

## Filling a Vacuum

No, not a vacuum flask! I'm sure you all know the hazards in doing that. And sorry, I can't illustrate the other kind of vacuum, for obvious reasons . . .

The saying goes that nature abhors a vacuum, and if we look at the disciples met together between the Ascension of Jesus and Pentecost, we find them acting out that very adage.

**Acts 1: 12-26.** Returning to Jerusalem they gathered themselves together in "the room upstairs where they were staying." (v. 13) and got their heads together. Here they were, told to wait for the promise of the Father, but you know how it is – you have to do *something*, and they didn't know how long they'd have to wait anyway. Yes, they were praying, but surely there was something else . . . and perhaps inevitably it was Peter who stood up and suggested what that something could be. Drawing on Scripture, he argued that they should choose someone from among those who had been with Jesus from the beginning to take the place of Judas. They had no idea how the future was going to pan out, but they did know about the past: Jesus had called twelve of them so the logical thing was to make that number back up, and they went about it in a time-honoured way. Two names were put forward, they all prayed and then drew lots, and the lot fell upon Matthias.

Good planning for the future, you could say, but look what they were actually doing - trying to plan the future *on the basis of how the past had been*. Twelve disciples then, twelve disciples now. And what about poor Matthias, who I'm sure was a perfectly nice man, devoted to Jesus? From this point on we hear nothing more of him. On the other hand, we hear a great deal about the man God was going to choose in his own time – Saul of Tarsus – and in fact we are largely here because he accepted his calling.

Now the question, if you haven't guessed it already. As the Church restarts in a serious way, will we be like the disciples and try to force a pattern that pertained before the Pandemic struck?

I pose the question because we have moved through a completely new experience over the past year, which has affected us all. People we haven't seen since before the first Lockdown look different, sometimes older (well, we are!). We have learned new skills and let go of others. Maybe our priorities have changed; I know of several people who have revised their thinking on possessions and spending, others who find the natural world more significant. I'm sure you know of other changes there have been.

I think there's an important pattern in Acts to watch out for in our own life. The temptation to run ahead of God is massive and, like the disciples, those ideas we have can seem the absolutely right thing to do. But modern psychology warns us against making big decisions after a life-changing or traumatic event and this last year-and-a-bit has certainly been life-changing and in some cases even traumatic, so perhaps we should beware of that urge to *do* something quickly. Doing nothing is allowed! We need spaces to think, to pray.

Centuries ago, if there was a big decision to be made in the life of the nation, a national fast was declared to give people time to fast and pray in advance of the decision. Could it be that in the Church we need to allow time out to be together again and to pray, alone or with others, in an open, quiet, seeking way before we try to fit everything back together exactly as it was or try to turn everything on its head?

One of the new things I've just done is upgrade my mobile phone, and the quality of the camera is striking.

This is a Common Carder Bee feeding on Lungwort, and the detail certainly couldn't have been captured on my previous phone, good though it was.

Perhaps what we all need is a new lens through which to view the world more clearly as it now is, in our own lives and in the Church.



A Prayer:

In an uncertain world, Loving Father, we seek your certainty.  
So much has been lost in the past year or so; there is so much we have missed,  
so much we have longed for and now a return to it all is tantalisingly close.  
We want to run ahead, to grasp new possibilities –  
or do we actually want to turn back to things as they were pre-pandemic?  
Only you, Lord, truly know our hearts, only you understand the people we are,  
the people the past has formed us to be, has formed the ways we react.  
You, Lord, truly know our hearts – and in your Son, Jesus,  
you have offered us a glimpse of what we can be,  
people living with an openness to your guiding Spirit,  
people loving neighbours, finding joy in being together and joy in quiet solitude.  
In this time of potential new beginning, help us follow Jesus more fully,  
ready to wait if that is what you need of us, and ready for action when you will.

As we rejoice in the number of vaccinations and reductions in the death rate,  
we pause to bring those who still suffer Covid and its effects,  
thinking particularly of those countries where the rate of infection and death is still high,  
and where medical facilities are struggling.  
We bring those whose lives have been shattered by the pandemic – livelihoods lost,  
families broken, those suffering loss of so many kinds.  
Loving Father, bring healing and hope we pray,  
and may the strong help the weak across borders of ethnicity and faith.

In the aftermath of recent elections, both local and by-elections,  
we pray for those newly elected, that they and their colleagues may be guided by the Holy Spirit  
to listen and speak with discernment and wisdom.  
May the wisdom of the Spirit and the peace of Christ fill the corridors of power,  
and the minds and hearts of those who have great decision to make,  
ones that will affect us all.  
And may that same Spirit and peace fill the Church,  
that we might face with courage, hope and joy  
the challenges that will face us in the coming days.

These prayers we offer in the name of Jesus, your Son, our Saviour. Amen

*Blessings, Ruth*