You Will Receive Power
Acts 1:1-11

'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.'

'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.'

If you didn't recognise them, those are the opening lines of two famous novels - George Orwell's *1984* and Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*.

But if you know the books, they do more than just open the story, they set the stage for all that's to come.

And as Luke begins the Book of Acts he does exactly the same - except this isn't a novel, it's an account of how a movement, against all the odds, turned the world upside down.

Look again how it begins:

Verses 1-3, 'In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs…'

And those three verses contains the three things that became the basis for all that came after: the teaching of Jesus; the sufferings of Jesus; and the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus.

Except, read on, and what becomes clear is that those three things alone won't do it, will it? Because these first disciples could know the truth, they could even believe the truth, but something more was needed.

And that something more was power. A power that could make them courageous, not cowardly; that in the face of opposition would keep them pushing forward, not falling back; that in face of challenges would keep them God-focused not self-focused; and that in face of the realities of their own lives, could change them so that their lives became increasingly consistent with the message they proclaimed. Because no-one listens to a hypocrite.

And if they needed that kind of power, don't you and I?

I mean, if you're a Christian, you live in an increasingly post-Christian world. A world in which it will sometimes cost you to speak up for the truth. So you also need an inner strength. Or maybe you face personal difficulties - and sometimes they can leave you feeling like it would just be easier to throw in the towel - so you too need an energy from outside that keeps you running the race. Or maybe you face challenges at work, or in your personal life - and you know that even if you dig deep you don't have it in you - so you too need a power that helps turn you from yourself, to God - whose resources never run out.

Or maybe you're not a Christian at all, yet - but you've learnt enough of Jesus' teaching, and his sufferings, and his resurrection to at least consider it. But how do you move beyond that? How do you *become* a Christian? Well, you too need a power - a converting, life changing power.

And every year, Pentecost tells you, there is such a power. As Jesus says, v8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

So this morning I want us to look at 5 things: a power for a new start; a power to proclaim; a power for prayer; a power to persevere; and a power for perfection. All of them beginning with P… except the first one! If only there was a word beginning with P that means a new start, or a new birth! And there is!

A Power for Palingenesis - a power to be born again, to start over.
Look what Luke says in v4: 'While staying with [the disciples] [Jesus] ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father.'

So before they're to do anything else, Jesus tells them to wait. Because, again, just knowing the right things is not enough; and if Christianity is still just a thing of abstract ideas for you - it's not enough. They first need to receive something. And that something is, *the promise of the Father*.

What is that?

Well, look how Jesus goes on: v5, "For John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when Jesus links the Holy Spirit, and the promise of the Father, we've got a pretty good idea what he's referring to, haven't we? Because 600 years before, God promised through Ezekiel, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *And I will put my Spirit within you*." (Ezekiel 36:25–27)

So why should these disciples wait before they head out into the world with the gospel? Because in fulfilment of his promise, God has something wonderful in store for them: he will put his Spirit in them and change them. And change them at their deepest level - at the level of their hearts: how they think and feel and see the world; what they love and long for; what desires drive them and motivate them.

And if you want a picture of how radical the change is, look at Ezekiel's image of a heart of stone being surgically removed and replaced with a heart of flesh.

Because what kind of blood does a heart of stone pump? What colour in the cheeks does a heart of stone produce? What loves, what emotions, what desires, does a heart of stone energise? It's as if God is saying, your life apart from me, and my Spirit living in you, is like a stone cold statue in comparison to what your life with me will be. You think you're currently alive - and you are, after a fashion - but in reality, you've not even begun to live. You need to be born over. It's why Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

Now, if you're not yet a Christian you might hear all that and think, 'What a load of baloney - I am no statue. Look at me: I am very much alive.'

Except, you can never truly know what you're missing until you experience it, can you? I mean, this is a trivial example, but there was a day when Su and I were totally happy drinking Nescafe God Blend, and we mocked those coffee snobs who turned their nose up at our gold blend. But then we got given a bean-to-cup coffee machine, and it was like we had never drunk coffee before! How could we be so ignorant!

And Jesus is saying to the disciples, and to us - God the Father has something wonderful to give you, and it will totally change your life. And until you receive it, you have no idea how grey, how cold - how instant coffee-ish - your life now is in comparison.

Or maybe you do realise that. And you've run after the idols Ezekiel talks about. And you thought this relationship, or that religion, or pursuing success, or just creating your own identity, would give you the beating heart you long for. But you know it's left you cold. Well, Jesus is saying - the promise of the Father will never leave you cold. You know there is life to be lived, and it's in him that you'll find it.

But a promise is only as good as the Father who makes it, isn't it. I mean, my girls will tell you that I once promised them a hamster - and they got a woodlouse. That I promised them a wooden crossbow, and they are still waiting. And maybe you've had a father who has left you distrustful, not just of him, but of authority, or any promise that things could be better.

So listen to what Paul writes in Romans 8: 'All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.' (Romans 8:14–16)

And that's what these disciples need, Jesus is saying. And if you're not yet a Christian, it's what you need. Because Christianity is not offering you a paint job to cover up a few scratches on your life, or suggest a few tweaks on your character. It offers you a total change in your heart *and* identity. To become a child, a son, an heir, in intimate relationship with the kindest and greatest of all fathers.

And this power is not some impersonal, inanimate, electrical-kind of power like you are some modern day Frankenstein's monster. This is the life of God himself coming into your life and making you alive like you have never been before.

And Jesus is saying to the disciples, 'Wait for that, and then go into the world.' And if you're not yet a Christian, come to Christ for that - because the promise of the Father still stands.

A Power to Proclaim

Verse 8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses." Which is exactly what happened. At Pentecost the disciples were filled with the Spirit, spilled out onto the streets and Luke says, 'Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them…' (Acts 2:14).

Look again at Acts 1:1, 'In the first book, O Theophilus, [Luke's gospel] I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach.' But now, through these Spirit-filled, life transformed disciples he continues to do and teach. And the day of Pentecost was just the beginning, because in Acts 3 we read, 'When Peter saw it [the crowd that had gathered] he addressed the people…' (Acts 3:12).

Then, in Acts 4, having been arrested, and threatened, we read, ‘With great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 4:33). And then in Acts 5, ‘Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.’ (Acts 5:42).

And think who this is happening to: Men who just a few weeks before had abandoned and denied Jesus. But now cowardice has become courage. And the fact that against all the odds they do go out into the world and upend it, is one of the extraordinary evidences for the truth of the gospel.

And if you’re a Christian, you too have a story to tell and good news to proclaim. And maybe you feel totally inadequate to do it. Well, the good news is, the Spirit is not about to turn you into a bible-thumping street-corner preacher, but ask him for boldness and courage, he’ll give it to you, and the opportunities that go with it.

And as the Spirit bears witness to your spirit that you are a beloved child of God, your fears of what others think of you will grow less, while you love for Christ will burn all the brighter.

Or maybe you are already full of bravado at the power of the gospel - but you’re also a bit clumsy. Maybe even a bit off-putting. So ask the Spirit of God to grow the wisdom and patience of God in you, to rely on yourself less and on him more.

But if you’re not yet a Christian, you’re going to spend your life preaching and proclaiming something aren’t you? They way you live, and choose to spend your time, or use your money, or just talk about, speaks of what you think life is to be found. But why spend your life proclaiming a message that doesn’t ultimately satisfies?

Because if you live and breathe the disenchanted, sterile air of secularism, you’ll live your life devoid of true and deep meaning. So you’ll scrabble around in the dirt trying to find meaning, but when you fail you’ll end up either cynical or despondent. But come to Christ and you will find power and meaning for life. And with it, something to talk about.

A Power for Prayer

How do you respond to trouble in your life? Because that says something about where we think the power to resolve troubles comes from, doesn’t it?

Let’s say you’re facing something difficult and you summon all your inner resolve to try harder, *or* you collapse in despair. Either way, you’re probably thinking the power to change that situation lies with you. But, if you get angry with others, or turn on the charm, you’re probably thinking the power lies in this other person’s hands.

But when we begin to realise that the true power over every circumstance lies in the hands of God we’re going to start turning God-ward when we face difficulties.

And prayer was the prelude to Pentecost, as Luke says, ‘with one accord [they] were devoting themselves to prayer’ (Acts 1:14). But, if anything, it intensified afterwards: Acts 2:42, ‘And they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.’

And when the opposition intensified, and Peter and John were threatened by the authorities for proclaiming Christ, where did they turn? Acts 4:23-24: 'When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord…"'. Because when you know who's sovereign over troubles it changes who you talk to in troubles, doesn't it?

And yet, the pull to sink into self-pity and talk to yourself, or complain to others is strong, isn't it? So we need a power from outside us, to come into us, and cause us to pray.

It's why Paul writes in Romans 8: 'Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.' (Romans 8:26–27).

So, how's you prayer life? Because I doubt any of us would say, 'I've got this prayer thing licked.' Well, Pentecost tells us that the Spirit who indwells us is the Spirit of prayer. So if you recognise the need for change, ask him to teach you to pray.

A Power for Perseverance

Over Ascension, Su and I drove to Munich to see our daughter and son-in-law. The problem is, Munich's in Germany and 5 hours plus drive away. And because we start out at the end of the day, by the time we arrive it's late, and dark, and we're tired. So you need something to keep you going, don't you. And this time it was caffeine and a packet of Pringles.

Well, listen to Jesus speaking to the disciples on the night of his betrayal: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth… for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16-18).

Why send another helper, or comforter, or counsellor as you could translate it? Because they're going to need help and comfort and counsel. Because they - and you and I - are going to face times when you'll be tempted to think you *have* been abandoned like an orphan.

'But you haven't been', Jesus says; 'by my Spirit I am with you', and that can be fuel for your road and power for your perseverance.

You see, the time came when the apostles weren't just threatened for proclaiming Christ - they were jailed and beaten for it. And how did they respond? Acts 5:41-42, 'they left the presence of the council, *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, *they did not cease* teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.'

So they didn't just need a power to pray. They needed a power to persevere. To keep going in the face of opposition and criticism. And they got it with joy. Does that remind you of someone? Because the writer to the Hebrews says of Jesus: 'for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame.' (Hebrews 12:2)

It's why Paul prays for the Ephesians: 'that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be *strengthened with power* through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.' (Ephesians 3:16–19)

Because when the Spirit speaks the depth of Christ's love for you into your heart, and how he endured the cross for you, it will strengthen you for endurance. Because you can face anything when you know you're loved by him.

A Power for Perfection

Perfection in this life? No. In the next life? Absolutely - and real change between now and then. Because look again at the promise of the Father: "I will put my Spirit within you, *and cause you* to walk in my statutes *and be careful* to obey my rules" (Ezekiel 36:27).

So look what Luke writes of the authorities' response to Peter and John on trial: 'When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognised that they had been with Jesus.' (Acts 4:13).

What astonished them? What were they recognising? Their boldness under threat? Their biblical knowledge despite lack of education? Sure - but there's something more isn't there? That they'd been with Jesus; that somehow they were reflecting something they'd seen when they had Jesus on trial. That some hint, some glimpse, some remembrance of his bearing and dignity was in them.

So look at what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians: 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, 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 3:17–18).

In other words, as we behold Christ's glory, as we meditate on the beauty of his character, as we think deeply about his obedience, and see him dying in our place, the Spirit works something in us - and he changes us, one step at a time, into the likeness of Christ.

Because we're all being moulded and formed into one image or another aren't we? So if you're not yet a Christian, what is that for you? Because when, at the end of your life, you're taken out of the mould, will you like what you've become?

You see, the Lord Jesus displayed *the* most beautiful of characters and today of all days he says, 'come to me, and I will give you my Spirit and he will slowly, but surely, change you to become more like me', wouldn't we be fools to turn away?