

Acts 1:6-14

Due to the current lockdown it may have escaped your notice that last Thursday was an important day in the Christian year: Ascension Day, still a public holiday here in the Netherlands (though I imagine many people have little idea what it commemorates). What it commemorates, of course, is what is described in our reading from the Book of Acts today, when the disciples gathered with Jesus on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem and said goodbye to him as they had known him in a tangible, flesh and blood way. From now on the disciples are going to have to get used to Jesus being with them in a new way – no less real, and closer to them than ever, but no longer as they have been accustomed to. In fact Jesus has spoken to them of how he will be present to them from now on: ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you’. In other words he will be with them in a new and closer way and they will find themselves gifted with a new and dynamic power. And if we were to read on we would find a description of that happening, as the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in power on the day of Pentecost, transforming them and driving them out into the streets of Jerusalem to perform signs and wonders.

That, however, did not happen immediately. We don’t know exactly how long the delay was but it must have been a few days – and that must have been a very strange interval of time. Jesus in his physical presence had gone, ascended – but Jesus in his spiritual presence, through the Holy Spirit, had not yet returned. And so the disciples were somewhat in a state of limbo, you might say in a betwixt and between state. One period had ended but the next had not yet begun and it’s a common condition in human life. There’s a technical term for it: it’s the word ‘liminal’.

Think of a couple of examples. A loved one dies, someone who’s been an important part of your life. There is the initial shock of the loss and the grief and there then comes a delay before the funeral, when you say goodbye to them. That is a liminal time, an in-between period. But you could also think of it in longer terms. Say the person who has died is your spouse, your partner. That person has been a vital part of your life and your identity is bound up with him or her. With his or her loss there is a sense in which you must form a new identity. You are no longer a husband or a wife or a partner in the way you were. And it may take years for your new identity to settle. And until it does you are in something of a state of flux, of confusion. Things which were fixed and sure have come unstuck. Or again, you have a baby, and let’s say it’s your first. All of a sudden you are a parent, something you’ve never been before. Your identity has changed - but it takes time to adjust. You have lost a measure of independence, you have to adopt to whole new range of responsibilities - and that takes time. In a sense you do not become a parent overnight – you gradually grow into the role, into your new identity. And in between is the liminal time.

One way of thinking of the liminal is with the three words: *orientation, disorientation and reorientation*. In our lives we get used to a measure of stability and familiarity: we are accustomed to and oriented to our world. But then something happens, something that breaches normality and we are disoriented. That is the liminal time – until in due course we become reoriented to life, embracing our new situation. In our church here some of us are in the habit of systematically reciting the psalms, and one scholar has shown how many psalms have that pattern of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. Life goes along fairly smoothly. God seems to be with us. But then comes disruption, the unexpected, change that leaves us disoriented. Where is God in all this? But often by the end of the psalm the writer has become reoriented, their trust in God restored.

Now, what can help us to negotiate this liminal time, to move from the old to the new, are rituals – they help to process the change. So a good funeral is important, as we lay down what we must leave behind and face the uncertain future and our new self. This is true of all rites of passage: it’s why birth rituals are important, it’s why Jewish people have bar and bat mitzvahs as they move from childhood to adulthood – indeed many cultures have highly developed rituals for that rite of passage into adulthood. Teenage years, after all, can be tough. Good rituals help us to deal with the pain of loss and the challenge of newness as we move from one state to another. And it is troubling

that today's secular life is often bereft of the rituals that in a former day helped us to process change.

We find two good examples of the liminal in the story of Jesus. Remember his baptism in the River Jordan, prior to the start of his ministry. Here Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit and equipped for his ministry. He does not, however, embark on that immediately. First, he goes off into desert and there he wrestles with his vocation that lies ahead of him; he embraces his identity that has been proclaimed in his baptism as the Beloved of God. This is the liminal, transition period. And it's appropriate for that time to be spent in the wilderness as the wilderness is a place of uncertainty and disorientation and confusion, without the usual rhythms and routines, without our usual landmarks – exactly the features of the liminal. And only after that is he ready to re-engage with the world. The other liminal time in Jesus' life is Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Good Friday is a day of horror, a day of catastrophe – Christians would say it's the end of an old era. And Easter Sunday is a launch into newness, a new chapter of the world's story. But in-between is a day of waiting, a day of preparation, a betwixt and between day. And it's appropriate that it is Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, a day when God pauses, catches breath.

So the disciples in that upper room in Jerusalem are in a liminal time as they await the coming of that Spirit. There is a pause, a treading water. And this, surely, is where this passage addresses us so powerfully today, in our current state. For this period of pandemic is a liminal one, poised as we are between times, waiting, - just as the disciples were waiting - for whatever the future holds. I'm struck that during this time the disciples, we are told, 'went to the room upstairs where they were staying...' In other words they were confined – well, we know all about that! And it's worth pondering a few features of the liminal, what are the characteristics of the betwixt and between.

For a start, typically, the liminal it is an anxious time, a confusing time - cut adrift, as we are, from our usual bearings. All sorts of things that were taken for granted have gone, and what will be and exactly how life will emerge is uncertain. How long will this lockdown last? How long before we can gather, and travel and return to 'normal'? And that makes us anxious and afraid.

And, of course, a strong feature of the liminal is a loss of control. In our current crisis we are very much in the hands of 'the experts': we are constantly told that we are 'following the science'. But the truth is that even the scientists and experts are not in control. We pride ourselves on our belief that we control the world, that we control our lives, that we control nature, but we delude ourselves. The liminal pitches us into a vortex where our lack of control is evident and we flounder. So, for example, we are used to making plans. John Lennon has a song which includes the lines, 'life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans...' And normally at this time of year I am looking forward to a Summer holiday we're planning, and with that on the horizon life slips by. But not this year. We cannot plan because we have no control.

What we need to do, however, is to clarify what can be good about the liminal period, how it can bring blessings in disguise, for it is a time of opportunity. So, for a start, it can be a creative time. The liminal time, after all, may contain both pain and hope, the pain of Good Friday and the hope of Easter Sunday, and that interplay of pain and hope can be productive, it can be fertile. That is why beauty, great art, is often born out of pain: think Beethoven, think Van Gogh. Of course not for everybody, for people whose circumstances are too constrained, or for whom Good Friday is too persistent. But I was fascinated to hear of a company in the UK that produces flour and that is struggling to keep up production during this pandemic due to the surge in bread making and home baking. There is creativity blossoming.

The liminal time can also be one when we are more teachable. When we are disoriented we can be open to new insights, more attuned to wisdom as Christ was in the wilderness. The saying goes that 'familiarity breeds contempt' – 'normality' can dull and numb our senses, closing down our spirits.

But above all, the liminal time can be one where God draws closer and we draw closer to God. We're told in our reading that in that upper room the disciples 'were constantly devoting themselves to prayer'. When we lose control we are cast onto God, onto prayer, and we discover in

our confusion that 'underneath are the everlasting arms...' Maybe that is why some Christians find the dawn and the dusk a good time to pray. Dawn and dusk are liminal times, between night and day, day and night, and that can be a time to find God, to rest in God's presence and to pray.

The disciples in that upper room were confused, disoriented. They were betwixt and between, anxious and uncertain. This was necessary for the transition into newness. And so with us. No-one should minimise the pain of times like this. But as Christians we live by faith and hope. God is with us. We are not in control, but the ascended Jesus is Lord. And we may be amazed at how God can make all things work together for good. Amen.