**Sermon: Pentecost 2020**

Is there a point in your life when you felt you had real power?

For me there was one such occasion, and I still remember it very clearly.

I was 13 and spent part of the school holidays on a farm, potato picking. The tractor moved slowly in front of us and we followed, picking up the potatoes that had been lifted. But one day there was a problem with the tractor. Was it the brakes? I don’t know. But one of us had to sit in the driver’s seat and drive the tractor on its slowest setting. And I was the chosen one! I spent the rest of that day sitting on high, feeling very important, keeping the tractor on its course, and, biggest excitement, when it reached the end of a row, I had to turn it round to do the next row. And behind and below me followed my friends, doing the much harder work of bending to pick up the potatoes. Of course, it wasn’t real power, but the point was, to me it certainly felt like it was.

Ten years later I started work in the Civil Service. After my training I was told that I could not start ‘until I received my powers.’ You will be disappointed, I know, as I was, to discover that this was not an event accompanied by much of a fanfare. I simply had to sign a piece of paper. That might not seem like power either, but it was significant, in that it gave me the authority to do my job.

And today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, or Whitsuntide, the third most important festival in the Church’s year, after Easter and Christmas, when the Holy Spirit gave the disciples power and authority to do the job for which Jesus had trained and commissioned them, that of spreading the word of God’s love in Jesus, and of making disciples.

In our Gospel reading the disciples, like us at the moment, are in lockdown. They have literally locked themselves inside, and are isolating, not because they were afraid of a virus, but something also life-threatening, the danger that they too like Jesus their master, might be found, arrested and executed.

Then Jesus suddenly appears amongst them. Locked doors and walls are no barrier to the risen Christ. Recognising their fear, he twice he tells then, ‘Peace be with you.’ And after showing them his wounds to reassure them he really was Jesus, who had been crucified two days before, he commissions them for apostolic service. “As the father has sent me, so I send you.”

But first, we are told, he gave them the power to do so. He ‘breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.”’ And along with that power from the Holy Spirit, came a new authority. They are told that they can forgive sins. You remember how people criticised Jesus in his ministry for this very thing. ‘’Who but God has the power to forgive sins?’ they said. And now that very authority is given to the disciples. And it is the Holy Spirit which has been breathed into them, who enabled them to exercise that power and authority.

It is often said that this is John’s more gentle account of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s account in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, which is in our second reading, tells the coming of the Holy Spirit in a much more dramatic way. A violent wind fills the house and tongues of flame rest on each of the disciples. This is the full technicolour version. But it is the Holy Spirit who is central in both accounts.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts happens when the city of Jerusalem is again full of visitors for the next festival, 50 days after Passover, the harvest festival called Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, which also commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. And we are told that the Holy Spirit, as well as arriving so dramatically, gives to the disciples the gift of speaking in different languages. This allows them to go immediately into the crowded streets (their social isolation has definitely ended!) and start speaking to people from all over in their own language.

They are so fired up that some even accuse them of being drunk. Peter responds indignantly that they are not drunk with alcoholic spirits, but with the Holy Spirit. It is, after all, he says, only nine o’ clock in the morning!

And then Peter preaches to them, with such power and conviction, that by the end of that day three thousand people responded and became Christians. It is the birth of the Church and so Pentecost is often celebrated as the church’s birthday.

We all love a celebration. Only 3 weeks ago we were celebrating VE day, despite the restraints imposed upon us. And it is wonderful to see that the creative gardeners at St Marys have been at work again and have prepared a Pentecost garden for us with flames of fire. Do go and have a look at it.

And there is much to celebrate. But it is so much more than a birthday or anniversary. Without the Holy Spirit the disciples would have only had their memories of Jesus and his teaching. And even a risen Christ could only be in one place at one time. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples are equipped with power and authority. And they are given gifts which enabled them to launch a world-transforming religion. Even more amazing is that these gifts of the Holy Spirit continue to be given to Christians today.

Our reading from Corinthians focusses on these gifts. St Paul emphasises that whatever the gifts given, ‘to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.’ In other words, the gifts are not given for individual advancement, but for the building up of the church. And this chapter is followed by one of the most well-known and well-loved chapters in the whole Bible in which St Paul tells the Corinthians, and us, that whatever gifts we have, if we do not have love they are worthless.

‘If I have prophetic power and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.’(1 Cor 13.2)

Gandhi said: ‘Love is the strongest force the world possesses and yet it is the humblest imaginable’

These last few weeks may have been difficult but there have been so many good things which have emerged, not the least of which have been the small (and large), acts of kindness, or, I think we could call them, acts of love, which we have witnessed daily.

As our first hymn expressed it:

‘There’s a spirit in the air

Telling Christians everywhere

Praise the love that Christ revealed,

Living, working, in our world.’

What is more, it transcends locked doors and even our own fears.

The writer Maya Angelou said: ‘Love recognises no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope’.

This is real power, to which we all have access through the Holy Spirit. And this is certainly worth celebrating!

The Revd Dianne Cox