**SERMON FOR ASCENSION SUNDAY | 29.05.22**

**Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 1: 15-end; St Luke 24: 44-end**

**Question: what did the youthful King Charles ll and Lord Robert Baden Powell, the founder of the Scout movement, have in common? Any ideas? Have a few minutes to think about it – I don’t think it’s Googleable…! - and I’ll try and give you an answer.**

**Over the last forty days since Easter, the Gospel’s have alluded to a really very strange relationship between Jesus and his closest disciples. Like the local 271 bus, you never quite knew when he was going to come next. As far as we can tell after Good Friday, the disciples returned to their old jobs on the Lake, catching fish, mending their nets – but also spending quite a lot of time together, talking and wondering what was going to happen. And throughout that time, without any warning, Jesus would suddenly just ‘be there’, in upstairs rooms, on the road to Emmaus, and on more than one occasion at the Lake itself - with the smell of cooked fish and baked bread hanging in the air.**

**In a sense it was all very unsatisfactory and unreal – delighted though they were to see him of course. But it was a kind of suspended animation; nothing permanent could be organised and what he said always had a slightly cryptic, mysterious ring to it – like that odd conversation with Peter - somehow making good after Peter had denied him three times the night he was arrested – leading into Jesus’ commission for his second in command to go and feed the sheep. It couldn’t go on like this, could it?**

**And then two of today’s readings, , the 1st from the Book of Acts and the Gospel, both written by St Luke, draw this rather strange time to a close. After some final words, telling them that he was going to send the Holy Spirit to take his place as their leader and mentor, he was off – up, up and away into the clouds. The job was done. The phoney period of ‘not quite but almost’ had finally come to an end.**

**And if Luke is to be believed, the Apostles were surprisingly ready to lose him because it says they returned to the Temple in Jerusalem, praising God in the Temple for all the amazing things that he had shown them – and apparently all ready and eager for the huge challenge of sharing the good news, even without him being there to show them how it was done.**

**The biggest surprise is that it all worked: within months (if we can believe the Book of Acts) Paul, Peter, Barnabas, Mark and their colleagues were travelling further and further away from Jerusalem, sharing the story of Jesus and being almost overwhelmed by the numbers of people who came to faith - occasionally up to three thousand in a day! Romans as well as Greeks and Jews were caught up in the moment and the preaching really caught the attention of the perfectly ordinary people of those towns and cities. Before long, Christian worshipping communities began to put down roots, based in the homes of people like Lydia whom we read about last Sunday.**

**From what we can piece together it was a whirlwind of activity – all based on those experiences of having seen the risen Jesus – or at least of having talked to people who had seen the Risen Jesus out and about in Jerusalem and whose word could be trusted. One would talk to another and the ones would become twos and threes; an extraordinary feat which reaffirms our belief that faith is usually caught not taught.**

**It is only a matter of months since we were all glued to our televisions, watching the likes of Prof Chris Witty, Sir Patrick Vallance, Prof Neil Ferguson and Prof Jonathan van Tam, standing in that infamous briefing room in Downing Street, showing us graph after graph of how Covid-19 was spreading. The key to it all, you may remember, was the R rate: if the rate went over 1 then the disease would spread rapidly; if under 1 then slowly but surely Covid was in decline. And we watched those charts avidly for signs that the pandemic was finally on its way out.**

**Dr John Hayward, a mathematician based in south Wales, has been using that same model for the churches and his conclusion is stark: *the faith that we are proclaiming today simply is not contagious or infectious enough to grow*. Working from figures over the last twenty years he says that there is a straightforward analogy between what Chris Whitty as our Chief Medical Officer and his team were doing with Covid and what we need to see in our churches: if church members add new members through personal contact and our R rate is greater than 1 then conversions will be strong enough to counter losses and the Church will grow; if they don’t, the opposite will happen: faith, like Covid, will die out. According to Dr Hayward, the CofE and the Roman Catholic Church both have an R rate of just over .9 which could mean that all our congregations may have vanished by 2062. Methodism, at .85 may be gone by 2045…**

***One thing is clear,* he says: *if things carry on as they are, the future of Christianity does not lie in the hands of the older denominations…***

**Of all the many things that many things that were upsetting in the wake of the shooting of all those children and their teachers in West Texas this week, was the vox pop reports of the attitudes of the local young people after the had heard what had happened: *There is nothing that can be done* they said, *these things will just go on happening. We just have to accept that.* A similar kind of attitude is apparently on the rise among young people in China too, a kind of endemic resignation. There is a buzzword there, ‘bai lan’, which basically means ‘let is rot’; and another ‘tang ping’ which means ‘lying flat’. The implication of both of these phrases is that, in the face of bad news there is nothing else to be done than to accept that the situation is deteriorating – without any desire, energy or vision to want to turn things round. Bai lan, doing the absolute bare minimum and letting thing just take their course: it is hopelessness – head down stuff - writ large.**

**Into the situation in West Texas, into the jaded Chinese society of young people – and I fear, sometimes in Church circles here in the UK facing the pressures of the 21st century - comes the Ascension of Christ. And the challenges that we face, as the PCC realised when we talked on Thursday, can lead us into one of two directions. We can either shrug our shoulders and say the declines are inevitable – bai lan – or we can take seriously the promises made by Jesus: *Hold on in there: wait in the city and before very many days have passed you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who will – if you will allow - lead you into new and exciting opportunities which will be far better than you have experienced in the past.***

**The message of the Ascension – as Sergio’s meditations in tonight’s Musical Vespers point out so powerfully – is the truth that Jesus went through death to resurrection precisely to show us how to meet the feeling that everything is all too awful and depressing for words. Yes we will often find the options less palatable than we would like but the gift of faith, the gifts of the Spirit, the community of the Church, the reassurance that Jesus will be there for us, come what may – looking up rather than down, are the enduring antidote to ‘bai lan’ – just giving up.**

**We have precious gifts in our hands. We know what God does for those who trust him. We have the evidence from the Bible stories that those who work for the coming of God’s kingdom will succeed.**

**But the Spirit that causes out R rate to rise can only work amongst us if we are responding to these new challenges with the same attitude as the disciples at the Ascension. Jesus had left them a blue print for the future; there were no simple answers to be taken off the shelf and wheeled out at the right time. The key was confidence that the coming Spirit could and would be there to carry his people through – if only they looked up and not down.**

**If they asked ‘what will I do’ - not, what will people do for me?**

**And looking up is also the answer to my earlier question about the young Charles ll and the leader of the Scout movement, Baden Powell. For different reasons they were both hiding in trees, trying to escape enemy forces in Charles’ case, or some new scouting recruits in Baden Powell’s case.**

**And both remained safely undiscovered because their pursuers refused to look up…**