

“THE END?”
Acts 1:1-11

The person who has been nominated for the post of Vice-President of the Baptist Union this year is a minister called Rupert Lazar. He's of Trinidadian origin and was a good friend when I was at my previous church – in fact, he felt his call to the ministry while we were there. Seeing his face smiling at me from various Baptist publications recently made me think of some of the other people who were part of the congregation in Edmonton during the time I was working there. One of them was a guy called Steve who used to be involved with the youth club as well as Rupert. We'd been good friends and played football for the same club, and I bumped into him a few years ago at Spring Harvest. But he is now considerably fatter (as am I) and greyer (as am I), so I didn't recognise him. There are two things I remember about him. One is that whenever we went to a party, you'd find him in the kitchen telling other people about his faith. The other is that he was always getting into fights. It wasn't his fault. Somehow people always thought he was staring at them, or had had affairs with their wives, or they just didn't like the look of him.

Now, that wasn't too unusual in the pubs and clubs of North London, where the furniture was usually screwed to the floor so it couldn't be thrown, and the floors were painted red, for the same reason that the decks of the *Victory* were painted red – so that you couldn't see the blood. But if you went anywhere with Steve, there would usually be someone who would come up to him or follow him into the Gents and say “*What are you looking at?*” Maybe you've had the same experience. You sit down and stare into the middle distance, alone with your thoughts, and then someone who happens to be in your line of vision starts asking you, “*What are you looking at?*”

It's a question the disciples were asked as Jesus disappeared into heaven – although there wasn't the same hint of menace in the voices of the angels who spoke to them. And it didn't lead to a fight, as far as we know. According to Luke's gospel, Jesus took his friends out to the countryside near Bethany and, according to his sequel, *Acts*, having made a brief farewell speech, he “*was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.*” I suppose it's not entirely surprising that the disciples were left staring into space after his disappearance, but then “*two men dressed in white*” – presumably angels rather than medical orderlies – appeared and asked them “*What are you looking at?*”

It's one of those questions that are asked for effect, really. It was obvious what they were looking at and why. They were looking wistfully after Jesus – maybe wondering how he'd done it, or why he hadn't taken them with him, or what they were going to do now that he'd gone. It was probably as much sheer amazement as anything else. But the question of the angels was designed to remind them that he had

promised to return some day – in the same amazing way that he had left – and in the mean time they had work to do. “Don’t just stand there staring: get on with the mission he has entrusted to you.”

That’s a challenge that we still need to hear today – especially when we meet together for worship like this. It’s great to get together and look for Jesus in worship. It’s good to be here with friends and like-minded people – other disciples. And it’s right that we should, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, “*keep our eyes focussed on Jesus, the beginning and the end of our faith.*” It’s to be encouraged that we should seek him, want more of him and his presence, concentrate our thinking and our studying on him and on his words. But we must not forget that we are also engaged in a mission to the world around us.

We were not saved (or whatever word you want to use) so that we could huddle together and have good times. Our Christian calling is not to attend services and conventions. According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus’ last bit of teaching to his disciples before he returned to his Father in heaven was that they should go into all the world with the good news of the Kingdom. Worship is a very important part of our Christian experience and we neglect it at our peril. But if the point of our worship is simply to have a good time, to bask in the warm and fuzzy glow of songs and prayers, then we’ve missed out on what the path of discipleship is all about. Just like those first disciples we need to get on with the job to which we’ve been called.

That’s fair enough. But it wasn’t going to be easy for those disciples – the eleven who accompanied him to the place where he disappeared, and the greater number who were also involved in the work of Jesus. He was no longer there with them. For three years they had been with him – listening, watching, practising, learning. Whenever things had got tough, he was there for them – sorting out the demons, calming the storms, dealing with the hard questions, drawing the map of the Kingdom of God. Now he was gone – and in rather curious circumstances.

It had been a bit of a rough ride over the past few weeks. There had been the emotion of the last week of his life (as they thought), with that triumphant entrance into Jerusalem, the strange Passover supper they’d shared, all the talk of death and departure. Then he had been arrested and executed, and they’d watched him die – those who had the bottle to stay around. No doubt about it: he was dead. All that talk of triumph, of a new world order, of liberation and power had seemed empty. He was gone – and the dream had gone with him.

Then, a couple of days later he’d come back to life. They’d seen him, spoken to him, touched him. Suddenly it was all alright again. Jesus was alive. The Kingdom could be built. The Messiah had come

and demonstrated that he was real. He had appeared in all kinds of places, bringing them peace and breakfast, fish and hope. He had spoken of, promised, power to them and they could see that there was a plan after all. So when he took them out to Bethany they asked him, “*Are you now going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?*” Everything seemed right now. The end was in sight. He was with them again and there was a real hope for the future. This was the time to inaugurate the new order. But he dismissed their question and suddenly disappeared again. Now what? Their hopes appeared to have been dashed once again. How were they going to cope?

It’s all very well preachers and teachers standing up and saying we’ve got to get on with the job, we have to fulfil Christ’s mission. It’s all very well being reminded that worship is fine, but we need to speak of Jesus to our colleagues and classmates, neighbours and friends. It’s all very well calling people to a life of sacrifice and servanthood for the cause of the Kingdom. It’s all very well saying that we need to live with the highest moral and ethical standards. But how are we going to do it? At least those disciples of whom we have read this morning had been with Jesus, they had spent time with him and actually physically accompanied him. We haven’t even got that. How are we to get involved in sharing the gospel with the community in which we’ve been called to live and work?

Well, according to Luke, as Jesus was preparing to leave his friends, he made them a promise. They were, indeed, to be his witnesses throughout the entire world, but he was going to give them the wherewithal to carry out that commission. “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,*” he said. There was to be a source of power, a presence with them that would encourage and enable and equip them to fulfil the task. As we now know, ten days later they had the amazing experience of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was given to them in a dramatic and unmistakable fashion as they sat praying in an upstairs room. And the rest of the book of *Acts* narrates just how the effect of the Holy Spirit was felt by them and how it influenced the world in which they lived. And you can see how that power has continued to operate down through the centuries as men and women have gone out with the message of Jesus and been equipped and empowered in amazing ways.

And I believe that promise still holds true today. Jesus promises all those who are prepared to follow him and his ways the power that they need to fulfil the tasks to which he has called them. It is as we worship and pray, as we fix our eyes on Jesus, that we receive the power of the Holy Spirit. But that power is not to be used only there, in worship and prayer. It is to be used in witness and work for the Kingdom of God. If you feel inadequate, if you feel you are not up to the task, if you simply feel that your Christian life needs a boost, then God wants to fill you with the power of his Holy Spirit. And once that has happened, you can set about the task of witnessing for him knowing that God will bless you and your efforts. And what is so great about it is that you can keep coming back for more!