

“THE EMPOWERED CHURCH” (Pentecost)
(Acts 2:1-21)

*(This is a revised version of a sermon preached
at St. Aidan’s West Epping on 27th May 2012)*

Power. It’s a word that conjures up a whole range of images. There’s nuclear power, solar power, and many other sources of energy. There are engines and vehicles and factories that use or produce great amounts of power. Or think of political power: politicians, dictators, armies, unions, the media, and others who wield great power in our days.

But power is not an obvious image associated with the church in the western world today. Whatever power the church once exercised in Australia has been eroded, so that its influence on society is very restricted indeed. Not that that’s necessarily a terrible thing. Throughout history, the church sadly has seldom wielded power in the way it should. Its leaders have too easily been diverted from their real task, and got caught up in less important things, or even in evil activities, which have tarnished the reputation of the one who is the Lord of the church.

Power was certainly lacking in the church at the beginning of the book of Acts. When Christ returned to his Father’s side forty days after the resurrection, the disciples were confused, bereft, uncertain where to go – except that Jesus had made them a great promise.

Before he ascended, Jesus told his disciples to wait for a new gift: the gift of the Holy Spirit, who would come upon them and give them power – power to become witnesses for Christ, not just in Jerusalem, not just in the surrounding region, but to the ends of the earth.

Now just stop and think about these people. If you wanted to change the world, you would surely look for people of outstanding ability and achievement, people of proven leadership capacity who would work effectively as a team, people of the highest moral calibre who could see beyond mere financial rewards. Actually, it would be good to have a few more of those in our own parliaments as well!

But when Jesus chose the leaders of his church, he chose a motley collection of nobodies. So many were uneducated, selfish, cowardly, prickly. Peter: a man whose claims were far greater than his not-so-valorous deeds. James and John, the sons of thunder, apparently best known for their fiery tempers. Thomas, who seemed to be able to see the worst in every situation. Simon the Zealot, a member of a group which would happily kill all tax-collectors, those collaborators with the Romans, such as Matthew, another member of the “leadership team”.

Now, let’s face it: with a team like that, you’d want to sack the selectors! But these were just the people through whom Jesus was going to found his worldwide church. These were the ones who would be the first to take the Gospel of Jesus to the outside world.

Of course, they **would** need some outside help, or quite a bit of spiritual enabling. If this was the team, God would really have to do something special.

And of course he did! The feast of Pentecost was a time of thanksgiving for the Jewish people: thanksgiving for the harvest, thanksgiving to the Lord who had rescued them and made them his people and given them his Law. Thousands and thousands of people had crowded into Jerusalem to worship and give thanks at the festival. And on that day of Pentecost, seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus, God did yet another new thing.

In our reading from Acts 2, we heard of a violent wind from heaven, and tongues of fire resting on the disciples – probably about 120 of them – as they spoke in other tongues.

A **mighty wind**: an expression of life and power, the breath of God, the Spirit of God – for in the Old and New Testaments the same word means *wind* and *breath* and *spirit*. There is true life and power here. There were **tongues of fire**: fire, a powerful force, a purifying and cleansing force, an expression of the presence of God, as Moses discovered at the burning bush. Yes, God is truly at work here. John the Baptist had said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now that promise is being kept.

The disciples are speaking loudly and enthusiastically of the wonderful things God has done. People gather round. And as they listen they realize that most of these speakers are Galileans, country bumpkins who would surely never have made it to high school, let alone university.

But they're not speaking Aramaic or Hebrew or Greek, one of which everyone would know. Here's a visitor saying: "Hey, this man is speaking my **native** language. How did he learn that?" And this is happening all over the place. The disciples are speaking in different languages: languages they have never learned, probably never heard. And this is not clever planning, good luck, speedy correspondence language courses. This is the Holy Spirit giving them power to speak.

Very odd! And actually quite unnecessary! For virtually everyone there would understand the languages the disciples already knew. Of course they would have had to concentrate to hear the message through the thick guttural accent that Galileans had. But when God does something new, he sometimes likes to celebrate, and certainly on this day he was doing something special. He was inaugurating a new era, the age of the Holy Spirit.

And what was the point of all these different languages? God was making clear that the message of Jesus was a message for people of **all** races and backgrounds and languages. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit was at work in people, but it seems that he only came on **special** people on **special** occasions for **special** purposes. Now he was coming to work in **all** Christ's followers for **all** time, in fulfillment of the message of the prophet Joel, as Peter pointed out to the crowd. He was coming to work in and to work through men **and** women; through old and young; even through **slaves** as well as free people. No follower of Jesus is excluded when the Spirit comes to Christ's people.

The Holy Spirit **has come**, and he is **with us**, among us, within us, this day. And despite the apparent inadequacies of those first disciples, the Gospel of Jesus went out through them, and then through those who heard their words, all over the world as it was then known. And it has come to us, just as it has gone out to all parts of the world.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he had told his disciples: “You will receive power when the Spirit comes, and you will be my witnesses”. And through the Spirit, those first disciples and others like them and like us became the instruments of God in taking the Good News of Jesus throughout the world.

The Spirit’s work is sometimes dramatic and even miraculous; more often gentle and subtle. But he **is** there, at work even in us. With his enabling, we too can bear witness to the message of Jesus, by our words and actions and love, pointing people to the love of Jesus and inviting them to share in the life of his family. May we be open to the gentle – and sometimes unexpected - power of the Spirit, at work in our lives and the lives of all Christ’s followers. Amen.

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