

Acts 1.1-8

Encountering God

Christ Church Selly Park

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Big Church Little Church [5]

What do you want?

Various people have said something like: ‘blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall never be disappointed.’

As Chris pointed out a couple of weeks ago, Jesus often asked people the question: ‘what do you want me to do for you?’¹ At first it seems like a stupid question – I mean, he asked it of a blind man! Isn’t it obvious what he wanted?!

But what do you *really* want?

Most of you know I’ve not been well since Christmas. I most likely have something called Meniere’s Disease which affects my inner ear, causing dizziness and hearing loss. Though there is no cure, thankfully the treatment reduces the symptoms to a level where I am able to work most of the time. Would I like God to heal me where medical science cannot? Of course!

Pause Or would I?

The thing is, human beings are complicated.

On the one hand, we can be really suffering with physical, mental or spiritual sickness and long to be healed. On the other hand, we can secretly cling to our sickness because it doesn't make demands of us in other ways.

Phil Potter, The Challenge of Cell Church, p. 111

I'm not saying it's one or the other... the tricky part is that often it's *both*. We can long for God to take away the thing that hurts, whether it is physical or emotional or spiritual – *while at the same time* clinging to it because it's become part of who we are, it's become normal, part of the story we tell about ourselves.

The England cricket team is a good – though frivolous – example. Do I want them to win test matches? Of course! Would I miss complaining about *another* one of their batting collapses, their inability to take twenty wickets on a flat pitch, their over-reliance on Joe Root? Of course I would miss that!

Human beings are complicated. That's one reason why – and this *really* shouldn't come as a surprise – Jesus' question is so wise and insightful: *what do you want?* What do *you* want from God?

Encounter – on whose terms?

Today we are thinking about ‘encountering God’.

Often the encounter we look for comes out of what we want. When we pray we lay it all out for God. We want answers to our questions. We want peace in that country. We want healing for this person. We want to see God release her from addiction, to bring him to faith, to bring them his comfort as they mourn.

We look and long to encounter God in those things, and more. They are good things – why wouldn’t God answer those prayers?

The disciples did exactly that when they met Jesus. **‘Lord,’** they said, **‘are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’** (6). Their question was many questions in one. Are you now going to stop the oppression of God’s people? Are you now going to bring justice for the poor? Are you now going to do what God has been promising for generations?

Today, here, we might say, ‘God, are you now going to bring peace to Ukraine – not forgetting all the non-European countries where there is also war? Are you going to make sure no-one goes hungry? Are you going to bring healing?’

When the disciples asked their question, they asked *our* question – *all* our questions. Why? Why not? When?

To them – and by extension to us – Jesus says this:

‘It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

Acts 1.7-8 (NIV)

That answer contains Jesus’ last words on earth (until he returns); they are worth dwelling on. At first we may find it unsatisfying, like Jesus’ ‘stupid’ question to the blind man (‘what do you want me to do for you?’). The Bible contains many what we might call unsatisfying answers to difficult questions.

The thing is though, if I could understand God’s ways, if I could grasp his thoughts, if I could comprehend who he is, would he be worthy of my *worship*?

Too often we reduce God to a broken vending machine: we put in the coins of our prayers and are disappointed when we don’t get the Dairy Milk answers we thought we’d paid for.

Friends, if we hope to encounter a God like that, if we look for a God who turns up when we pray and leaves us alone when we don't, then like those first disciples we will be disappointed – because such a god does not exist.

The disciples wanted God to do what they wanted – not least because they wanted something good! But they wanted God on *their* terms, they wanted God to do what *they* thought he should be doing.

Jesus' answer shows where we must begin if we want to encounter the living God, the true God, the God who *actually* exists rather than the gods we make in our own image: **'It is not for you to know,'** he says (7). If we want to encounter the God who is actually God, we must begin in *humility*; to encounter the God who is actually worthy of worship, we need to stop telling and start listening.

I don't pretend that's easy. The disciples must have been so disappointed. Immediately after their question and his answer, Jesus **was taken up** and **hidden from their sight** (9). And then... not a lot. They chose a replacement for Judas (15-26), but mostly they prayed (14): **They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.**

I wonder what they prayed, I wonder how they felt in those in-between days. Jesus had gone. He hadn't done what they wanted. They must have been confused, disappointed, frustrated.

The Bible contains many other examples of people *waiting* – and it's usually a struggle. Whether it's Abraham waiting decades for a son, Joseph in prison for a crime he didn't commit, David being anointed king and then being chased round the hill country living in caves, Elijah waiting for the rain to come back, Daniel in exile waiting for God to rescue his people, and many more besides – there's an awful lot of waiting in the Bible.

And here in today's reading Jesus told his disciples to **wait**:

‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but **wait** – 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.’

Acts 1.4-5 (NIV)

I don't pretend that's easy. They only had to wait ten days – sometimes we are waiting for much longer for God to act. And sometimes we are waiting for God to do this, when actually he is doing that, if only we might turn and see.

Encounter – invited

If you've heard this story before you can drift off to sleep for a couple of minutes. Twenty years ago I visited Lesotho, a country entirely surrounded by South Africa. We spent a few days in Mokhotlong, high up in the Drakensberg mountains.

Mokhotlong was a hundred miles from the nearest electricity, so there were no street lights – and it was almost a full moon so at night it got very dark. One night, as I stumbled back from the church to our hosts in the darkness, wishing I had a better torch, I happened to look up – and what I saw took my breath away.

There, across the sky, was a band of stars – so many that they merged into one: becoming, as it were, a *Milky Way*. All around, either side of it, were countless other stars. I stopped walking and instead lay on the ground, staring up in wonder at the view Abram had when God promised him he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky.

The disciples wanted a better torch (6): **'are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'** They thought they had a big vision, bringing God's kingdom back to the nation.

But Jesus wanted to give them the Milky Way (8): **'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'**

The disciples wanted God to do the work: **'are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?'** they asked. But Jesus had other ideas: **'you will be my witnesses,'** he said, and not only in Israel but **'to the ends of the earth.'** And they were!

Friends, it's too easy to slip into a way of thinking that tries to make God part of *our* story, when actually *he* is **inviting** *us* to be part of something much bigger, to be part of *his* story. Do you see the difference?

I'm sure none of us actually thinks of God as a heavenly sky fairy with a magic wand to wave over difficult situations – and yet in our thoughts and our prayers how often we treat him like that! We so easily slip into constant asking, even demanding things of God. We *must* present our prayers and requests, our concerns, the longings of our hearts to him – of course we must – but we must also *listen* and submit ourselves to *him*.

Jesus changed his disciples' perspective, he **invited** them to place themselves in God's story, **to the ends of the earth.**

Encounter – transformed

I was once invited to step backwards off the top of a 60-foot-high wall. Don't worry, it wasn't because Jess was cross with me – it was a team-building exercise. And of course before she told me to jump, the instructor had first given me various pieces of equipment so I wouldn't die when I abseiled down.

When God invites us to become part of his story, he doesn't expect us to do so in our own strength. Notice the order in which Jesus answers his disciples (8): **'[1] you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; [2] and you will be my witnesses.'** First comes the Spirit, then comes the witnessing.

Earlier Jesus puts it like this (5), **'John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.'** The word 'baptised' doesn't mean 'sprinkled', it means 'soaked', 'drenched', 'plunged'. The word 'power' is *dunamis* from which we get words like 'dynamic' and 'dynamite'. Jesus is not talking about the morning pep of a cup of coffee, but an explosion of life. The transforming power of the Holy Spirit turned those disciples into people who overflowed with life and love, who couldn't help but be witnesses to all Jesus had done in their life.

A group of sailors were marooned on a life-raft off the coast of Brazil. After days without water they were on the verge of death, but a passing ship eventually rescued them. When the captain of the ship asked them why they were so dehydrated, they replied that they'd run out of water. 'No water?' said the captain. 'You only had to reach over the side of the boat for an endless supply.' They'd been floating through a freshwater stream that pushes out into the Atlantic from the Amazon River. The shortage was an illusion. All they had to do was drink.

Potter, 114

God gives us all we need to be part of his story: the transforming power of his Holy Spirit, his never-ending water of life. It doesn't mean things will be easy; all but one of those disciples was martyred, killed for their faith in Jesus, killed because they were being Jesus' witnesses, killed for being and doing what Jesus had called and equipped them for.

But they were part of God's story, actors in his play, living out the life Jesus gave them in *his* way, on *his* terms, with *him* as Lord. God's story is true; he invites us to join in; and he sends his Spirit to transform and shape us into who we should be as his people.

The sponge

Some of you may well be screaming at me inside your head right now: if all this is true, why don't we see more of this transforming power? Why don't we see people's lives changed?

Sometimes, for whatever reason, there is what feels like a lull in God's activity among us, whether it is a few days like the disciples waiting for Pentecost, or many years like the examples I gave from the Old Testament earlier. It's not always the answer we want to hear, but sometimes God says, 'wait'. Patience is hard but even here God helps: the Spirit's fruit includes patience.

Sometimes it's a question of perspective. The more we pray in small groups with one another, the more we share testimony of how God is at work in one another's lives, the more we learn to see and spot God at work. That increases our expectations and our confidence in God and in his Spirit.

Sometimes the issue is a little closer to home.

You may have heard preachers use the example of a sponge being immersed in a bucket of water – when we take it out of the bucket, water pours out, overflowing. The idea is that as we are filled and soaked in the Holy Spirit, we too overflow.

But, if you don't use a sponge for a long time, it becomes hard and dry, and then it behaves a little differently...

When a hardened sponge is immersed, it doesn't absorb the water at first. It usually becomes wet on the outside, but it needs a little more time to soften in the water before it can be filled.

Potter, 115-116

Sometimes what hardens us as Christians is time in the real world with its temptations and distractions and pressures. Sometimes it's the disappointment of unanswered prayer. Sometimes – if we're honest – we are tired and weary, and just want to be left alone, collecting dust in the dry bucket.

I don't know about you, but I want *more*. I want to bring him all my worries and struggles and longings – but I also want to lift my eyes to see beyond them, beyond myself to God's upper story. I don't want to reduce God and squeeze him into *my* story – I want to be part of *his* story, I want to be the Ben he's calling me to be – not so he can sort out my problems, but so I can be his witness. I don't want to be a hardened, dry sponge – I want to be soaked in the Spirit of God, I want to overflow with his life and love.

I wonder how you answered Jesus' question earlier: 'what do you want me to do for you?'

In a few moments there will be an opportunity for us to bring those things to God – and also to put ourselves into *his* story.

And, I hope, for those of us whose hearts feel like dried-out hardened sponges, time to dip ourselves into the living waters, to begin the process of softening ourselves so we can soak up the life and love and power of God's Spirit.

For now I'm going to end with a story Cathie Bartlam shared with me this week – and gave me permission to share with you this morning as she isn't here today.

As she does every day, Cathie was out walking Stevie their dog and suddenly realised she couldn't see him. She started to call his name, looking around the edges of the field, trying to spot a rustle in the bushes that might give her a clue where he was – but she couldn't see any movement at all, nothing.

She was getting worried, thinking he'd run away and left her – and then looked down and saw him snuffling in the grass; and she realised he had been by her side the whole time.

¹ Matthew 20.32, Mark 10.36, 10.52, Luke 18.41.