

When does one thing become another during a transformation process? And if we are waiting for something to transform – what do we do while we are waiting? This can be both a practical and an esoteric question.

Yesterday afternoon St Paul's Cathedral was packed to capacity as Bishop Sarah was installed as the 133rd Bishop of London – and its first woman. It was an amazing afternoon – filled with so many firsts as well as a great deal of tradition. I found Bishop Sarah's installation much more moving than I expected – the promises which she made; but also the moment in history which we were witnessing – nothing will ever be the same again! If it ever was!

After her installation, there were readings and Bishop Sarah preached. It was a very clever and thought provoking sermon – the full text of which is on the Diocese of London website and I do encourage you to read it¹.

While the sermon as a whole made me think, there were two themes which stood out for me. Firstly she said *I am aware that as the first woman Bishop of London I am necessarily subversive – and it's a necessity I intend to embrace*. She reflected that when she was first made a Bishop a few years ago the sermon had encouraged her and Bishop Rachel to *socialize and subvert*. She spoke about the fact that Jesus chooses outsiders not so much as to disturb the comfortable, but to disturb the conventional, and that it is through the disturbance that we learn to see the world and God afresh.

Will London Diocese look different now – well it has a new bishop – so in some ways it does – but in reality London Diocese is its people – you and I that form the fabric of the diocese – are we different because of Bishop Sarah – time will tell – but yesterday made me feel incredibly hopeful for our future.

Since Bishop Sarah's appointment has been announced I have had lots of discussions with people who ask about what ways this might change – and my answer is really – we have worked and prayer for this day - *all we can do now is hope and see what the outcome is as we continue to work together to transform – cause that's what we do!*

There are things that we know, things that we hope for and things that we have to trust God for.

Our Gospel reading today is Luke's version of Jesus Ascension into heaven. Luke's account is more subtle than some of the others. Luke divides his narrative into three movements, each with a distinctive theme. The past: The necessity of these things (vv. 44-47); The promise: The call to be witnesses (vv. 48-49) and "While You Wait": The call in the meantime (vv. 50-53).²

¹ www.london.anglican.org/articles/sermon-by-bishop-sarah-at-her-installation-in-st-pauls-cathedral/

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2385

Luke is a clever writer, and unlike the other accounts, Luke places the ascension on the evening of Sunday of the resurrection. In a sense the timing doesn't matter, or how long Jesus appeared on earth after the resurrection, what matters is the message that is communicated; Luke is trying to make this as clear as he can for the disciples.

Luke starts with the 'what has been put into it' – the past journey with Jesus, reminding the disciples of what they have learnt through their time with Jesus, but also of the things they knew before which Jesus has built on. The labour, the effort, the intent and the learning has been intense, and should not be forgot in light of what is happening now, and what is to come. This is the same for us in our journey of faith. So often when we are rattled in our journey, or we lose sight of God in our lives we forget to look at where we have been. Surely the start of working out where we are, and where we are going is to look at where we have been. To consider the things we have known about God to be true in the past; to consider the things we have learnt, and to even ask why we have the questions that we do. Jesus' disciples must have felt the earth slipping beneath their feet at the thought of being left alone, after all that happened in Jerusalem, and Luke's account draws them back in the words of Jesus to what they have known. What they do know! Bishop Sarah was very clear yesterday that we continue to build on the foundations which are already in place. Next week we will celebrate 20 years in this building and our sharing with the URC – it is the foundation upon which we work for the future.

Luke moves from the past confirmation onto what is promised; the *all that I have done, or all that I have listened to*. Luke's Jesus does not dwell simply on the past. He turns the focus next to his followers: "you are witnesses of these things" (v. 48). You have seen all these things, you know what I promised and what has been fulfilled – you need to trust this.

Bishop Sarah will be like other Bishops – she has been a Bishop before – she is not new to London – she grew up and worked here – but she is new to the role – and seeks to lead us in a new direction. But we are not the first Christians to have a have a new leader, nor are we the last. We are not the first people to have questions, or feel challenged, or want to put our own mark on how we live as Christians; each generation has done the same.

As Jesus prepares to leave his disciples he reminds them to not forget the promise, again to not forget what they know. We too need to remember the promise and be open to what it offers to us.

The final movement of Luke's account is the main event - Jesus' Ascension. Unique to this version is the prominence of "blessing." First, while Jesus ascends he blesses his followers, Second, after worshipping and returning to Jerusalem, his followers are "continually in the temple blessing God" (v. 53), causing Luke's Gospel to both begin and end with prayer and worship.

Jesus has told his disciples to wait for the spirit – to trust this promise – but they don't just sit around waiting – they worship. This is not a flippant thing for filling in time, it is an active celebration of God in our midst which informs what is taking place and what it to come. It is why the Archbishops have called us all to prayer in Thy Kingdom Come – we are called to use this time to focus our minds on praying for the world.

Luke concludes his gospel with Jesus giving guidance to how his followers are to live: worshipping God, waiting on Jesus' promises, and doing so "with great joy". Later writers and followers will build on this, including the writer to the letter to the Ephesians we heard earlier – they build on the theme of ascension as a call for the church to "know" God's power as it is revealed in Christ. This Christ who is above all things is also the head of the church, which is his body (vv. 22-23)³.

Liturgically this week we sit between the ascension and the promise of the spirit which will come at Pentecost. It is a time of the churches year which calls us to pray – to worship in our waiting. The Bishop's have called the whole church to pray this week, with special prayer events in the lead up to Pentecost. It is part of a national call to a week of prayer leading up to the celebration of Pentecost. It builds on our commitment as part of Capital Vision to 'Pray without ceasing.'

Now the spirit of God is always praying within us whether we are aware or not, but this is a time to focus in on that spirit of prayer and yearning. There are a number of resources too, including a number of events in the city listed on the Diocese website. But however you hear this message, we are invited in this time of waiting to pray and worship – wherever we are, reminded that we know the story, we know the promise and now it is time to act.

I started by asking **When does one thing become another during a transformation process?** I guess I want to ponder whether the transformation process ever ends. We are evidence of that – no sooner do we become one thing, or master a skill than we begin the process of further learning and changing.

Bishop Sarah summarised this yesterday in these words *'We are called upon, with all God's people, to proclaim afresh in this generation the good news of Jesus Christ and this requires faithful improvisation. It requires us to reimagine, to subvert the old ways of doing things, to challenge ourselves, to speak up and speak out.'*

She concluded with an invitation, very similar to the question that Jesus asked the disciples *'A church which is rooted in scripture and tradition but not afraid to reimagine the future. This is the sort of church and community that I believe the Lord has called me to assist in fostering, here in this Diocese. Will you join me?'*

This is our invitation this Ascensontide . Amen

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2463