

What next? – mission after the Ascension

I've heard a rumour that Aaron Sorkin is bringing back the American TV series the *West Wing*. I used to love this drama about an American President called Josiah Bartlet. He's a Democrat, a Catholic and a Nobel prize-winning economist – so very different from current reality! But one of President Bartlet's favourite sayings is, 'What's next?'

'What's next?' You can imagine that also being on the lips of the disciples of Jesus as they came to terms with the Ascension. After all, they have spent the last three years of their lives trailing around after this wandering Galilean rabbi, never quite sure of where they might end up. Now they have gone through the trauma of arrest, trial and brutal crucifixion. Their hopes and dreams have been trampled underfoot by religious intolerance and military might.

Added to that is the utter confusion of the resurrection! Is he dead or isn't he? And just when they were getting used to having Jesus back among them, post-Ascension, he's gone again. What a rollercoaster of emotions, taking these poor disciples to the very extremes of hope and despair. What next?

The disciples' first reaction is predictable, especially for Methodists – they form a committee to fill a casual vacancy. With Judas gone, the twelve have become eleven. So, according to the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the remaining disciples gather to choose a successor. They use tried and tested methods to discern the will of God and eventually Matthias emerges as the new number 12. But isn't it interesting that we hear nothing more either about the exploits of Matthias or the one he pipped to the post, Justus. Some commentators have wondered whether Justus took his bat home disgruntled at not being chosen, but we shall never know.

More important for us today is to discover what this reaction to the Ascension says about mission. If nothing else, it reflects a desire for continuity among Jesus' bewildered followers. In the absence of any firm plan for the future, they revert to what they know. Since Jesus chose twelve from among the many disciples who followed him - a sort of inner core or politburo – the post-Ascension Christians wanted to maintain that pattern. We could ask two questions of this decision – was it necessary to replace Judas, and; did

the disciples jump the gun when they should have waited for Saul of Tarsus to come along?

In many ways, they went for the safe option, sticking with what they knew, even if they couldn't quite understand why they did it. In the face of such confusion, it is easy to see why they looked for stability in their past. However, part of the continuing story of the Acts of the Apostles is to demonstrate the dangers in that approach. For one of the great issues within the early Church was the position of Gentile believers. Peter and his followers assumed that continuity with Jesus also meant continuity with Judaism. If you want to follow Jesus then you must be like him, i.e., Jewish. It took some hard arguing from Paul and a vision from God to confront Peter with a choice of mission perspective – is it primarily about preservation or transformation?

We know that Saul of Tarsus was eventually to join the apostles, someone totally from outside the original group, someone in fact who would not have been eligible to stand in the original contest for the number twelve slot on the team. Yet it was Paul who brought the message from God which challenged the preservation agenda.

At this time in the church's history, it seems we are faced with another 'what next?' moment. Our systems, theologies, liturgies, for the most part, speak of our so-called 'glorious' past. They root us firmly in the preservation business. Increasingly, the church is being seen by society at large as the repository of our collective past, for good and ill. They want the nostalgia-fest of Carols by Candlelight, but have long since ditched the Victorian Family Values that still seem to cling around the institutional church's neck.

It is an attractive role – society's museum curator, reminding us of yesteryear. At least the church would have a definite role! But is that what the Ascension (and indeed the Resurrection) is all about? Is that our mission in today's world?

The Wesleys knew what it was like to face a church institution for which preservation had become stagnation, when doing things right had prevented the church from doing the right thing. So John Wesley risked being seen as a revolutionary in his preaching and pastoral mission, an abominable thing for a High Church Tory to be branded!

The Wesleys grasped the most radical part of the Ascension agenda – its boundlessness. Whatever the mechanics of the Ascension itself (and astronomers reckon that if it is taken literally, and Jesus left earth at the speed of light, he would only now, in the 21st century, have left our galaxy!), this act takes Jesus beyond the limitations of history and place. His presence becomes limitless and, with it, the power and scope of his love.

That is the difference between preservation and transformation. Preservation sets limits in order to bring definition; transformation looks at the limits already in place and seeks to step beyond them. And so we are brought to the very heart of the Gospel message: God offers us in Christ a chance to be defined, not by what we have been, but by what we are becoming. The Gospel says – you will be judged by what you do next, not by what you did last.

In this, the Resurrection and the Ascension reorient our lives as individuals and a community. The church becomes future-focused. Not that we are given some special sooth-saying powers to predict the future. I hope you are as uncomfortable as I am when certain Christians act as if they have access to God's appointments diary and can accurately predict God's future movements and moods! Being future-oriented means that we allow ourselves to be open to the unknown.

The future is no less uncertain, scary and exciting now for us as for those eleven disciples left after the Ascension. Like them we must be prepared to have our minds blown open by God's radical, boundless and creative future.

The question is; are we honestly ready to say to God – What next?