The Power of Pentecost
Acts 1-2

Last Sunday, Hendrik got us to consider those things that can leave us feeling threatened - like other people, or the circumstances of life. But there's another scenario I want you to consider - when people think you *should* feel threatened but you're not.

I mean, imagine a new colleague starts at work, and everyone's talking about how great they are. The problem is, what they do overlaps with what you do. What would you need *not* to feel threatened in such a situation? You'd need a confidence in your own abilities, and a sense and strength of identity that's not flip-flopping with every comparison you or others make.

Great, but what's *that* got to do with Pentecost?

Well, Moses faced just such an episode, which Joshua, his right hand man, clearly saw as a threat. Israel was in the Wilderness, and Moses had gathered the elders to a meeting at the Tent of Meeting, and we're told that the Lord came down in a cloud and took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on them, and they started prophesying.

The problem was, two of them weren't there, they were still in the camp, but the Spirit came on them anyway and they also started prophesying out in the camp. And when Joshua heard about it he urged Moses to stop them. Because clearly they were not under Moses' control, so by definition, this was a threat. But Moses' reply tells us a lot about him, Numbers 11:29, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"

And Acts 1 begins with Jesus telling the disciples to wait in Jerusalem, v4, 'For the promise of the Father.' And so Pentecost is the fulfilment of all the promises God had made, to pour out his Spirit on his people. But it's also the answer to Moses' hope and longing. That the gift of God's Spirit would not be limited to a few but given to all.

But what could make a leader like Moses long to see power and influence poured out on others, rather than fight to hold on to it himself?

Well, the answer lies in the power itself. And it's a power we all need. Because you're inevitably going to live your life by one power or another. Something's going to be the dynamo, the energy, the thing that empowers your life and what you do with your life.

And so that thing is going to exert a profound influence on you and, as with Moses, on those around you. Which means, you've got to get this right, haven't you?

So, from Pentecost, I want you to see that Christianity gives you a power that doesn't corrupt; an identity not based on race; a joy that leaves no hangover; a courage that doesn't wilt; and a message that does not destroy. And that might all sound negative, but then and now it's impact is profoundly positive.

A Power That Does Not Corrupt
Now, given Pentecost is a day of joy, why start with the corrupting ability of power? Well, look at v5: Jesus tells the disciples, "You will be baptised with the Holy Spirit" and they follow up with v6, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

And we can read that and go, ‘o well there you go - nationalism, and the power of ethno-centric politics. And Luke tells us, v3, that Jesus has been teaching them about the kingdom of God, but they’re so steeped in a 1st century version of Make Israel Great Again, that they can’t see beyond it. And if any power can corrupt, that one can.’

Except, Jesus doesn’t slap them down, does he? Because arguably, it’s not the restoration of Israel he critiques, it’s their desire to know the time-line. Verse 7, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.” You see, the Old Testament prophets spoke of how God would restore and renew Israel, and how she’d become a light, not just to herself, but to the Gentiles, and a blessing to the world.

And Christ has come, and fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, and he’s said he’s the One greater than Solomon, greater than the Sabbath, greater than the temple itself. And he’s appointed 12 disciples after the 12 tribes, and his point is clear: the work of restoration has begun.

And so instead of slapping them down, he re-focuses them on how that restoration and blessing to the whole world is going to happen. Verse 8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Great, you might say, the promise of Pentecost is not geo-political, but personal, inner power. No risk of corruption in that! Except, power is always for something, isn’t it? I’m not a petrolhead, but a friend of mine took me for a drive in his new Tesla, because he wanted to show off it’s acceleration. And if I had hair, like Donald Trump has hair, it would have been out the back of the car.

But is that power for sitting in the garage? No - it’s for getting from A to B. And power’s about getting a job done. And what energises your life is always going to determine what you build with your life *and* how you do it; what you communicate with your life.

So think how such power can corrupt.

It can corrupt when you begin to think that life, or the position you hold, or the authority or influence you have, is about you. And when you can, you’ll concentrate power in your or a few others’ hands. And you’ll think you’re special and deserve special treatment. That you’re entitled, and above accountability.

But look at Pentecost, because the power of the Spirit is very different, isn't it? It’s not just poured out on the one - on a Peter. Or on the three, like a Peter, James and John. It’s not even poured out just on the 12. Acts 2:1 says, ‘When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were *all* together in one place.’ And how many were the ‘all’? Chapter 1:15 tells us, ‘The company of persons was *in all* about 120.’

And look at the tongues of fire. Are they alighting on a few especially gifted individuals? No. Verse 3, they ‘rested on each one of them.’

So this is Moses’ hope come true - ‘oh, that the Lord would put his Spirit on *all* his people.’ But it’s also the answer to your hope. Because if you’ve ever felt powerless, or unable to do or face what’s

before you, and if you know you're not one of the great gifted few, look at the Spirit filling all 120 , without distinction, and know - there is a power for you.

And if having power can persuade some 'I don't need to be accountable', this is a power that draws you into community - a community of the accountable. Acts 2:44, and the outcome of Pentecost: 'And all who believed *were together* and had all things *in common*.' So if individualistic power corrupts, pentecostal power does the opposite. It's why, when Paul writes to the Galatians, calling them and us to live by the Spirit, in step with the Spirit, he says 'Bear one another's burdens' (6:2).

And you could read that and think, 'ok, I need to help old people carry their shopping.' But Paul's got something else in mind - that we can be tempted to think we're someone special, and when we do we'll end up falling flat on our faces. And when that happens, Paul says, help one another get back up, bear one another's burdens. To walk in the power of the Spirit is to live in accountable community.

You see, power and influence begin to corrupt when you think you're better than others. That you've earned it, or deserve it. And so it slowly isolates you, as you begin to see others as less worthy, or more of a problem than you.

Christianity says something very different, doesn't it? It says, whether you are high born or low born, rich or poor, strong or weak, *in* authority or *under* authority, we all need a power that changes us - because we're all part of the problem. A power that's not earned or deserved, but's a gift. As Peter says to this crowd, v38, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of *your sins*, and you will receive *the gift* of the Holy Spirit."

And when you get that the fullness of God's Spirit is a gift of his grace, based on what Jesus has done for you, not what you've done for him, it doesn't just empower you, it humbles you, and sets you on a path to using any power or influence you have to lift others up and magnify Christ not yourself.

Now, you could respond to all that by going 'If only! Look at history, or the established church, or the evangelical mega church, and you're telling me Christianity doesn't corrupt?!' Sure. But have they imbibed too much of the apostles' teaching, or too little? Are they too much like Jesus or not enough?

Five-hundred years before Pentecost, God promised through Ezekiel: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statues and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezek 36:27). And writing after Pentecost, Paul says of the power of the Spirit, 'beholding the glory of the Lord (that's Jesus), [we] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' (2 Cor 3:18).

In other words, the Spirit isn't given so we can become ever more like ourselves, feeding our appetites, lining our pockets, turning us inwards. Instead, he's the power that changes, that gives us the will and the way to say no to our inner corruptions and so daily become more like Christ.

Isn't that the kind of person you want to be? The kind of community you want to be a part of?

Because as it does, this power of Pentecost gives us…

An Identity Not Based on Race

I don't think it's too much to argue that in recent years we've seen the destructive power of race-based politics, on left and right. And there are multiple reasons for that. But one is likely to be that it's empowering. Because if you get your identity from your race, or ethnic background, it can give you a sense of superiority, even if you see yourself as a victim, because it tells you, you're not one of *them*.

But if the Spirit doesn't just fill a few, at Pentecost he's like a river breaking its banks and overflowing the walls of racial division. Verse 4, 'And they were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.'

What tongues? What languages? Well, Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims from all over the world, come for the feast. As Luke tells us in v5, 'devout men from every nation under heaven.' And v7-11: 'And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us *in his own native language*? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling *in our own tongues* the mighty works of God."

As one commentator writes, 'it's the sheer breadth of representation that stands out.' And as Jesus made clear, it wasn't going to stop with Jews or converts to Judaism: Acts 1:8, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

So this is not some power of ethnic superiority, sucking everyone into some geopolitical centre. It's a power that overcomes racial barriers and sends us out into the world. This is God's promise to Abraham coming true, that all nations on earth will be blessed through his offspring, Christ. And it's the fulfilment of Joel's prophecy, which Peter quotes in his sermon, Acts 2:17, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit *on all flesh*."

Now, as you look at the world, don't we need that power more than ever?

But notice, it's not a culture-flattening, colour-washing power. The disciples aren't speaking *one* language that everyone else magically understands. They're speaking the languages the people *do* understand. Because the Spirit is creating one new multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-colour and multi-lingual people - as a testimony to the multi-ethnic redeeming power of Christ.

And what does that tell you? It tells you, you can love your country, and you can love your culture even as you are loved by Christ. But ultimately, country and culture are not what define you. Christ does. Which means you can critique country and culture, because Christ undercuts any racial superiority or inferiority. Because you're his.

Thirdly, the Spirit will give you…

A Joy That Leaves No Hangover

Recently, I was looking at campsites for a holiday. And one of them stood out. Not because of their olympic-sized swimming pool but because between certain hours you were banned from smoking cannabis.

And that struck me, *not* because there's nothing Su likes better than a drag on a joint, but that such a notice was needed at all. Because ask yourself, what are people looking for who *do* want that? What are any of us looking for when we use drugs, or alcohol, or food, or sex, or stuff online, in ways we shouldn't? To alter our mood, or numb our pain, or find a sense of peace, or of joy, or just to heighten the experience.

The problem with any of those is that they don't last, and there's a crash that follows the high.

So look at the crowd's response as these Christians spill out onto the street; v13, 'But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."' In other words, it's not the Spirit they're filled with, it's alcohol.

What are they seeing that makes them respond like that? Because if those disciples came out of that upper room in an orderly fashion, and engaged people on the street in civil conversation, they would *not* have said - 'they're drunk!'

Something about the way they were behaving, and not just the languages they were speaking, must be behind it. And the clue is in what they're saying, v11, "We hear them telling in our own tongues *the mighty works of God*."

And mighty works stir mighty emotions and require mighty words. Even an Englishman can tell you that. And these onlookers are watching them and thinking, 'what has got into them?!'

The Spirit has got into them. Joy has got into them. Because all that Jesus has done for them has got into them. The joy of knowing your sins are forgiven, and death had been defeated, and Christ is alive, and God is good, and your life and future are secure in him.

And Paul says, 'the fruit of the Spirit is… joy.' But so too is 'self-control' (Gal 5:22). Which means, when you know the mighty works of God in Christ for you, and think on them deeply, it will give you a joy that doesn't rot your brain. Let me ask you: do you know that joy? Because you can. A joy that means you can face the harsh realities of life, or even just the boring realities of life, and you don't need to turn to substances to lift your mood.

Instead as Romans 8 tells us, 'the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' (8:16). And knowing that will give you, fourthly…

A Courage That Doesn't Crumble

Now, have you ever said, or posted something, only to back down and apologise? What made you change your mind? It could be that you realise you were wrong. Or that what you said was right but your tone or timing was wrong.

But we might also back down when we're afraid of what others might think. And it's easy to be bold when everyone agrees with us. It's much harder when it starts to cost us.

And Peter knew that equation. He had vowed that he would die for Jesus, only to be reduced to tearful denial by a servant girl. And yet, look at him now, v14, 'But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them.' A crowd of thousands.

And it's not just that he goes public - it's that he challenges the very powers who crucified Christ, v23, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Now what can give him, or you and me, a courage that might be costly - in school, on campus, or in the office?

But it's not just courage you need is it? I mean, you can be so timid that you never say anything, but you can also be so bold and brash that it's not just people's opinions you don't care about, it's them you don't care about. And you begin to despise them.

That's not what Peter does. He appeals to the crowd, v38, "Repent and be baptised." Come join us. So what can give you a courage that knows public opinion is not what ultimately counts, but along with it a deep sense that those who oppose you *do* count, that their lives matter?

The Spirit who tells you, you are a beloved child of God. The same Spirit who, after Jesus' baptism, sent him into battle against satan in the wilderness, but who also led him to the cross to die for us when we were his enemies. As Paul writes, 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). The Spirit who makes us bold *and* gentle.
So finally, the Spirit empowers us with…

A Message that Doesn't Destroy
I'm sure you saw the news last week of how Blatten, in the Lötschental valley, was flattened. But read the reports and it's not just the grief that comes through. It's the eyewitnesses accounts of the roaring sound, as the mountain of rock and ice came crashing down - at the end of which a village lay destroyed.

And Pentecost has the same hallmark of power, v2: 'And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.' Only this power doesn't destroy a community, it builds one. Verse 42-46, 'And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers… and all who believed were together… and day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.'

And today, the powers ranged against community are huge. So more than ever we need a power working in our own hearts, and our communities, that builds up not tears down.

And Pentecost tells you that power works through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Because as Jesus himself said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18-19).

Something is going to energise your life. Something's going to be the message you preach with your lips and your life. And Pentecost tells you, be filled with the Spirit - with a power that changes you for the better, that gives you a deep and secure identity that welcomes others, that fills you with joy, and makes you courageous and kind, and sets you on a path to building not destroying community.

We need that power more than ever. So, repent of your sins. Let his word dwell in you richly. And his Spirit fill your heart.