The Promise and Power of Pentecost
Acts 1-2

Whether or not you realise it, your year is marked out by anniversaries. There's your Birthday and Christmas. And if you're Dutch, there's King's Day. And if you're French there's Bastille Day. And if you're American there's Independence Day – though why you'd celebrate that I have no idea. And typically these are days to feast and celebrate. And the Feast of Pentecost was just such a day in the Jewish calendar. Coming 50 days after Passover, all Israel would gather to thank God for the harvest.

But today, Pentecost is a yearly reminder of a very different kind of harvest, and of the power that makes that possible.

Pentecostal Promise
Look at chapter 1v4: 'And while staying with them [that's the first disciples] he [Jesus] ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for *the promise from the Father*.' And those words echo Jesus' words at the end of Luke's gospel, where he says to the disciples, Luke 24:49, "I am sending *the promise of my Father* upon you."

So, what is that promise? What has God our heavenly Father promised to his children, that Jesus is going to send, and that they're going to receive? Well, Jesus tells them: Acts 1:5, "For John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

Now, before Jesus' own ministry got going, John the Baptist was preach and baptising, and crowds came out to him, wondering, 'Could this guy be the Messiah? Because he's quite a man.' And in response John said, Luke 3:16: "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire*."

So God issues a promise through John: that through Jesus something unprecedented is going to happen – people are going to be immersed in God's Spirit just as John had immersed them in water.

But this promise of the Spirit stretched even further back than the 3 years to John. It stretched back five hundred years to the time when God spoke through Ezekiel that a new day was coming: Ezekiel 36, "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*" (Ezek 36:26-27).

And it stretched back to the prophet Joel, who Peter quotes in his sermon at Pentecost: Joel 2, 'And it shall come to pass afterward, *that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh*, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit' (Joel 2:28-9).

So the promise of the Father wasn't for a one-off, but unforgettable, party at Pentecost. It was a promise of his Spirit in our lives, of changed hearts and

transformed lives. A promise that breaks down the kinds of barriers that divide us, by humbling our pride that looks down on others, because it's for men and women, young and old, Jew and Gentile, high earners and low earners. A promise, Peter says in his sermon, for those who, Acts 2:39, 'are far off'. Far off geographically, like gentiles. But also, far off relationally. It's a promise for people who are alienated from God, people a million miles from God and currently at war with God – a promise that he would make us his friends. A promise for those of us who look at our lives and think that no one, especially not God, would want us. The one crucial step, as Peter says in his sermon, is that you turn to God and put your faith in Christ, and receive the gift: Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Now, did your parents keep every promise they ever made to you? Or if you're a parent, have you kept every promise you've ever made to your kids? Sadly, my girls would tell you, 'nope, he hasn't'. Because there was the promise of the hamster – which never materialised; or the wooden crossbows – that were never made. But you and I have a Father in heaven who never fails us, and never fails to keep his promises. We might forget what we've promised after a week or two, but Pentecost is this yearly reminder that over hundreds and thousands of years, God your heavenly Father always keeps his word. He's is a promise-keeping God. Not just for this promise but for every promise he makes to you in his word.

And here, he promises a baptism of power.

Pentecostal Power

Listen again to what Jesus said in Luke 24:49: 'Stay in the city until you are *clothed with power* from on high.' And Acts 1:8, "You will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." Now, Jesus once compared the Holy Spirit's work in someone's life to the wind blowing, and you might imagine a gentle breeze. But when God keeps his promise, and the Spirit was poured out, that image of wind was intensified to storm force levels.

Acts 2:1-2: 'When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.' Now, have you ever been out in a storm, and the wind is so strong that you have to lean into the wind just to stay upright? Or have you ever heard the roar of the wind so loud that you can't speak over it? A few years back we were on holiday in France, and we were caught in a storm and inside the holiday cottage we had rain pouring through the light socket in the ceiling, but outside full size trees were being uprooted and were crashing down around the house. And the wind can be incredibly powerful, can't it? And this wasn't a nice gentle breeze filling the house this first Pentecost. This wasn't like a little draught because someone had left a window open. This was like the sound of a mighty rushing wind. This was like the roar of a tornado, and it filled the house!

And not just wind. Verse 3, 'And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each of them.' And wind is one kind of power, but fire is another, isn't

it. And time and again when people encountered God in the Old Testament, what they saw was fire – a symbol of his burning purity, of his *Holy* Spirit.

And Luke tells us in v4, 'And they were all *filled* with the Holy Spirit'. Now think about that. Think about being filled with God's Spirit that he chooses to picture here as a mighty rushing wind, and fire. Because you might think that if you were exposed to that kind of power it would destroy you. That it would be like being plugged into the electric mains, or standing in the stream of a rocket engine. But look at what it does for these disciples. They're filled with the Spirit, they're clothed with power from on high, and they spill out onto the street, and v12-13, the crowds 'were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."'

So what did the crowd see? Not, for the moment, what did they hear, but what joy did they see that made them think that these disciples had been at the bottle?: 'O, oh they've been drinking!'? You see, far from this being a power to destroy you, or break you, the Spirit's power is one that makes you, or better still, remakes you. It's a power that takes you out of yourself, and a life centred on you, and carries you out into the world; it's a power that fills you with the joy and peace that's the fruit of the Spirit – a joy that lifts you up above those things that drag you down in anxiety and fear; and a peace that settles your heart and defeats your cynicism.

But it's also a power that loosens your tongue. I mean, think about it. Power is not an end in itself, is it? Power is a means to an end. Whether it's political or economic or physical or cultural, power enables us *to do something*. So… what does this power from on high enable these first disciples to do?

Well, this book called the Acts of the Apostles is like one of those photo albums you create of a great holiday. Except, rather than a holiday, gives us snapshots of what these first Christians got up to after Pentecost. And Luke begins the book by telling us that after his resurrection Jesus spent his time with the disciples, 'speaking about the kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3). And he ends it, in the last verse of the last chapter, by telling us that the apostle Paul was in Rome, 'proclaiming the kingdom of God' (Acts 28:31). And those are the two book-ends of this book: speaking about the kingdom - proclaiming the kingdom. And in between, Acts is the account of how the disciples did just that: how God's kingdom has broken into our age, not by political or military or even intellectual, academic power, but by Spirit-empowered proclamation that transforms people's lives.

You see, look what Jesus tells the disciples, Acts 1:8, '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.' In other words – you have a mission, but you need empowering for that mission, because that mission is to be witnesses to me.

Now, when a friend asks you to countersign an important document that she's just signed as a witness – it's to say that you saw them do it. Or if you see a crime committed, and you have to go to court as a witness, it's to say 'this person did it'.

Of if you attend a great sporting event and you get to witness the world record being broken, you go home and tell everyone about it. And in every case, being a witness is never about you, or what you've done, is it? It's about telling others what someone else has done. And Jesus says, that's how the kingdom comes. That's how it advances, by Spirit-filled witnesses telling other people what God has done.

And when Pentecost came, and the world was outside, on the streets, inside, in an upper room, the sound of the wind started blowing, and this thing like fire appeared, and v4, 'They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.' And they spilled out onto the streets and Luke says the crowd 'were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language… 'We hear them telling in our own tongues *the mighty works of God*" (2:6,11). And Peter stood up and preached his very first sermon. But what did he tell them? All about what God has done for us in Jesus, in his death and resurrection.

And that's what this empowerment, this baptism of the Spirit is for. To proclaim all that God has done in Christ, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth: 'We've seen it, we've heard it, we've experienced it – and you can too!' And the Holy Spirit is like this megawatt spotlight whose beam is centred on God, so the attention is never on us, nor even, primarily, on him, but it's Jesus who takes centre stage. It's why Jesus said in John's gospel, when the Spirit comes, he will glorify me.

And what better example of the Spirit's power to take broken and far off people, and to turn their lives around through the good news of Jesus, and fill them with joy and purpose, and put them to a mission far greater than themselves, than Peter himself. Because, just a few weeks before, he was anything but an effective witness. He denied even knowing Jesus. And he was broken and hiding and fearful of what the authorities might do to him if they found him. But the Spirit found him first and filled him, and he sent him out into the world.

And later on, people complain that Peter and others have turned the world upside down. But that's the power of the Spirit, isn't it: to turn people's lives the right way up, to see them transformed, and full of joy, and part of God's kingdom breaking in.

Now, maybe you hear all that and think – I need a dose of that kind of power in my life – I need what Peter had: a power that conquers my fears, that fills me with joy, that sends me out into the world with confidence – because frankly a lot of the time I feel like Peter before Pentecost – I'm hiding, I'm broken, I'm silent. Or maybe you hear all that and think, 'nah, that's not for me! That all sounds way too emotional.'

Well, the truth is that whatever you think, if you're a Christian you've already been baptised by the Spirit. You already have this power within you. Because, whilst the terminology different denominations use differs, when the Bible talks of baptism in or by the Spirit, it means that moment you become a Christian, and

the Spirit fills you, and baptises you into the body of Christ. As Paul says to the Corinthians: 'For in one Spirit *we were all* baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' (1 Cor 12:13). So it's impossible to be a Christian without this having happened to you.

Now, you might say, 'well, it doesn't feel like it.' Sure, but that doesn't change the fact that it's true. Someone could give you a state of the art sports car, and its tank be full of petrol, but you see it and think, 'O he didn't really mean it for me, and I couldn't possibly drive that, I'll go and stand at the bus stop in the rain instead.' Or, weeks after you've recovered from the 'flu, you could still be lying in bed, because you've got used to lying in bed – not realising that now you're healthy!

But to say that God has already filled you with his Spirit is not to say that you have experienced all there is to experience of his Spirit, or that there is not more of the Spirit's work to do in your life. You see, in a few chapters time, these same disciples are filled by the Spirit all over again, and that time the house shook! So this isn't a one-off event. It's the first of multiple fillings of the Spirit. Because as DL Moody, the great American Evangelist said – 'I need to be continually filled, because I leak!' And so Paul tells the young Christians at Ephesus: 'Be filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18) – go on being filled. Keep coming back to God for more of his empowering. Because our need for him never diminishes.

You see, did you notice how Luke introduces this book of Acts to Theophilus, who he's writing to? He starts by reminding him of volume 1 that he'd written: what you and I know as Luke's Gospel. Acts 1:1: 'In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach.' Why *began*? Because Jesus' life and death and resurrection were just the beginning of his work to redeem the world, and that work continues through his people. And the fruit that the Spirit bears in your life, and his gifts that he gives to you, and his power that's at work in you, are all to transform us and equip us to be Jesus' hands and feet and mouth out there in the world.

It's why the Spirit's power isn't just for changing our individual lives, it's about building a community, a people, on Jesus' mission.

A Pentecostal People

Now, just imagine, what would a church, what would a community look like that was born of Pentecostal power and Spirit-empowered witness? Well, you don't have to do much imagining, do you, because Luke tells us.

Firstly, it's a Devoted Church: Now you might be tempted to think that post-Pentecost, these guys would devote themselves to the spectacular, or the showy. But look what Luke says: Acts 2:42, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' And devoted to all those things… not just to one of them. You see, a church that's just about teaching, is really just a preaching chapel, it's not a Spirit-empowered church. And a church that's just about fellowship, and community, is not a Spirit-empowered church. And a church that's just about breaking bread and the

sacraments, or about prayer and the inner life is not a Spirit empowered church. Instead, a church empowered by the Spirit will combine all those, and devote themselves to growing through teaching, *and* fellowship, *and* breaking bread *and* sharing life *and* prayer.

Secondly, it's a Generous Church: Acts 2:44-45: 'And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.' Now, whatever form it takes, a community empowered by the Spirit to spread the good news of all that God has done for us in Jesus – is going to be a giving, sharing, generous church. Because the very reason it exists is because God is a giving, sharing, generous God, and our lives are being transformed by his grace, his generosity to us in Christ. So such a church will be generous to care for its own, and generous to the work of spreading the good news.

Thirdly, it's a God Glorifying Church: Acts 2:46-47: 'And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, *praising God and having favour with all the people*.' And if the Holy Spirit always seeks to glorify Jesus and put the spotlight on him, then a community filled with the Spirit is going to be one that glorifies God in its worship and shines the spotlight on him. And not just in our gathering together on a Sunday, but also in our scattering on a Monday. Because as these men and women went out into the world, people thought well of them. Now, it wasn't always like that for them. People didn't always like them, and it won't always be so for us. But God is at work out there, calling people to himself. People who in our gathering and our scattering will see God's life in your life and say, 'I want that!'

Fourthly and finally, it's a Multiplying Church: Acts 2:47, 'And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.' And a church that's empowered by the Spirit doesn't stop at Pentecost, instead it's going to be one that continues to reach out into its surrounding community proclaiming the good news. Because that's what the Spirit has come to do: to empower us to be witnesses to Jesus.

So, God has kept his promise. And it doesn't matter who you are, or how old you are, everyone of us can know what it is to be filled with the Spirit, to have our lives restored and transformed by Jesus and be part of taking his message out into the world.