

COME, HOLY SPIRIT

(Acts 1.12-14)

Introduction

You've got to admire the British adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes who, just four months after double heart-bypass surgery, and aged 59, ran seven marathons in one week on six different continents. He would have run one more, but bad weather in Antarctica prevented it. Just the idea of running one marathon in Antarctica boggles the mind, doesn't it?

Fiennes said afterwards that his biggest test was marathon number 4 in Singapore because of the tropical climate. With temperatures reaching 32°C Fiennes barely finished the course – but he did it, before going on to run three more over the next few days.

It goes without saying that you cannot achieve a feat like that without some very serious preparation. Every marathon runner trains hard – how much more this man, given the scale of his challenge and so soon after major surgery?

The evangelisation of the entire planet, from a standing start, was an almost infinitely more difficult objective for the early church than those 7 marathons in a week. We're talking about by far the most ambitious mission in the history of the world.

Just 120 people (that's the precise number given in v15) who have no map or compass, let alone aeroplane to reach every nation of planet Earth. How did those charged with that challenge prepare for the mission?

Acts 1 tells us that they did three things; simple things, that are not beyond any of us here this morning. It says that they gathered, they waited and they prayed.

1. They Gathered

When it says in Acts 1.12 that the apostles returned to Jerusalem after the Ascension, we know that they went together and stayed together.

Here's what we read: Acts 1.12-14. "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem." They're just across the Kidron Valley from each other. It's a short walk. "A Sabbath day's journey" is about 1 kilometre.

"When they arrived," it says, "they went upstairs, to the room where they were staying." And it tells us who was there; "Peter, John, James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James."

No, not *that* Judas. Not Judas Iscariot. This is another Judas. Rotten luck if your name is Judas. You introduce yourself as one of Jesus' apostles. "Oh yeah, I think I've heard of them. What's your name again?" "Judas." "Oh, I've heard all about you." "No, not him, I'm the *other* Judas."

Sometimes you just get stuck with something, through no fault of your own.

Verse 14 says that the women are there as well. And Mary, the mother of Jesus who is also a woman, obviously, but who is in a category of her own.

- She is the chosen one, the special one, who brought him into the world.
- She pondered things in her heart at the time of his birth.
- She saw how he astounded the temple scholars when he was 12 years old.
- She witnessed his first miracle at Cana.
- She was there at the cross, there for her boy until the bitter end.
- And now, she's a follower and humble disciple of her own son.

Some of you here today are mothers with sons. I'm sure your boys are all wonderful individuals, and you're very proud of them, but how many of you would publicly worship your son as the immaculate son of God? But Mary did.

And Jesus' little brothers are there too, notice. Some of you have a big brother. I bet every one of them are great guys who you look up to and admire! But how many of you would stand up and say, hand on heart, "My big brother is without sin, he's definitely worthy of praise and worship?" But Jesus' brothers did.

They didn't believe in him during his ministry. It was classic sibling rivalry. They teased him. They confronted him. They said he was out of his mind. But now he has appeared to them risen from the dead and they too have gone from being sceptics and cynics to full-on believers.

So there are 120 people in this room including Jesus' family. It may not be very many given the scale of the task ahead of them, but in one room, that's quite a crowd. That's a pretty full room.

The upper room would be on the first floor in a flat-roofed building of simple structure. There's precious little ventilation, no air conditioning, you're just under the roof, so it's probably sweltering up there.

This is, by the way, the very first mention in Scripture of the post-Ascension church – and you find men and women *together*. We sort of take this for granted, but it is still extremely counter-cultural in the Middle East to this day. In synagogues, even in the 21st century, and of course mosques likewise, you find the men are separate from the women.

In the Judaism of the First Century, only men were allowed to sit at a rabbi's feet to learn, but we know that Jesus gave women too access into that privileged inner circle. Mary of Bethany was commended for doing just that instead of being busy in the kitchen.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, women:

- ministered to Jesus' practical needs, supporting him from their own means
- women stayed with him to the end while most of the men fled
- women were the last at the cross
- women were up first to tend the grave on Easter Sunday
- women were the first to meet him
- and women were the first to testify that he was alive

2. They Waited

So, they all gathered together, men and women, and then they waited.

At their last meeting with Jesus, shortly before the Ascension, Jesus gave them some careful instructions: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but *wait* for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days, you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

So, they wait. And they wait. Hours pass. Nothing happens. Days come and go. Still nothing.

Do you like waiting? I bet no one does. I don't like waiting around at all. I start to fidget. Waiting for buses, waiting for trains, waiting for late people to turn up. When I was a kid, waiting for Christmas was like physical torture. It felt like a breach of my human rights! I'm a doer. I don't like wasting time when there's work to be done. But they waited, and waited, and... w a i t e d.

The Norwegian theologian and author Ole Hallesby used to talk about mining in his country in the early twentieth century. There were long periods of time, he writes, when deep holes are being bored with great effort into the hard rock. To bore the holes deeply enough into the most strategic spots took steadiness, patience and lots of skill.

Once a hole was drilled, they put a stick of dynamite into it and connected it to a fuse. To light the fuse and watch what happens is easy and exciting. You see immediate 'results.' It goes kaboom, and pieces of rock fly off in every direction.

And then Hallesby says this: "The more painstaking work requires skill and patient strength of character, but anyone can light a fuse." How many of my prayers are like "fuse-lighting" prayers, the kind I soon give up on if I do not get immediate results?

Handling the tedium is part of what makes for effective prayers. Those who really believe in the power of prayer will cultivate a patient prayer life of "hole-boring."

3. They Prayed

Which brings us to the third thing they did – they prayed. They weren't wasting their time as they waited. They invested their time in prayer.

In fact, it says "they all joined together constantly in prayer." So this was dedicated, continuous and organised. It seems to have been 24/7, possibly with shifts covered by several teams, sleep and comfort breaks and so on.

And the basic prayer seems to have been, "Come, Holy Spirit" because when God sent his Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, that rolling prayer meeting stopped; the prayer was answered.

Since the days of the early church Christians have prayed for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Every week at Holy Communion, we ask the Holy Spirit to come. Many songs have been written about it, from *Come Holy Ghost Our Souls Inspire* to *Spirit of the Living God Fall Afresh on Me*. All the great revivals and awakenings were preceded by concerted prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus expected us to ask for the Holy Spirit when he said, (in Luke 11.13) "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

Ending

So, as we gather and wait and ask... and wait and ask... and wait and ask... as we have been doing in 10 these days of Thy Kingdom Come, may God refresh and renew and anoint and empower his church again for the mission he started then and that he has called us to complete.

Let's pray...

