gift from God - a space and an opportunity to follow, to be faithful, to renew the face of the Earth. A “little while” is also a time of hope and hope is a great and awesome thing and it is not hard to hope, sometimes.

For the spirit of Him is so at large in the air we breathe that almost anything we see can turn into the shadow of Him if we're not careful ... or if we are careful - a piece of bread, a glass of wine. We go to church looking for Jesus in some uncertain way because we have seen Him, we've seen enough of Him to suspect that if there is anyone who can enlighten the dimness of us, He is the one who can - the light of the world. (Frederick Beuchner. A room called remember. Harper Collins. 1984. pg 91 – 103)

“Though I have spoken to you figuratively at this time, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will speak to you plainly about my Father (Luke 16: 25).

The time is coming when there will be no more confusion; no more misunderstanding; no more ignorance - we shall see him as he really is. “We shall know” says Paul, “just as we are known.”

Our little while is drawing to a close and the pain of this world shall be as nothing to the joy that awaits us. As the pain of labour is soon forgotten when the joy of new life is experienced.

What shall we do? How shall we prepare for his coming?

- 1) We can tell others what he has done;**
- 2) We can love others like never before;**
- 3) We can serve others, and by doing so be instruments of his grace.**

This is the Great Commission we been given and the purpose of our “little while”. We are not perfect but we shall persevere and, in all our insufficiency, we will push forward. For Christ has not abandoned us. He takes full responsibility for his Church. “You did not choose me, but I chose you” said Jesus. And still he bears the wounds of His Church.

We will tell others about what he has done.

We will love others like never before.

We will serve others and so become instruments of grace.

And we shall wait for the air is pregnant with Hope that He will come again!

George Marchinkowski, Somerset West, South Africa

(for the parish church of Kintore, Aberdeenshire, Scotland on Ascension 21 May 2020 during Covid19 epidemic)