

# Waiting in the City

a sermon preached on

## Ascension Day

13 May 2010

at

### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Fr David Moore**

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Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

The ascension event sets a dramatic scene for a final instruction from the risen Christ: "Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.... Thus it is written, that the Christ is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations... You are witnesses of these things."<sup>1</sup> This, according to Luke, is the distillation of the teacher's message. In a moment he will be with them no more, and they will have only the memory of his instruction – and they are, after all, to be witnesses.

It is this call to witness to these things which is the mark of this feast. And it is this business of being witness which is so problematic. The assumption is that witnessing means talking a lot, smooth-talking others to subscribing into a bunch of rational propositions to 'believe in'. Or it is assumed that witnessing means running around in a frenzy doing good deeds to those who we think need them. Under the powerful forces of externalism, literalism, and historicism, our proclamation tends to be verbal, rational, organisationally-focused, and hyper-active.

The bad news for the church is that, increasingly, modern people are deeply suspicious of our talkative, triumphalist and, frankly, bossy 'witness' to the crucified, resurrected and ascended Christ. Good works are still generally acceptable, of course – people are still happy to give money to a church agency which helps the poor and the marginalised. And without doubt, the capacities of Christian compassion are truly astonishing, and a cause for great thanksgiving. But the mission of the churches continues to be thwarted by the doing of good works with an ulterior motive – which is ultimately at its basest level nothing other than scalp-hunting. Our mission agencies remain infected by the long and dark history of Christianity's exclusive claims and imperialist mind-set. The warning of the late Church Missionary Society General Secretary and bishop has not yet been heeded:

"If the gospel is ever to redeem humanity from its obsession with militarism and domination by showing Jesus' voluntary surrender of himself into hostile hands, his rejection, suffering and degrading death actually challenges all previous ideas of God and God's relation to the world, the church will have to reflect this truer image of God in a more distinctive lifestyle and a clearer grasp of the nature of power."<sup>2</sup> "An evangelist who, in the process of evangelism, does not himself [sic] learn more about Jesus Christ from the situation to which he [sic] has been sent, is not engaged in evangelism. He [sic] is involved in propagating christianity, which is a very different occupation."<sup>3</sup>

So how to be 'witnesses'? It does help to recall that the Lord's commission is an instruction in the one thing that must be *done* – not an instruction in salesmanship, speech-making, marketing strategy, clever rhetoric, or even good deeds. The disciple, the witness, is to undergo exactly what the Lord himself had to undergo. We ourselves are to embody the Paschal Mystery – to suffer, die

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:44b, 46-48

<sup>2</sup> Taylor J V, *The Christlike God*, 1992, SCM: London, p257.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor J V, *For All the World* 1966, Hodder & Stoughton, London, pp33-34.

and rise from the dead. We ourselves are to embody repentance and forgiveness. That's what we have been meditating upon during these Easter days.

This, of course, is impossible for us. We like the idea of *rising*, certainly! But the very idea of suffering and dying are absolute anathema to us. It's more than we can stomach. It's madness in our culture. We cannot accomplish the task which Christ set us. Certainly not by our own sheer act of will, or righteousness, or holiness, or correct thinking. It is the Spirit who blows where she will who accomplishes what we ourselves cannot: "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised."<sup>4</sup>

Part of the problem is that we are very impatient. We want results - *now!* Fearful, anxious, and insecure, we want to prove to ourselves and others that God is on our side, that we are right, and that we are in the majority. And so the very last words from the Lord are crucial: "So stay here in the city until you have been clothed with the power from on high."<sup>5</sup> Stay here. Wait. In the *polis*,<sup>6</sup> the 'city' – where we are, among those whom we are called to serve and live. Watch. Stop rushing around trying to cook up the future. The Spirit who enables us to suffer and die is given to us – there's no need for us to hurry it along, to talk God into something, indeed we cannot. We will be given the necessary garment, that we may undergo the Paschal Mystery.

As for those to whom we are called to witness... Well, there would probably be a heart-felt sigh of relief if we talked a whole lot less 'about' the Christian proclamation – instead silently, humbly undergoing the Paschal Mystery, through the power of the Spirit who is given to us. Patient attention to the symbol at the centre of our tradition – which is not up in the clouds but down on the ground, planted firmly in the ground – is still all that is needed.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 21:49a

<sup>5</sup> Luke 21:49b

<sup>6</sup> Gk: **πολις** *poli*