

Sermon: 'But by my Spirit'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster – 23rd May 2010 11.00am

LESSON: Zechariah 4:1-10; Acts 2:1-13

They laid the foundation stone for Cologne Cathedral on the 15th of August 1248, it was then 632 years before they finished it in 1880!

Perhaps they didn't want to rush it!

Sometimes it's very hard to finish something off!

On a somewhat smaller scale, I think of my friend Les Kellett when I was a minister in Halifax.

The first time I visited the house there was a rolled up carpet on the stairway, I was in and out of that house a lot in the six years I was there and the carpet remained there rolled up on the stairs.

Some ten years later I was back preaching,

"Have you got the carpet down Les?"

"No it's still rolled up on the stairs!"

Sometimes it's very hard to finish something off!

On an even smaller scale my dear wife Biddy was once given a cross stitch kit for Christmas.

Every holiday for the last seven or eight years she has brought it away and done a bit of work on it, yet it still isn't finished.

What is this magnificent work of art she is laboring on?

Well it's a bookmark!

Sometimes it's very hard to finish something off!

I am sure that if I went round this Church this morning each of you would be able to tell me about that project you started but haven't yet had time to finish.

One day the garden will get sorted out.

One day the books will get put into alphabetical or theme order.

One day you will sort out the photos on the computer.

One day you will re-tile the bathroom or repaint the lounge.

You mean to do it,

you promise faithfully that yes you will do it,

but in truth you never get going so nothing gets done.

Sometimes it's very hard to finish something off!

Well the Israelites who we read about in this someone strange and indecipherable passage of the book of Zechariah were a bit like that.

The Jewish leader Zerubbabel had led his people out of exile back to

Jerusalem,
and there the first thing he set out to do was to build another Temple.
There was great rejoicing when they started it but then
a lack of resources,
fierce opposition from the locals,
and the apathy of his people meant that some fifteen years later things were
not much further on,
they were discovering that sometimes it's very hard to finish something
off!

Into this situation God sends the prophet Zechariah.
He has no patience with them for he tells them that although they are poor
and weak their God is not poor and weak,
the work is not theirs but His,
Zechariah chapter 4 and verse 6

verse 6B

With God's resources hope opens up,
and in fact Zechariah promises that it will be finished and fairly soon,
verse 9

verse 9A

So what do we learn on this Pentecost morning from this story,
three main things.

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First, this story encourages us in the face of the poorness of our resources.

The world seems so very dominant doesn't it?

Many multi-national companies have larger turnovers than the gross national product of some whole countries.

The power of advertising means that when a new advert is screened on TV sales rocket,

and linked to that, the power of the media means that if Delia Smith or Gordon Ramsey use a particular type of saucepan or frying pan it is sold out in the shops within the week.

Then what a world we have in the internet!

For example if you put in "Martin Turner" on the fourth O of Google and 4 down you get my sermons,

and if you Google the images page my smiling face is there on page one!

I find that quite remarkable,

and if I am honest I also find it just a bit worrying!

Perhaps this apparent present day dominance by the world is best summed up by the London skyline.

When St Paul's Cathedral was finished in 1710 it would have been seen from across the city and would have dominated London, that was so for about 350 years.

But now St Paul's fights for its right to be seen alongside the Gherkin, Tower 42,

and soon alongside the new tallest building in London, The Shard.

The Cathedral used to dominate over all other buildings,

the divine used to dominate over the secular,

but now mammon seems to have the victory, seems to grow bigger and bigger and bigger,

Then we struggle intellectually under the attacks of secular bigots such as Richard Dawkins.

We struggle morally as the weaknesses of so many clergy are paraded in the courts and then on TV.

We are too often marginalised as governments show a complete lack of understanding of the principles and priorities of people of faith.

In so many ways we seem pushed to the edge of society with an uncertain future ahead of us.

But what do we read here?

verse 4:6

Think for just a moment.

Where is the power of Ancient Greece?

Of Rome?

Of the British Empire?

We read of it in history books or display it in museums or shade it in on our maps yet nevertheless it is gone forever!

But I will tell you what remains!

The work of a handful of men gathered together in fear and trembling on that first day of Pentecost remains,

for as the power of the Holy Spirit came upon them they went out into the streets and the early Church was born,

ordinary men,

but through the power of the Spirit the world was transformed.

I will tell you what remains!

A lone monk called Martin Luther started to realise that the Roman Catholic Church of his day was corrupt and had lost its way.

He read the Bible for himself and discovered that it was possible to be put right with God through faith and not by works,

and in that great truth the Protestant Church was rooted.

An ordinary monk, but through the power of the Spirit the Church was transformed.

I will tell you what remains!

Two brothers called Wesley were touched by the Pentecostal fire of God, one of them, John, in fact wrote in his diary exactly 272 years ago tomorrow, May the 24th 1738

"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

And from their labours of open air preaching to the poor and the marginalised a Church was born which now numbers 74 million world wide.

Two ordinary men, but through the power of the Spirit God used them and you are here in a Methodist Church this morning!

I will tell you what remains.

A young lad grows up in a poor home in the East End of London.

He is bright but he has to leave school at the age of 12 to help the family income,

but God has his hand upon that young boy and eventually he finds his way into the Methodist ministry and eventually he is sent here to Westminster as the Superintendent Minister;

William Sangster – who died fifty years ago tomorrow.

This man filled this great Church morning and evening throughout the Second World War,

his sermons made it to the front page of every national newspaper.

Just a lad from the East End but the Spirit of God so transformed his life that he influenced thousands of lives for God and for good.

Pentecost is the proof that through the Holy Spirit of God the way of the world and the priorities of the world can be turned upside down, and that nothing can turn back this floodtide of God's love and power!

Look at the first four verses of this passage from Zechariah.

In this strange almost psychedelic vision he has he sees a great gold lamp stand.

Now lamp stands were fed with oil and when the oil ran out the light went out,

but this lamp stand is not fed by oil being poured into the holders, rather there are two olive trees, one on each side.

So the lamp never goes out because it is rooted not in the fruit of the olive tree but rather in the live trees themselves,

it is a self fueling lamp stand,

so there is a limitless supply of oil.

You see what matters is not the size of the bowl but the source of the oil, a source which never runs out,

just as the Holy Spirit never runs out;

there is always more,

always more power,

always more love,

and that encourages us so much for although our resources may look small they are in fact all sufficient!

Then Second, this encourages us in the face of opposition.

These people had faced fifteen years of trouble.

The people were poor and preoccupied with surviving in hard times.

The neighboring tribes both derided what was happening and sometimes attacked physically.

The morale of the people was so low that they were divided and

argumentative as to what was the way forward.

But then after this word from Zechariah the Temple was fairly soon finished,

in the face of the odds it was built.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

Think of the early Church so viciously persecuted by the mad Emperor Nero. On one occasion he soaked the Christians in tar and used them as torches to light one of his orgies, but the blood of the martyrs became the seeds of the Church,
not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

Think of William Wilberforce; his battle against slavery went on for twenty six years, but he was a man of faith who knew that God was on his side so he got there in the end and the lives of millions were transformed.
Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

I sometimes think that we Christians here in Europe could do with a bit of opposition, we have it too easy and we have grown soft, whereas where the Church is persecuted it is so often growing. So don't worry about opposition, whether it be to you as an individual Christian or to the Church as a whole, don't worry about it. Fight it – yes. Scheme to undermine it – yes. Work your socks off to convince folk of what you stand for – yes. Come against opposition with the love which will baffle and confound them – yes. But ultimately we are in the hands of God, and He will have His way for eventually love will always triumph over hate.
not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

Then third, this encourages us that small beginnings will bring about an ending.

Folk laughed at those few Israelites, but eventually their temple was built.

At Pentecost a few folk gathered together in an upper room, and then when the Holy Spirit came folk laughed and said the disciples were drunk.

Where on earth does one meeting of a few folk lead us to?

Yet the greatest force for good in the world sprung from that gathering, the faith which brought education and hospitals and schools, the faith that fueled the Tolpuddle martyrs as they claimed workers rights, the faith which gives each and every individual infinite worth and value.

As the poet David Everitt writes,

“Large streams from little fountains flow,
Tall oaks from little acorns grow.”

And isn't that the same in your experience?

That seemingly chance meeting with a boy or a girl that has blossomed into marriage.
That casual conversation which got you thinking about a particular career or
about a new priority in life.

That sermon which everyone else found boring but which spoke to your
heart.

God uses these tiny things to work out His good purpose in your life,
Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

So where does this leave us this morning?

This building can be thought to be the finest Methodist Church in Britain,
this congregation one of the growing Methodist congregations in Britain,
we have the resources and the people and the policies,
but unless the Holy Spirit is at work,
unless the Holy Spirit moves,
we are wasting our time.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

Then what about you and what about me?

We can come here week by week to worship,
we can say our prayers and read our Bibles,
we can do our best to live good lives,
yet we can still be totally dead as Christians for unless we allow the Holy
Spirit to rule in our hearts we are but playing at following Jesus.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

You see we like to have our Church organised and we like to have our lives organised.
We almost tell God what He ought to do and how He ought to work,
we read the right books and hear the right preachers and look for the key in
them,
but God cannot be contained or organised or directed.

Look at that first Pentecost,
how did the Holy Spirit come?

In a mighty rushing wind and in tongues of fire.
You cannot direct either wind or fire,
the Holy Spirit comes how the Holy Spirit comes.

Listen also to the words of Jesus in John chapter 3 and verse 8

"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell

where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

This Holy Spirit will blow where God wills,
but the will of God is good and loving for each of you here this morning.
You may feel that you have done so much wrong in your life that there is no hope for you,
the Holy Spirit can bring you forgiveness.
You may know that you are a hard and cynical person,
the Holy Spirit of love can melt your heart to tears.
You may feel lost and lacking in purpose,
the Holy Spirit can give you new direction in life.
You may feel a terrible restlessness,
the Holy Spirit can bring the peace of God to you this very morning.

Think about the wind whistling round a building in the winter,
it gets through the tiniest crack,
nothing can seem to seal it out.

Well the Spirit of God can turn round the most pagan nation,
the Spirit of God can bring new hope to local communities,
the Spirit of God can wake up the sleepest Church,
the Spirit of God can meet even with me,
even with you,
for the Spirit of God is a Spirit of love,
and love wants the very best for your life.

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

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