

Today really ought to be called 'Limbo Sunday'. It's the Sunday in between: the Ascension has happened and something has been promised for the future, but when, how and exactly what, nobody knows. It's the moment before the conductor raises his baton to begin the overture, or the referee takes a breath to blow his whistle to start the match. The chattering stops, and everyone waits.

There are several important periods of waiting in the gospels. The first is the time in which Zechariah could not speak because he did not believe Gabriel's assurance that he was to have a son. This – the prologue, if you like, to the annunciation and birth of Jesus, is the true beginning of the story. It continued for nine months, and only came to an end when Zechariah complied with the second part of Gabriel's message and named his son John. In that long period without speech Zechariah, who was a priest and should probably have known better, learned the hard way that the word of God was to be trusted.

The second waiting time was the agonising one which followed the crucifixion; the day we now call Holy Saturday. Jesus' closest followers were frightened for their own lives. They hid, for fear of the Jews. Their leader, the man they thought was the invincible son of God, had been killed. Jesus had warned them that this would happen. He had told them that he would return, and had even told them when, but in language that they did not fully understand to begin with, and which, if they remembered it at all, made no sense in the circumstances in which they found themselves. Even when directly confronted with the first evidence of the resurrection, Peter and John did not make the connection. They too had to learn the hard way that the word of God was to be trusted.

The third time is described in today's first reading. It involved the same people who had holed up together after the crucifixion. Even now they could not completely let go of the idea that Jesus would, somehow, pull off the great revolution that would overthrow the Roman occupiers and re-establish the kingdom of Israel. Jesus told them firmly that that was none of their business. He followed this by saying something that must, when they came to think about it properly, have seemed truly terrifying. 'You will receive power.....you will be my witnesses.....to the ends of the earth.'

And then he disappeared.

But this time was different. Just as there had been two men – angels – in white robes at the tomb on Easter morning, so they were joined by two men in white robes now. This was the nudge they needed, and this time they had learned to trust. If Jesus said the Holy Spirit would be given to them, they would wait for it, whatever it was. They didn't know how or when it would appear, what it would be like and how they would recognise it, but they would wait. The angels who told them to stop staring up into the sky were telling them that they must take the next step, and move on. Jesus would no longer be with them in person, but he would be with them in spirit. They were no longer to be taught and led. They were to teach, and to lead.

It's the moment when the trainer wheels come off the bike, when the child first goes on the bus alone, when they move out to live independently, when they first show you your new

grandchild. You and they are both proud and nervous. You can only hope that you've given them the skills, the moral fibre, the encouragement and the freedom they need to make a go of it. And you will still be there with the sticking plaster, the gin and tonic or the sympathetic ear when it's needed.

What happened between the Ascension and Pentecost showed just how much the disciples had grown in spiritual maturity. This time, when Jesus left them, they resorted to prayer, not panic. This time they opened themselves to receive whatever God would give them, reflecting on everything they had heard Jesus say and seen him do. Instead of the desperation and grief of Holy Saturday, they were hopeful and confident. If Jesus had promised, he would, in his own time, keep that promise.

The Archbishops have asked all Christians to keep this time between Ascension and Pentecost as a period of special prayer on the theme 'Thy Kingdom Come'. We pray 'Thy kingdom come' every day, and yet it can sound hopelessly abstract and unachievable. How can my prayer bring the kingdom nearer? If the prayer is merely words, it can't. But if, like the disciples, we combine the prayer with careful reflection, and with the recognition that we, as Christians, are also teachers and leaders in God's great enterprise, we can make a difference. We are to be witnesses to him everywhere we go and in every aspect of our lives. It can take courage to be a visible Christian in today's complicated world, but we, too, receive the Holy Spirit. We, too, are to have the confidence to declare and live out our trust in God. We are kingdom-builders, and we have to get on with the job. As the angels almost said: 'Don't just stand there. Get stuck in!'