

By My Spirit

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Today is what we call 'Pentecost Sunday'. We call it that because somewhere back in in history someone decided to introduce a calendar of special days to coincide with special events and some of those special days and festivals are still with us today. That's where 'Advent' and 'Lent' and 'Easter' and a number of other festivals and celebrations come from. But they didn't come from Jesus. Most of them came from Jewish tradition and then took on new meaning in the Christian era.

However, when the New Covenant was ushered in by Jesus and the New Testament era began, all the religious festivals the Jews had known for centuries were supposed to be replaced by, or find their fulfilment in Christ. That's why Paul said in his letter to the Colossians:

*"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ ... do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; **the reality**, however, **is found in Christ**." (Col. 2:8,16-17)*

All those festivals, feasts, holy days and religious events were but a shadow of things to come and we know now that the 'things to come' that Paul was talking about was the coming of Christ and the New Covenant He was to bring into being through His sinless life, sacrificial death and powerful resurrection. So the 'Reality' which Paul speaks of is found in the person and work of Christ, as revealed by His Spirit – and not in anything else.

That Reality entered our time and space one cold night in a cave in Bethlehem when God stepped out of eternity and into time – out of heaven and into a frightened Jewish teenager's womb. For the next thirty years or so, not a lot happened.

But then one day in a river a guy called John the Baptist found himself standing face to face with that Reality – the long awaited, much prophesied Messiah – Jesus, the Christ. As John baptised this carpenter from Nazareth, the chasm between heaven and earth was bridged. Heaven opened and the Spirit of God descended and rested upon and remained upon a human being – for the very first time. And so it began as this inconspicuous man from a insignificant town commenced His world-transforming mission – all under the direction of, and in the power of the Spirit of God. As soon as Jesus was baptised, the Spirit led Him into the wilderness to be refined and tested and focussed and equipped to fulfil His mission, His calling and His purpose.

Three long, hard, challenging years followed until that mission ended with His brutal murder, His miraculous resurrection and His ascension back out of time and space and into the eternal Kingdom where He has always ruled and reigned. But just moments before Jesus left our world, He issued a clear, simple but unbelievably important instruction- actually, it was a warning. We can read that in Acts 1:4-5, where Jesus told His disciples:

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."

Jesus told them to wait for power from on high; wait for the Spirit of God to breath life and power into the mission to which Jesus has called them. He spent three years teaching and modelling and living that mission, under the constant guidance and power of the Spirit. Now Jesus was telling the disciples not to attempt anything at all in His name until they were empowered by the same Spirit of God Who empowered Him.

This was not the first time Jesus had spoken about this. We read in John 14 where He told the disciples exactly how this would happen. He said:

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” (John 14:16-20)

Here we see Jesus unwrapping just a little of the mystery of what we call the Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit. He tells the disciples that He is about to leave them but that He will come back – but He’s not talking about His return at the end this age – He’s not talking about ‘the second coming’. Jesus is talking about the birth of the Church as we know it, seven weeks after His death. He’s talking about Pentecost. What happened to Jesus, the man, in the river that day when John baptised Him, is what He’s now telling His disciples to wait for so they too will be empowered.

The same Holy Spirit who rested and remained upon Him, filled Him, empowered Him and guided Him throughout His entire ministry, must also rest upon, remain upon, fill, empower and guide His disciples – or they won’t have a ministry! They will not be able to fulfil the great commission or any of their calling in Christ without the power from on high that Jesus had in His ministry.

Now this idea of the Spirit of God being upon or within a human being was a radically new concept and part of the mystery and miracle of the New Covenant. But the work and priority of God’s Spirit was certainly not a new idea when the Church was born. It has always been this way.

Human effort, human might, human power, human initiative is never going to achieve an outcome in the Kingdom of heaven. If you want a heavenly outcome, you need heavenly power. If the most prayed prayer of all time, *“Your Kingdom, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* is ever going to be answered, it will not come by human effort, vision, expertise or power. It will only come by the Spirit of God.

That’s why over 500 years before Jesus warned the disciples to wait until they received that power from on high, God spoke through the prophet Zechariah and affirmed the same truth in chapter 4 verse 6: *“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord God Almighty.”*

Haggai and Zechariah were prophets during the same period of time. God gave them the responsibility of guiding His people to review their work on re-building the Temple after they returned from exile. At the point this statement was made, the people had built the foundation, but then stopped. It had been about fifteen years since they had done any work on this building project. In a vision, Zechariah was told by the Lord that the Temple would be rebuilt and how the building would be accomplished.

The principles shared in this vision are timeless and so on this Pentecost Sunday, I want us to focus on the Word of God spoken so clearly 500 years before Pentecost.

Not by might ...

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord God Almighty."

When the Hebrew children returned from Babylonian bondage, they began to build the Temple. The pagan people who lived in their land offered to help with the building. When the people of God said, *"You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God,"* (Ezra 4:3) the pagan people got mad. They stirred up so much trouble that the King called a halt to the re-building project.

Apathy then set in and the people of God lost interest in building the Temple. The might or strength of the great numbers of people who wanted to build the temple had dwindled. The elders had known how important it was to worship God and keep Him in the centre of their whole lives and they believed the temple helped them do that. But many of the elders had died now and there seemed to be no strength or might to build the temple. Haggai reports that the people were saying,

"The time has not come, even the time for the house of the Lord to be rebuilt." But he answered, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses while this house lies desolate?" (Haggai 1:3,4)

The prophets were trying to stir the people to rebuild. Zechariah had a vision and the Lord told him the building would not be accomplished by might nor power but by His Spirit. The Lord was saying, *"Don't sit around and wait for might, listen to the direction of My Spirit and move out in faith."*

We humans tend to think we need might. We think our strength and might are so very important, but they are only important as the Spirit of God chooses to use them. So many people in our world today believe that if they can just get more might, as the world counts might, they will be ok. But what they need, and have always needed, is God's power.

The Hebrew children didn't need more might, they needed more awareness of God. They needed a revival of what they should have already known. They needed zeal to replace apathy. They needed God's vision to replace their own. They needed God's spirit to empower God's call.

Not by power ...

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord God Almighty."

So what's the difference between might and power? This word for power carries the idea of the authority and influence of the king behind them. When they lost that authoritative power, they felt they couldn't build the temple. No doubt they felt if the king would give them a new decree to build, they could proceed to accomplish their task.

God wanted them to build the temple, but to do it under the authority of the King of Kings and not some earthly king. The people needed to depend upon the power of God for the building of the temple. This was God's mission, not man's. This was God's initiative, not theirs.

You are familiar with the story of David and Goliath. This giant of a man had taunted the people of Israel and their God. It seemed that no one was willing to go up against the Philistine warrior. Nobody had the power to match Goliath. Then David volunteered for the job. Saul thought David was too young, but David convinced him he could do the job. Saul loaned David a sword and some armour, but they were too big for the youngster. He went into battle with only a sling shot and five stones, but in reality he went into battle with far more than that. Young David knew that the weapons of our warfare are not of this world and David's power was not in the slingshot or the stones.

So while the people were mocking David and saying, "You're too small compared to this giant," David's faith was telling him, "this giant is too small for my God." You know what happened next and the people were praising David for his incredible skill and accuracy and power over this giant. David was praising God for bringing the victory by His Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, the story has never changed. This truth has always been with us:

- > Noah facing the flood
- > Moses standing before the red sea
- > Joshua marching around Jericho
- > Elijah against the prophets of Baal
- > David facing Goliath
- > Zechariah standing before the temple ruins
- > Jesus, murdered and in a borrowed tomb
- > The disciples gathered in the upper room, with the call of God in their hearts but no power to effect that call.

The Pentecost story is the story of life on earth. Human beings have achieved so much in so many areas and yet none of our achievements have any impact on eternity; none of our effort lives beyond the grave; our greatest achievements and greatest victories all die with us, unless they are empowered by God and part of Christ's mission.

We gather in this 'upper room' today in exactly same condition as the disciples who gathered in that upper room only weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection. They knew what the mission was into which Jesus had called them all. They also knew they were powerless to do what Jesus did. We know, or should know by now, what the mission of Christ is today – it's exactly the same mission as when all this began – but we will never achieve Christ's mission on earth unless we are empowered by God the same way Jesus was – by God's Spirit.

But by My Spirit ...

"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord God Almighty."

The strength of numbers and popular opinion won't bring spiritual might. Nor will the influence of the king's power or authority bring it. God's Spirit and God alone will empower us to build His Kingdom. That's why Jesus clearly said, "... *apart from me you can do nothing.*" (John 15:5)

To build our life of faith we need the power and might of God. To build a Christian home we need the power and might of God's Spirit. To build a congregation of people and have them grow in grace and truth, we need God's Spirit. To be effective in any ministry we need the might and power and presence of God. It is just not an option, it is essential. We cannot do God's Work without God – how simple can it be? Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus, in His wisdom and grace, has chosen to partner with us in fulfilling His mission on earth. Therefore we need to get together!

From cover to cover in the Bible, from generation to generation throughout human history, the story is the same: Without God's power and presence nothing will be achieved which makes any significance in the eternal kingdom of heaven.

The mission of Christ is the only mission there is. Unfortunately, the word 'mission' is used in millions of different contexts today all across the world and only some of those contexts have anything to do with the actual mission of Christ. Even in many Churches today when the word 'mission' is spoken or read or put on a sign or a business card with many people no longer thinking about the actual mission of Christ.

What is the mission of Christ? Well, read the gospels – what did Christ do? He made disciples and then He taught those disciples how to make disciples. He didn't teach them how to convert people or change people – only the Spirit of God can regenerate a human spirit and open our spiritual eyes to the reality of Who God is and Who Jesus is. As the Spirit did that, Jesus made disciples. Then He commissioned His disciples to do the same, and they did ... and billions of disciples later, here we are – with the same Jesus, the same gospel, the same calling, the same mission, and the same need for power from on high to accomplish that mission.

Friends, there is no point in us praying, *“Your Kingdom Come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven..”* unless in the same breath we are praying, *“Come, Holy Spirit, Come!”* There is no point in us being part of a church which operates on human power - fulfilling a mission which is not the mission of Christ.

We may achieve a lot of things in this life; we may alleviate a lot of people's hardship in this life; we may bless a lot of people with our efforts, but the mission of the Church which Jesus is building is, and has always been, to advance the Kingdom of Heaven, bring people to Jesus - by God's grace, for God's Glory and through God's Spirit.

How that mission is fulfilled and in what vehicles that mission is taken into the world around us will vary widely: Preaching and teaching; worship and celebration; welfare programs and community service projects; social action and advocacy initiatives, to mention just a few.

But, if we are to remain the Church of Jesus Christ; if we are to remain committed to the mission of Jesus Christ; then the underlying, overarching and defining purpose of all our ministries and actions as disciples and communities of disciples, must be to lead men, women and young people into a personal relationship with God, in Christ.

And here is the most important sentence in this sermon - so at least remember this - almost all of the ministries and programs in our churches can be done by humans like you and me without power from on high. We can do almost everything in the church without the active presence of the Spirit of God. But we cannot save, redeem or transform anyone. We cannot heal, deliver or restore anyone. We cannot bring someone from the kingdom of darkness into the glorious Kingdom of light.

We cannot open the eyes people's hearts to behold the reality and beauty and magnificence of God. We cannot rescue people from the hell they are living in right now and bring them into heaven, basking in the love, grace, mercy and forgiveness of God. **Only God can do all that, by the power of His Spirit.**

In other words, we cannot achieve God's objectives, God's purpose and God's plan for the Church, without power from on high. We cannot be part of the mission of Christ, the only mission there is, without the empowering presence of God. For it's not by might, nor by power, nor by anything at all we come up with ... the mission of Christ and the work of His Church will only ever be achieved, by God's Spirit.

So come, Holy Spirit, come!