Before coming to Coventry, I was Rector of Newbury, where, from time to time, we would be visited by our Bishop, Stephen Cottrell, the Bishop of Reading (now the Bishop of Chelmsford). One of Bishop Stephen’s rather unnerving habits was - and, for all I know, still is! - the way he would begin his sermons with an extended period of complete silence. After a couple of times, we got used to him doing it - but it was rather alarming to being with. Everyone wondered what had gone wrong - what is the correct way of dealing with a bishop who falls into a catatonic trance as soon as he gets into the pulpit? I have to say that the wait was always worth it - but there was an edge to it; it was distinctly uncomfortable. More of that a little later...

Over these last few weeks the disciples of Jesus have begun to get used to the idea that he is astoundingly, gloriously, miraculously alive! Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

It’s something which, initially, had come as a complete shock. ‘Startled’ and ‘terrified’ are the words Luke uses to describe their reaction to the sudden appearance of the risen Jesus among them. His response - ‘Peace be with you’ - comes not just as a polite greeting but as an absolute lifeline!

But that was a few weeks ago now. By now they’ve begun to take it in their stride. As the Dean was reflecting on Thursday evening, Jesus has been meeting up with them on what seems like a pretty regular basis. He has been teaching them by ‘opening their minds to understand the scriptures’. He has been preparing them for the next stage in God’s unfolding plan. In which, they discover, the onus is going to be on them. Jesus will still be present, yes, but in a very different way.

He had begun telling them this a few hours before his trial and crucifixion: ‘I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.’ The presence of Jesus himself was necessarily limited in time and space. He could ever only be with a relatively few people at the same time. Whereas the Advocate, the Comforter, the Strengthener, ‘the one who comes alongside to help’, the Holy Spirit, has no such restrictions. He can range freely through time and space. He can be everywhere at once.

And he can be not just with people but within them - to bring about what the prophet Ezekiel anticipated so eagerly. The gift of the Spirit comes to transform people on the inside, to help us live as God intends us to live, able to follow his statutes and observe his ordinances. A new heart. A new spirit. The replacement of their unresponsive dead hearts of stone with living and beating hearts of flesh.

But back to where we were. The visible, audible, touchable, physical Jesus has now finally gone. And gone for good. There’s an air of finality about the Ascension, isn’t there? Something about the way ‘he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.’ He is coming back, yes. ‘This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’ But not for a very long while. In fact, of course, we’re still waiting. And, meanwhile, there is work to be done...

But not just yet. First of all, there’s something else. First of all, there is the instruction simply to wait.
We find it at the end of Luke’s account in chapter 24 of his Gospel: ‘And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city - wait - until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

And then again at the beginning of Luke’s second volume, the Acts of the Apostles: ‘While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This’, he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

It’s this waiting that I’d like us to reflect on for a moment as we gather together on what we might think of as this in-between Sunday, the Sunday after Ascension Day, the Sunday before the Day of Pentecost. What do you make of it?

I’m drawn to think about this because I really don’t like waiting. It feels like an unnecessary waste of time. It goes against the grain. Not least in the never-ending roller-coaster of a place like our Cathedral, where there is such a relentlessly constant stream of activity. We haven’t got time to wait. Pressing the pause button is a luxury we simply cannot afford...

And yet - here it is. The latest in a whole series of indications in the Bible that waiting is a vital component of a healthy faith. We find it especially in the psalms, which is one the reasons why they are so good for us. Psalm 27.14: ‘Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!’ Or Psalm 37.7: ‘Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices.’ Or Psalm 62.1: ‘For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.’

It turns out that the one luxury we simply can’t afford is not pressing the pause button...

So what does this period of waiting between the Ascension and Pentecost do for the disciples?

I think that, first and foremost, this time of waiting relieves them of the pressure of thinking that it’s all going to be down to them. It rescues them from the illusion that they are the ones who are in control. It gives them time to absorb more fully the contrast between the enormity of the task before them - the call of Jesus to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth - and the all too obvious limits to their ability and their desperate need of the power of the Holy Spirit.

And for us? I don’t think I want to suggest a slavish adherence to the church calendar whereby we simply pull the plug on Ascension Day, cancel everything and and wait for the Day of Pentecost nine days later - though that would undoubtedly be an interesting experiment! No - a better way of applying this is to make sure that our busy lives include times of concentrated waiting. Time to stop. Time to be still. Time to reflect.

Time to be relieved of the pressure of thinking that it’s all down to us. Time to be rescued from the illusion that we are the ones who are in control. Time to contemplate the enormity of the task of being the witnesses of Jesus in the world today. Time to bring afresh to God our need of his Holy Spirit. Waiting, just waiting, for the promise of the Father to clothe us with power from on high. Amen.