

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

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Isaiah 40:27-31

Acts 1:1-14

What to do when you don't know what to do!

Well, here we are in the newly linked charge of Kingussie with Laggan and Newtonmore. Here we are, both at the start of something new, and in the middle of something that we began long since – our walk on a path of renewal. And what are we supposed to do?

The disciples were in that same place of a new thing and a continuing thing when we meet them at the beginning of Acts – or of Luke volume 2. Before Easter we were looking at Luke volume 1 to learn about discipleship, and now we are going to keep seeing what Luke can show us. Luke gives us a little overlap between his volumes, in that he ends his gospel – or volume 1 – with a brief account of the ascension of Jesus, and he begins his second volume with a fuller account of this.

In this second reporting, we find that even before the ascension the disciples are already floundering around to find out “what next?” “Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” If they had tried with both hands to find a way to demonstrate their depths of misunderstanding, they could scarcely have bettered this question.

The answer – because there is an answer – is not about Israel, but about them. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Jesus’ answer took the focus of God’s activity and power from the comfortingly large and anonymous “Israel” – the nation, with appropriate leaders and rules – and made it real and personal. You will have power; you are going to have a job to do (and the ability to do it). In his ministry, Jesus has spoken to and of the larger nation-state – most often calling it to account – but all the time his real task, as we have seen, has been to

train his disciples to do his work and carry on the revolution of God's kingdom.

You will have power. You will be my witnesses – to Jerusalem and Judea (yes, to Israel) and to Samaria (yes, the local enemies, strange people) and to the ends of the earth – so raise your eyes beyond the local.

And then he was gone, his last challenge ringing in their ears. He was gone, and they could no longer pretend or hope that life after the resurrection was going to be the same as life with Jesus before his death.

But what are they actually going to do? What to do when you don't know what to do? Feelings of purposelessness and emptiness are very negative and can make way for all kinds of wrong choices. What were they to do?

They had the answer, because Jesus had told them: they were to wait. They were to stay in Jerusalem and wait. And so they did.

In the weekly prayers we held on the Wednesdays; of Lent, we were given various readings to think about, both Biblical and from Christian writers. The last Wednesday one of the readings we thought about was from the Scottish Victorian writer, George MacDonald. He said this:

What God may hereafter require of you, you must not give yourself the least trouble about.

Everything he gives to you, you must do as well as ever you can.

That is the best possible preparation for what he may want you to do next.

If people would but do what they have to do, they would always find themselves ready for what came next.

The best preparation for what lies ahead in the unknown future, is to do what we can and should do now. No messing about. No excuses. So the disciples waited, and they prayed.

When we read that the disciples prayed I wonder how you picture that. What did they actually do? There were the eleven disciples, some women and Jesus' birth family, maybe twenty to thirty people. How did

they pray? Aloud, almost certainly. These were the days before doing things like reading or praying in silence had been developed. That's hard to believe, isn't it? But it was not until a few centuries later that anyone is recorded as reading in silence when St. Augustine, remarked in wonder of St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan that

When [Ambrose] read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud. Jewish prayers (the prayers that this group waiting in Jerusalem knew) were rooted in the reading of Scripture, so almost certainly they were praying aloud.

Did they just use formal Jewish prayers about the restoration of the place of Israel? Did they use the Psalms and sing or chant their prayer? Was it now that the formalising of the pattern of prayer that Jesus had given - the Lord's Prayer – was begun? Did they sit? Stand? – probably – prostrate themselves? When they “devoted themselves to prayer” how much of each day were they actively praying?

We don't need to know the answers. What we do need to do is to work out for ourselves how we might also devote ourselves to prayer. One of the calls to churches on the path of renewal is a call to prayer. We will not know renewal in any meaningful way unless we deepen our faith by spending time consciously in God's presence.

Obviously, we pray together in our Sunday services, formally and, I hope, devoutly. There are other times when we pray together: at the beginning and end of meetings of the Session or any of the Session groups. That is good, but there is never a time when we say that we pray or have prayed enough, because prayer is not measured on that kind of scale. There is still a prayer group which meets in St. Bride's on a Monday lunch time. There are discipleship groups of various sorts which meet in Laggan and in Jenny Jones' home in Newtonmore. These groups pray. There is a time on a Thursday morning when you can sit in St. Bride's in quiet with one or two others and use that time for meditative prayer. All these are good.

But what of all the times when we are not together? We are not like that group waiting in Jerusalem, living together in one place and waiting. We each have our homes and our lives, but that doesn't mean that our task of uniting in prayer ends when we close our own front doors. To be a

Christian is to be called to pray – constantly – with thanksgiving as well as with petition.

If I say we all have our personal prayers to make, I wonder what comes to your mind? Childhood prayers by the bed or by your mother's knee? Some people have a time of day and a part of their home that they go to, to pray. Some people find this hard to do, either because of the chaos of their lives or because they find that sitting still does not help them concentrate.

Some people like to read and meditate on Scripture before they pray, while others will pray before they read. For some people a daily routine is best, while for others a weekly time is more helpful. Some people find it easier to pray while walking or while making music! On busy days – we know about these! – it can be helpful to remember that we can offer our activity to God as a prayer. So, for instance, when I sat down to prepare this service for you I asked God to take the time and activity as a prayer for this church. That sounds like “holy” work (it doesn't always feel like it!) But equally, when you have lots of housework to do, or when you have to write minutes or when you have to do whatever your work is, you can offer up your activity to God as a prayer – as an act of adoration or as intercession for a specific person or circumstance. And then as you do your task as well as you can, you can know that you are also doing it as part of your prayer.

We can pray using books of prayers or liturgies – as we did in our Lenten meditations when we used the evening prayers of the Northumbria Community – or we can use our own words, or a combination, or no words at all. We can simply hold a person or situation in our minds and offer them to God in silence or, as I have said, in action. There are so many ways to pray that there is no excuse, no valid excuse for not doing so! Especially as we are called to pray – to wait and to pray; to do what must be done and wait and pray. And then we will be ready when the next step in sharing the gospel in being the good news in witnessing by God's power comes to us.

Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up on wings as eagles.