

**Pentecost**  
**11/05/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 2:1-21**

**Psalm 104**

**1 Corinthians 12:3b - 13**

**John 20:19 – 23**

### **The power that makes possible**

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The readings today are joined by a single theme: the gift of the Holy Spirit brings new life. In particular Acts shows how on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were subject to the sudden, irresistible and bewildering gift of God. This is a story of high drama, but what we are really interested in is: what is being proclaimed here?

Luke, the author, has a style which makes clear what he wants to say through narratives free of the sort of detail we would find most interesting. There is nothing told about the personalities of the disciples, nor is there any analysis of the experience. What is clear is that the disciples were empowered to go public by something that took place between the energizing power of God and themselves. There was noise and disruption. There was a breaking loose a cracking open and a freeing up that resulted in the beginnings of the church. The cause did not lie in the strength and wisdom of the disciples. A power outside themselves was given to them. The church came into being as an act of God. No other explanation is possible.

When the Holy Spirit came, it was as though a special light shone on Jesus Christ, highlighting his resurrection, and the life he lived, as the place where God's renewing, redeeming action was at work in the world, for all people. Amid the sudden, bewildering drama of wind, fire and all-inclusive cross-cultural communication everything changed. This was no mystical event known only to introspective hearts. A harvest of souls began. Peter, a multiple denier of Jesus Christ who followed at a distance and led the others back to their old trade, stood up and preached so forthrightly that people cried out to change their lives. They discovered that in Jesus Christ a power had been let loose in the world, which was a power for them. They had not been looking for Jesus, but discovered that the life in him had sought them out. The day of Pentecost was the "birthday" of the church and the midwife was the Spirit of God, Jesus' promised gift.

That it was Peter who preached is a sign of what transformation had come about. He had become useless clay, a turncoat who let Jesus down in the hour of need. His being the first to preach in the streets is a miracle as great as God breathing the breath of life into human figures made from clay.

And Peter's appeal to the prophet Joel in his sermon is significant. In its original context Joel's prophecy about the Day of the Lord and the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh was a forecast of disaster. On Peter's lips Joel's prophecy became a declaration of new life for all, a sign the redemption of the world has begun. An old text has been given a new meaning. It is as if someone took Malcolm Fraser's words: "Life wasn't meant to be easy" – and said – "Life wasn't meant to be easy, but now

we have been given the gift that really counts - and that makes all the difference.”

But while all responded to the bewildering drama of this day, some sneered. Feeling under threat and unable to comprehend the events they sought a rational answer: this was public drunkenness. Once in the synagogue when Jesus announced that Isaiah’s prophecy had been fulfilled in their hearing, the people tried to capture him and throw him out. Not everyone wants what the Spirit offers; it gathers, liberates and heals, and it provokes division.

The drama of the story in Acts may cause us to wonder about the life of the church in our own time. Was this a once off event? Where is the power of God’s grace today? John V Taylor (*The Go Between God* p. 3-4) says that in our time we have forgotten that the Holy Spirit is the director of the church. “We have lost our nerve and our sense of direction and have turned the divine into a human enterprise.” While we repeatedly assert that without the Holy Spirit we can get nowhere, he says he has never heard of committee business being adjourned because those present were awaiting the arrival of the Spirit. So long as the human and material resources are adequate we take the gifts of the Spirit for granted. The implication is we have forgotten what it means to seek or to recognize the gift of the Spirit, and we remain limited by what we think is possible.

In John’s Gospel Jesus breathes the Spirit on the disciples and says: “As the Father sent me, so I send you”. The Archbishop of Canterbury says (*Tokens of Trust* p 129) that one of the simplest definitions of the church is that it is meant to be the place where Jesus is visibly active in the world. This is what Acts has given us – a picture of people being empowered to live a “Jesus shaped life”.

One of the early desert fathers who felt a bit sad about the life of the church in his time said: “I am not a monk, but I have seen monks.” He knew what real holiness would look like, even if he had doubts about his own.

There is a story about a council housing estate in a remote valley in Wales. It was the sort of place where authorities dumped those it no longer knew how to deal with. The social problems were cumulative and many. In the 1980s a retired minister of the United Reformed Church and his wife moved to this estate and bought two council properties. They lived in one and in the other created a drop in centre, a second hand clothes shop and a worship space that was roomy and quiet. In the worship space they set up an icon and a candle, and opened it as a place to be quiet. People from the estate dropped in, purchased second hand clothes, and gradually stopped for a while in the chapel, which they started to call their “church”. It was the only place in this community where people were offered some sort of dignity and care. Gradually things changed, and the authorities began to deal with the social dysfunction, and became partners with the church in a community health centre. (*Tokens of Trust* p 132)

Retirement is rightly connected with time to spend fishing, or collecting stamps or reading books. What is the power that enables someone to go and live in the hardest place and give birth to a new level of human dignity and care?

This week there will be celebrations to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment

of the state of Israel. The other side of this happy event is that this action uprooted 750 000 Palestinians from 418 villages and forbade them to return. This grievance is the source of much of the strife between Israel and Palestine today. While our government passed a motion congratulating Israel on this anniversary, nothing was said about the Palestinians. Because the Spirit has been poured out for ALL, much pressure was brought to bear on our Christian leaders to speak up about this situation. Only resistance was encountered. Now, at last over 140 Christian leaders have made a unified call for a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians, recognizing that the reason for Israel's celebration has become a catastrophe for the Palestinians.

Pentecost is about living in the strength that makes possible. That strength makes it possible to live in the hard place, to face the hard questions, and to take a stand. It is possible because we have been given the gift that really counts. That the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh means, in Jesus Christ all people have been claimed as people of God. This makes all the difference. It is the genesis of new visions and dreams of life together. Thanks be to God.