

Acts 2: 1-13 Sermon

The Spirit came to bring us power to witness to the truth

- Context is Key
- Real purpose...
- ...Needing Real Power
- The Holy Spirit and us

Introduction

A couple of questions for us as we begin.

When you hear the word **power** what or who comes to mind?

- World leaders? Trump, Putin. Power over people
- Natural disasters? Tsunamis, earthquakes, forest fires. The power to destroy
- The coronavirus? The power to harm and kill.
- Clap for carers, the power to encourage.

I wonder what you might be thinking of?

Well today's passage is about power. But the question is, how are we to understand this power?

My next question, I wonder what comes to mind when you hear the term 'Holy Spirit'?

I remember watching a TV show once where someone commented that he was thought the Holy Spirit was a drug, as his Christian friends always seemed to be out their minds when 'filled with the Spirit'. Or is the Holy Spirit like the force on Star wars? A mysterious force which people can use for good or evil?

When we think about the Holy Spirit, we might have a whole range of questions.

This is not a talk attempting to fully describe, explain and completely explore who the Holy Spirit is and explain fully what the Holy Spirit does. It cannot be as we focus in on one passage and we do not want to add to the passage what is not there, but I guess my question for us today is this; In Acts 2:1-13, in real history, with real people, as part of the big picture of God's plans, who is the Holy Spirit, what did the Holy Spirit do and why? And what does that mean for us today?

Let's pray for help as we do that.

So let's walk through the passage and my first point is this...context is key

Section 1 – context is key

V1 'When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.'

So we have 'they', that is the 12 disciples; 12 Jews who had witnessed the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (as we saw in Chapter 1 last week), gathering together on the day of Pentecost. Now the festival of Pentecost is one of the 3 main Jewish festivals, along with Passover and

Tabernacles. Pentecost comes fifty days after Passover; which is a celebration of God saving His people from Egypt. Pentecost, however, is a festival all about fulfilment and completion as it celebrated both the harvest and over time also came to celebrate when God gave his laws to Moses at Mount Sinai. From Passover to Pentecost, Jews celebrate God saving His people from slavery and God fulfilling his promises.

So we have this Jewish context, the disciples gathered in one place, but during this festival. Jews gathered from far and wide to come to Jerusalem (the capital city of Jewish life as it were) to celebrate that the God they worship, is a God who fulfils and keeps his promises.

But we also have the context that these 12 disciples, who witnessed the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus where gathered waiting for God to fulfil another promise...

We saw in Chapter 1 v 4 Jesus say “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵For John baptized with[Ⓜ] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with[Ⓜ] the Holy Spirit.”

So we have these disciples, waiting for God to fulfil his promise, waiting for this gift of the Holy Spirit.

To name but a few of these waiting disciples,

- We have Thomas – a man who less than 50 days ago (less time than we’ve been in lockdown), doubted Jesus had come back from the dead
- We have two brothers, James and John – who had previously arrogantly ask Jesus if they can share in His glory.
- We have Peter, who again just 50 days ago, denied to a servant girl, that he even knew Jesus.

So this group; a broken, weak, timid and certainly not impressive group, were waiting for this gift of the Holy Spirit.

But what was this gift and for what purpose?

Section 2 A real purpose

Acts 1:8 which we looked at it 2 weeks ago, tells us clearly:

⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

To leave his disciples in no doubt, Jesus had spoken about this gift before and the purpose of this gift.

Luke, in his Gospel records in chapter 24:45-49, Jesus saying this

⁴⁵Then he (Jesus) opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸**You are witnesses of these things.** ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with **power from on high.**”

What two things do we notice in both the verses from Acts and from Luke?

- 1) The Holy Spirit gives power, real power from on high, from God himself.
- 2) But power to do what? To witness. See in Luke Chapter 24 verse 48. ‘You are my witnesses’. Acts 1:4, you will be my witnesses.

But look back at Luke 24:45 again, witnesses to what?

Then he (Jesus) opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

They are to witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and to witness to what that means for every individual that ever lives. Notice that just slipped in there, witnesses to all nations! What a remit! What a responsibility! What a task at hand!

These disciples witnessed God himself with us; God the Father, sending God the son, who reveals and fulfils God’s plans that had always been promised in scripture (look at verse 45) and it is their task to share this revelation with the world! The revelation, as Luke 24:46 declares, that the Messiah, God’s chosen one, that is Jesus, would offer and does offer forgiveness to all that come to him if they repent (that is turn away from all that does not honour a God who is perfect and pure and who created them and knows what is best for them). They are called to be witnesses of the greatest life, the greatest message and the greatest truth.

So the Bible is very clear, the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost to bring the disciples power to witness to the truth. The truth as Acts 1:3 puts it, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, the truth of God’s Kingdom and God’s king.

Who was this task first given to?

Doubting Thomas, glory-craving James and John, cowardice laden Peter! So what is needed for these broken, weak, timid disciplines to be witnesses to this message? Nothing less than the power of God! Why would we expect they needed anything less?

Section 3 ...Needing Real Power

So let’s return to Acts 2 to see this power at work. From verse 2..

²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to

rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^(a) as the Spirit enabled them.

There was in verse 2 a 'sound **LIKE** the blowing of a violent wind' and verse 3 'They saw what **SEEMED** to be tongues of fire.'

Now if it were filmed, I am not exactly sure what we would have seen, for it wasn't a blowing wind, but a sound **LIKE** a blowing wind and it wasn't tongues of fire, but rather what **SEEMED** to be tongues of fire. But what is clear is that these two experiences (that of wind and fire) are too powerful to be really described; our human language cannot do it justice.

But these descriptions point clearly to God's power and God's presence. We have seen similar examples in the Old Testament as wind and fire show the presence, the glory and the power of the indescribably glorious and powerful God. In Exodus 40, 2 Chronicles 7, in 2 Samuel 22:16, in Exodus 19:18 (do look at those references). Luke, describing the indescribable, uses Old Testament language to express that God is present here and that the power of the God that we meet in the Old Testament is at work here.

Then verse 4: ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^(a) as the Spirit enabled them.

In this unique moment in time, at the start of a new era, at the formation of the church, God in His wisdom and generosity, gifts the disciples just what they needed to get this mission and message going at the time of Pentecost – **a gift of speech**. Verse 4 is clear, the Spirit enables them, supernaturally to speak in other tongues.

Why might this be the gift that God gave at this time?

Well just look at verse 5 – Many Jews from 'every nation' had gathered in one place, in Jerusalem, to join the Pentecost celebrations. But being from 'every nation' meant that they of course spoke languages of all kinds. 15 locations are mentioned; a multitude of languages represented. But what was the deepest need of every single Jew who arrived to celebrate Pentecost that year? It was to know and understand the message of Jesus and how the God they worshiped, the God revealed in the Old Testament had and was bringing about His Kingdom and all He had promised in the Old Testament through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The disciples needed the gift of speaking in a multitude of tongues (and in this instance in the New Testament, as it says in verse 8, tongues means understood languages, for they are not speaking unintelligible languages, but rather they crowd heard them in their own native language). They needed to speak the languages of those gathered in order to proclaim to them, what they had witnessed.

Here in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit gifts something quite extraordinary; so much so that the crowd of Jews are 'bewildered' (v6) and utterly amazed (v7). But this extraordinary power, is not power for power's sake, the Holy Spirit here in Acts 2 is not generously gifted to give the disciples a buzz or to make them feel good or give an experience for experience sake; but rather and profoundly more wonderfully, it gives them the power to witness to the gospel and the gospel is as Romans 1:16 tells us '**is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes**'. Or as Verse 11 in our passage puts it '**we (that is, those Jews gathered) hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.**'

What could be better, what could be more generous of God, what could be more important, than the power to witness to a lost world and show them their saviour? If we also understand witnessing

correctly, of course we would expect that these disciples needed power. Doubting Thomas, arrogant James and John, fearful Peter. They of course needed power to speak truth. Power to represent the risen saviour, the Lord of all. Power to explain in other languages and witness to the life, death and resurrection of the one who could take them and those who listened from death to life, give them life to the full, offer them forgiveness and an eternity of no more pain and tears. How could they possibly witness without power from God himself! If we understand witnessing correctly, we understand why it is deeply more impressive, more glorious, more gracious, more loving than how many have sadly reduced the Holy Spirit to – a buzz or a hyped experience.

But also look at v13

¹³Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”

Even with the power of the Spirit, witnessing to the truth, we should expect some not to believe and some to mock. Wonderfully, some do respond! Just look at verse 11, the Holy Spirit has helped some see that what the disciples declare are the wonders of God. The Holy Spirit is at work in the witnessing and is at work in how people respond. However, sadly others made fun. The disciples were not in charge of how people responded – their call was to, in the power of the Spirit, witness to God’s king and God’s kingdom.

Section 4 – The Holy Spirit and us. Worship and Witness

So what should our response be to this passage? This passage doesn’t reveal everything we need to know about the Holy Spirit and we may have many other questions...but two key applications struck me –worship and witness.

Worship

We should pause and give thanks to God!

How good is it that Jesus gathered witnesses to be with him for his life, death, resurrection and ascension, so that they could declare what he did and what he taught.

How good is it that God is in control of history and at a moment where Jews were gathering from far and wide for Pentecost, he gave his weak disciples, his witnesses, the power to speak to them all in their own languages, so that they could hear the Good News.

How good is it that God keeps His promises. Jesus promised the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gift of the Spirit was given to them at Pentecost.

How good is it that God has a plan for making His kingdom and gathering people for this Kingdom.

How good is it that what the disciples witness to, is true! The gospel, the plans of God the Father, the life of Jesus Christ, the power of the Spirit, is real and true and Good News for us, our friends, our enemies, our neighbours, for Huntingdon, for our country, for our world.

There is so much in this passage which shows God to be worthy of our praise! I have no doubt missed so much more from here of reasons to give thanks and reasons to worship God!

Witness – 2 responses to avoid and 2 responses to pursue

Secondly, our witness. If you remember one line from today's talk, it's this: **The Holy Spirit came to bring us power to witness to the truth of God's kingdom and God's king.**

So of course, this must be a focus in how we apply this to our lives.

2 possible responses to avoid

However when I read this passage, I think there are 2 main ways we could misunderstand the Holy Spirit and witnessing today.

1) The Holy Spirit must do exactly the same, all the time, today

Should we expect that the Holy Spirit will be giving this gift of tongues (in this case being able to supernaturally speak other people's language) as a regular gift to the church today as we witness? To that question, we must say that in one way, Pentecost is indeed a unique moment in history, a one-off in the sense that this is THE moment of God sending his Holy Spirit to set up His church, to start the fulfilment of that call to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. This is a moment that is not repeated as it sits in God's plans for His creation and His people.

However, we also need more than this passage to understand the role the Holy Spirit plays in the life of the church today. We will see through Acts some differing experiences of the Holy Spirit, which all need looking at in context to piece together the picture of who the Spirit is and what he does today.

So perhaps from this passage alone, it is not the moment to explore that wider question of 'what does the Holy Spirit do today?', however in the fullness of time we are hoping to do a talk on the Bible's overview of the Holy Spirit, to help us think this through. And we know that people wrestling with scripture, sitting under the authority of scripture have differing opinions on this. In life groups this week, we would love to gather questions that you have about the Holy Spirit and his work today to help with this.

But what is clear from **this** passage is that believers need the Holy Spirit to witness to God's Kingdom and God's King.

The second response to avoid is this.

2) We view the Holy Spirit as a bonus extra in our witnessing

This passage doesn't allow for us to have that view. No Spirit, no power to witness. John Stott in his commentary of Acts, put it eloquently when he wrote.

'There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.'

The Spirit cannot be seen as just a bonus extra.

2 responses to pursue

However I think there are 2 responses to pursue.

1) Hear and study God's Word

This is not tokenistic and just the thing to say at the end of a talk! Quite simply, how can we witness if we don't know what we are witnessing to? Perhaps God is prompting us today to read or hear His word more, to listen to Biblical talks online, or talk to other Christians about the Bible and its message, so that you may know better what you are a witness to. Part of the call to study God's word is so that we might know the truth of God's kingdom and God's king better, so we can pass that truth on.

2) Pray!

I'm sure, just like I have over the years, we down play our need to cry out to God for His power to help us witness. Whether through our fear of the supernatural, or for some of us our very English reserve, or for some of us our self-reliance.

Or perhaps we think we are too broken, weak and timid for God to use us – well just look at the disciples God used to set up His church! Doubting Thomas, arrogant James and John, fearful Peter. Whatever our personality type, out-going or shy, bold or timid, be assured God can use you to witness to who he is! So let us all pray for this same power to help us witness.

Perhaps praying for the boldness to invite people to the quiz night to draw people into life of the church, perhaps praying that you could share your testimony with a friend, perhaps praying to listen well to people's questions and doubts so that you can discuss relevant Bible passages with them.

So pray and pray and pray again, that in whatever context you are in, with whatever personality God has given you (shy or out-going), that you would be empowered by the Spirit to witness to the risen Jesus and that those that hear would respond!

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, what does this passage tell you about Christianity...

If you have joined us today and you would say that you are not a Christian, firstly thank you for joining us! It's never an easy thing tuning into something which you may disagree with and I hope you will continue to join us.

If that is you, can I give you two challenges.

- 1) We have seen today that at the heart of Christianity is a message about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It was this life that the disciples were witnesses to. It is Jesus' life that Christians claim to be life changing for us. If you have rejected Christianity, can I ask if you have looked into the life of Jesus and what he claims about himself and claims about you? Many people reject Christianity without looking at what these eyewitnesses to Jesus' life said. Now of course, from that you may still have a host more questions and host more that you may want to investigate; but if you are serious about discovering if Christianity is true, really looking into the life of Jesus is an essential. To help with this (and Charlie can say more) off the back of the quiz night, we are hoping to start a 4 week discussion group looking into the core beliefs of Christianity. So please do get in contact if this is something you or a friend would find helpful. But more details to come soon!

- 2) Secondly, if someone invited you to watch, why not ask them why they believe that Jesus' life and the life these disciples gave witness to, is good news for them and good news for you.

So as we finish, from Acts 2: 1-13, what is the key message for us? **The Holy Spirit came to bring us power to witness to the truth, to witness to God's Kingdom and God's king.**

Let me pray for us.

Intro 'I will offer up my life'