The Power of Pentecost
Acts 1:6-8; 2:1-17a v21-23, v32-41

So, it's Pentecost, and we're looking at the events of the first Pentecost. That moment in history when Christianity went from being a group of timid, afraid, behind-closed-doors believers into a missionary movement stretching out across the world.

And when change like that happens, you have to at least consider, *how* did that happen? Take a company, or an idea, or here a movement, how does it go from local to global? Or take an individual like Peter - how does he go from being cowardly - denying Jesus publicly - to courageous - and proclaiming him publicly? How does a group of people, like these disciples, go from being timid to bold? None of that happens for no reason what-so-ever. So how do we explain it?

Well, the New Testament explains it with a single word - *power*. Power - the pursuit of which is causing so much division in our societies at the moment. And yet the thing that none of us can do without, the thing that everyone of us needs *personally* if we're to flourish, and live free of the stuff that can strangle the life out of us.

So we're going to look at four things: The problem with power; the nature of *this* power; our need for power and how you can get it.

The Problem with Power
Look at chapter 1:6, 'So when [the disciples] had come together, they asked [Jesus], "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"' And you may not see it immediately, but they're asking about power, because just before this Luke tells us that after his resurrection, Jesus spent time with the disciples, 'speaking about the kingdom of God' (v3). And what's that if it's not the rule and reign and reach of the power of God?

And yet, what Jesus was meaning, and what the disciples were thinking, were very different. John Calvin, the great reformer, said that if you look at their question, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?", 'There are as many errors in this question as words.' Why?

Well, start with the word *restore*. Because if you've got a painting by one of the great masters, but it's been neglected in a garage somewhere, and it's in bad shape, and so an expert sets about restoring it, they're putting it back the way it was, the way it was meant to be. Or imagine some valuable object is stolen, and the police catch the thieves and retrieve the object and restore it to the one it was stolen from, they're returning it to its rightful owner.

So when the disciples talk of *restoring*, they're thinking, 'Jesus, are you going to return the kingdom to Israel, and put things back the way they were and should always have been, and restore her power and political independence?' So they're thinking kingdom equals borders and territory and geo-political clout

Then look at that word *Israel*. Because it's not just borders or politics they're thinking, but race and ethnicity. When they think kingdom and power, they're thinking nationalistically: ethnic Israel.

And then there's the phrase, 'at this time'. Because they're looking for Jesus to do this work of restoration *now*.

So for them power means borders, race, liberation from Rome and its oppressive structures, and an us against them mentality. Which is not a million miles from today, is it?

One night last week, we went out for drinks as a family, and ended up in a bar that draws an alternative crowd. And on the hand-dryer in the bathrooms was a sticker saying, 'Smash the Patriarchy'. What is that? It's a call to power, exercised by one group against another. And it may not be ethnic, but it is tribal. And it's coming from a desire to be free from what they think of as oppression.

Or take our polarised political landscape. Why the polarisation? Because there's a power struggle going on over who should have power and how it should be used.

Or take any one of the military conflicts going on around the world, and power is being used to rewrite borders, or assert one ethnic group, or culture, over another.

And if in their day the disciples were asking Jesus whether he was going to do it all *now*, in ours the use of force, or just the ratcheting up of angry words, tells us we think there's no time for reasoned argument, that takes too long, we want the kingdom and the power and we want it *now*.

And yet, what about our own lives? Because while we may not think in terms of borders and territory, what about boundaries, and the desire for some sanity, or order, or stability in our chaotic lives? And we might not think in terms of securing borders, but what about the desire for security, and something that can carry us through the storms of life, something we can depend on? And we might not think in terms of external powers oppressing us, but what about the internal stuff that does just that. Those habits that become controlling, or the sin you can't get free from, that like a black hole sucking you have a power of their own? Aren't there times when you feel the need for a greater power at work in your life?

Or think about your fears, and the power they exert over you as their cold chains wrap themselves around your heart. Wouldn't you want a power to break those chains? And if here the disciples were after a renewal of national Israel, and for her to finally achieve her calling, is there a sense in which you desire an inner empowerment that releases you to be all you were meant to be, to live the life you're supposed to have?

The problem is, the way our current culture thinks of power has no power to solve our problems - out there or in here, because it has no power to solve the problem under every problem. The problems of our hearts. Use power to overturn oppression, and the oppressed become oppressors. Enforce boundaries or borders, and which tribe is in and which is out, and divisions and conflict escalate. Seek and express the inner empowerment to be who I'm supposed to be, and we become ever more self-focused, and our lives are diminished as a result.

We need a different sort of power, from a different sort of source to the one the world offers us: a power from outside us.

So look at v8, where Jesus says, "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." So the power Jesus gives is a transforming power that comes upon your heart. And rather than advancing some ideology of left or right, this power is going to witness to a person - Christ.

And rather than being able to look at a map and go, ‘oo, there’s the kingdom of God’, rather than it being tied to one ethnic group, or political tribe, this power is going to be for all.

The question is, what is that power?

The Nature of this Power
Look at chapter 2:1-3, ‘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 the Old Testament the word for God’s Spirit is the same as for breath or wind. So as the sound of wind fills the house, it’s the sound of God’s Spirit filling their hearts.

Except, if the word means the same, why not as a gentle breath instead of a mighty rushing wind? I mean, in the Old Testament, when Elijah had his dramatic encounter with God, we’re told that God didn’t appear to him in the violent wind, or the earthquake, or the fire that preceded God’s coming, but in a gentle whisper. In a still small voice. In a breath. So why not do the same here? Why the mighty rushing wind, and the banging doors and the rattling windows and the shaking walls?

Because Elijah was a broken man in need of the gentle, light as a feather touch of God’s Spirit. But these disciples are outnumbered and outgunned with the powers of Rome and the Jewish religious leaders ranged against them. So they don’t need a whisper, they need a hurricane. They need to know that the power that’s in them is greater than the power that’s in the world. So they experience what it’s like to be in the wind-tunnel of God’s untameable power - his Spirit.

But there’s a problem with untameable powers isn’t there? They can become destructive, and consume the very thing they’re trying to protect or promote. But not this power. Verse 3, ‘And divided tongues *as of fire* appeared to them and rested on each one of them.’ And whether it was God appearing to Moses in the burning bush, or descending on Sinai in fire and smoke, or guiding Israel through dark desert nights by a pillar of fire, or appearing to Abraham as a burning cauldron promising to keep his covenant, or to Isaiah and Ezekiel in blazing glory, throughout the Old Testament God manifested his presence by fire. But a fire that didn’t destroy the thing it alighted on.

So this is not the destructive power of a mob or an ideology. It’s not even them trying to summon up all their inner strength to change their situation. This is the sign of the purity and promise keeping power of God’s presence. Verse 4, ‘And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.’ As God himself took up residence in their hearts.

Now, what kind of impact could that kind of power have?

Our Need for that Power
Firstly, we need **a *power that breaks down and builds up.*** You see, in Genesis the account of the Tower of Babel is the mirror image of Pentecost. And God had called humanity to fill the earth, so what did they do? They clustered together. Why? Because there’s power in numbers. And they set about building a tower whose top would reach to the clouds, with a clear intention, Genesis 11:4, ‘let us make a name for ourselves’. Let us express and project an image of ourselves. And in response, to limit their power to do harm, God confused their language.

Turn forward to Pentecost and instead of the disciples climbing their way to heaven, the Spirit comes down. And instead of confusion, v4, they 'began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.' And whatever else the gift of tongues is in the rest of the New Testament, here they're speaking foreign languages. And they spill out onto the streets, and the crowd that's gathered from across the Roman world for the feast, hears them and goes, v8-11, "How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?…We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God?"

So, the power of the Spirit is the opposite of the kind of power that divides people along racial or ethnic lines. Instead of putting up walls between people it breaks them down. Now 'Sure' you might say, 'but they're all still Jews - not much ethnic diversity here.' Agreed, but turn forward to chapter 8 and the Spirit falls on the Samaritan Christians. Turn forward to chapter 10 and the Spirit comes upon Gentile believers.

Because the power of Christ doesn't just break down walls, it builds up friendship and community across divisions. It doesn't just have dynamite, explosive power, but a power that unites and bonds. - like those super glues you'll find in Jumbo that promise 'this can take the strain, this can take the weight!' And in our fractured societies, we need that power of the Spirit. As Luke says in v4, 'they were *all* filled'. So this isn't a power reserved for an elite. As Peter says in v38, "For this promise is for you and for your children *and for all who are far off*." It's for anyone who responds to Christ's call to come enter the kingdom.

Secondly, we need **a power that saves**. And Peter stands up in the crowd and starts preaching from the prophet Joel. Verse 17, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh."

Now, early this week I read a book that said, 'One of the marks of maturity is connecting the present moment to all the moments to come.' Here, Peter does the reverse. He connects their present moment, and your present moment, to all moments *past*, to the prophets of hundreds of years previously, to the great river of God's redemption flowing through history and his plan for the righting of all wrongs. It's why Peter finishes his quote from Joel in v21 with, 'And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Saved from what? What's the enemy that threatens their and your life? Our current culture would say, 'those people over there, they're the enemy; the left or the right; the patriarchy, or the woke brigade.' But Jesus' power has a different enemy in its cross hairs. You see, when Cain was losing his battle with anger and jealously, God warned him, "Sin is crouching at the door. [And] Its desire is for you." (Gen 4:7). Cain, your sin is like a lion on its haunches, ready to pounce. It's like a viper coiled to strike.And you're its prey. That's your enemy and it's at your door waiting to take you down.

You see, Jesus' power is not like petrol to pour on the fire of our accusations of others, his power is like a light shining in the dark recesses of our hearts, having us confront our own issues. And as we do, we discover, it's me who has failed to live and love as I should. It's why Luke tells us in v37 that the crowd 'were cut to the heart' and said, 'what shall we do?' And why Peter replies, v38, "Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins."*

And yet, it's not one-sided. Because if Christianity critiques the idea that what's wrong with the world is everyone else and the systems of structural oppression, and instead says, 'no, we're individually responsible.' It also critiques the idea that the problem is all individual. Verse 40: 'And with many other words [Peter] bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves *from this crooked generation*."

A generation that was highly religious, and whose civil authorities, Rome, thought they held the moral high-ground. And yet a generation that had crucified the Son of God. So Christ's power doesn't just save us from our own sins, it rescues and redeems us from the sins of others.

You see, as you look back on your past, you can see the things you shouldn't have done but you did and the things you should have done but you didn't. But maybe you also see things done to you by others. Or how you were dragged down by others in ways you now regret. And Peter's saying, Christ's power doesn't just save you from your sin, but from sins done against you. It doesn't just forgive you, it heals you. Towards the end of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* Aragorn the rightful King comes to the Houses of Healing, and he goes from sick bed to sick bed healing and restoring the sick and injured, saying 'Walk no more in the shadows, but awake.' And Christ the King comes to us and says, come out from the shadows and live.

Thirdly, we all need **a power for joy**. The disciples spill out onto the streets and Luke says the crowd was, v12, 'amazed and perplexed' while others mocked, saying, v13, "They are filled with new wine." Now, why did they think they were drunk? Because they're not fighting. And it can't just have been them speaking different languages because that would have just blended in with the crowd. Something else must have left them thinking, 'what have they been drinking?!'

What was that? It was joy.

Don't you want that? Because whether it's the fight for political power, or self-righteous religious moralism, both can make you angry. But the power of Jesus doesn't. It fills your heart with joy and in ways that people notice.

Fourthly, we need **a power for worship.** A power that takes our eyes off of ourselves. Verse 11, "We hear them telling in our own tongues *the mighty works of God*." The problem at Babel was the desire to be someone or something great, and to be that apart from God. It's the problem lurking under all forms self-empowerment that place me at the centre. And the problem with self-centredness is that it's like poison to the roots of everything that really matters in life, like relationships and friendships and deep, thick community.

But the power of the Spirit doesn't leave these disciples making much of the disciples. They're making much of God. And Augustine said, it's getting that order right, the order of your loves, of what really matters to you, that's the key to you flourishing. And Jesus' power re-orients your life away from a self-destructive fixation on self, to him. Make yourself the centre of your life, and things get pretty screwy. Make God the centre and everything else begins to fall into place.

Great, but where do you get that power from?

How to Get It

Now every power comes from somewhere, doesn't it? A politician's power comes from the ballot box and the office held. An influencer's power comes from their reach on social media.

Where does this power come from? What's the source of a power that can make you joyful rather than angry; brave rather than timid; bring people together rather than divide them; cleanse you of your sins, and free you from the sins of others; cause you to take your eyes off of self and fix them on One far greater? Where does that kind of power come from?

Well, look at v23, as Peter says, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Where does this power come from? From the *weakness* of the cross. From the fact that at the cross Christ bore your sorrow so you could have his joy. He bore your sin, so you could have his forgiveness. And he was separated from the Father so that you could be reconciled to him and to each other. And when you know that the Son of God had to die for *you* to save *you from your sins*, it has the power to kill the angry, self-righteous pharisee in you. And as you see the depth of his love for you, it takes your eyes off of you and fixes them on him. As Paul wrote, 'For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God' (1 Cor 1:18.)

But then look at v32, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured this out that you yourselves are seeing and hearing."

And through his resurrection, Jesus broke the power of sin and death and crushed the serpent's head who is coiled at your door. And when he ascended and sat down at God's right he was taking the seat that in the ancient world was the place of power. The place where the king's favoured son sat - the one who could administer all the king's power and justice. And from there, Luke tells us, Jesus poured out the Spirit - the presence and the power of God - the wind and the fire - into the disciples' hearts.

But not just their hearts. Look again at v39, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." So forgiveness and joy, and unity and humility, and courage and worship are on offer to us all. And if you're already a Christian, they're yours in Christ - you don't need to do anything to earn them but live in the good of them. And if you're not yet a Christian, they can be yours, because as the prophet Joel says in v17, 'Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' You too don't need to earn them, you just have to come to Jesus to receive them.

But if it doesn't stop with the disciples, it also doesn't stop with us. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses." (1:8). Witnesses to his death and resurrection and witnesses to his forgiveness and joy.

So, this week, work for the unity of his people. Repent of any sin he brings into the light. Turn your eyes off of self and worship him. And be attentive to the Spirit's prompting to point others to a much better king, a much better kingdom and a much greater power.