

Sermon: 'Not an optional extra'

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LESSON: Acts 2:1-21

We've heard a great deal over the past couple of weeks about politics and the new coalition government.

However we actually voted, there's no doubt we are in uncharted territory as a result of the election, with the formation of the Cameron-Clegg union of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

Downing Street said farewell to the '**New Labour**' era, and waved good-bye to Gordon Brown after his moving speeches as he stood down as Prime Minister, and also as party leader and an MP.

We now have what has been described as '**New Politics**' with the first coalition government in 65 years.

This '**new era**' will need openness on all sides and, as we are taught in the Bible, Christians must pray for those who are in authority and those who lead us – whatever our personal politics and allegiances.

We should pray too for an effective opposition too, that through the democratic process, our society might experience peace, goodness, compassion and justice, together with other kingdom values.

We wait to see whether this pact will prove to be for the national interest and whether the marriage will be a happy one, and whether the relationship will grow and blossom.

I urge you not to be cynical about politics, but remember that those with integrity from all parties (with Christians across the board) are individuals with a vocation of public service, who want the best for society – they just disagree how that should be accomplished!

We like to knock MPs, and they've given us good reason for that in the past, but these men and women certainly need our prayers, for what, at times, can be a thankless task.

As I was thinking about this '**new political era**', I was reminded that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the dawning of a '**new era**' too.

The Church was born at the time of the first Pentecost.

Moreover, it was entering into uncharted territory with the followers of Jesus entering into a new relationship with each other, and their God.

A host of different characters were thrown together and would have to learn how to work with each other and love each other.

They had to wave goodbye to their old religious leaders and to follow their new inspiring leader and saviour, Jesus.

These followers needed to be obedient, open and to pray!

Dr James Dunn is a Church of Scotland minister and a Methodist Local preacher, and before his retirement was the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham.

In his classic book on the Baptism of the Holy Spirit ([p.40-41](#)), Jimmy Dunn writes: **'Luke sees history falling into three phases – the period of Israel, the period of Jesus, and the period of the coming of Jesus and his parousia.'** *That is, his second coming.*

'Jesus is the one who effects these transitions, and in his own life each phase is inaugurated by his entering into a new relationship with the Spirit: first, when his human life was the creation of the Spirit (Luke 1:35); second, when he was anointed with the Spirit and thus became the anointed one, the unique man of the Spirit (Luke 3:22; 4:18);

That is, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan and when he gave his manifesto in synagogue at Nazareth quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me ...'

Thirdly, Dunn says this transition is seen when:

'... he received the promise of the Spirit at his exaltation and poured the Spirit forth on his disciples, thus becoming the Lord of the Spirit. The transition from the first to second was made possible and 'triggered off' by his submission to John's baptism; the transition from the second to third by his submission to the baptism of the cross.'

In other words, Pentecost is **not an optional extra** for 'Pentecostal Christians'!

The coming of the Holy Spirit is an essential part of God's plan and purpose.

Without the coming of the Holy Spirit, we wouldn't be able to follow Jesus. Neither would we be able to work towards the establishment of his kingdom here on earth –

we'd have no power to do it!

When Jesus limited himself and entered our world as a human, he demonstrated that it was possible for us to live life as God intended with the Spirit's help.

The first Adam was not perfect, but God's son, Jesus, was the second Adam a perfect example of humanity as our Father intended!

If we let Christ live in us, then despite being human, we can be equipped for God's divine mission, but only if we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

1 John 4 verse 9: **'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him'.**

Methodists believe in **'Prevenient Grace'**, God being at work in our lives before we even know it.

He wooed us to himself.

Then, when we become a Christian, we are spiritually born again by the Holy Spirit.

Hence, the Spirit was at work when the disciples were being drawn to follow Jesus and to put their faith in him.

Nevertheless, they still needed to experience the Holy Spirit in all its fullness (Pentecost), and so do we.

I worry about churches that say that they are **'not into the power of the Holy Spirit'**.

Usually it means they have dismissed some expressions of charismatic Christianity and have thrown the baby out with the bath water.

The fruit and gifts of the Spirit will be manifest, if we are spirit-led people.

However, the gifts will not be ends in themselves, but to further the work of the kingdom.

The Holy Spirit is not given so that as Christians we may have **'spiritual experiences'** for their own sake, but to equip Christians for the common good.

The Holy Spirit isn't an optional extra ... we can't divide up the Trinity ... and without a 'supernatural church', Christianity is not spiritually empowered, but a dead religion!

Three things to note about the **'post Pentecost era'**:

1. A New relationship

I quote Bill Johnson from last night's service, **'Jesus came to reveal the Father. He sent his Spirit that we may know the Father and live for him'**.

We need a new, deeper, intimate, relationship with our holy and all-powerful Heavenly Father, through the living risen Christ, in the Power of the Spirit!

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus was Jesus' *own* entry into the new age and covenant.

Bill Johnson reminded those gathered here last night, that **'Jesus, God's only Son, emptied himself of all but love, and demonstrated what a Spirit led life was all about.'**

Led by the Spirit, we see Jesus' obedient loving relationship with His Father and we see perfectly the fruit of the Power of the Spirit within him.

Before he could baptize others in the Spirit he had to be baptized in the Spirit himself.

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...', he said in Nazareth.

After his baptism, we are told, was **'led by the Spirit into the wilderness'**, and so on!

When Jesus died, it was the Spirit of Christ that raised him to life!

Before he ascended to Heaven, the disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem for the gift that God, the Heavenly Father, had promised.

Jesus said: **'... 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.'**

For us to follow Jesus and have a right relationship with God our father; for us to enter into the new covenant he intended for us; we must first receive the Holy Spirit in all His fullness - it's not an optional extra.

Let me give you two examples of people who discovered a new relationship with God:

It was on the 24th May 1738 that John Wesley went to St. Paul's Cathedral and heard the choir singing the Psalm 130. After hearing the Psalm sung, John writes: **'In the**

evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, 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'.

This was the work of the Holy Spirit. With this new relationship with God, John spent the rest of his life telling of what he had found to be true and preaching God's word.

Then there was John's brother Charles.

Together with his brother he was influenced by Peter Bohler, but it led to a different experience!

John was a man of reason and logic, who had intellectual struggles – a man who wouldn't make a blind judgement.

Charles though, was more receptive. His quest for peace of mind was a more emotional one.

He wrote in his Journal after reading Luther:

'I am astonished I should even think this is a new doctrine' (*i.e. Salvation by faith alone*)

He was helped to peace of mind by Mr Bray, in whose house he was lodging whilst he had pleurisy.

Charles described Mr Bray as **'a poor ignorant mechanic, who knows nothing but Christ; yet by knowing Him, knows and discerns all things.'**

During the night of the 20th May, ill again with pleurisy, Wesley heard a woman come to his room and say, **'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth arise and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities'.**

This was Bray's sister! It was through this ordinary devout family that Charles experienced the assurance for which he had hungered.

In the morning he found himself at peace with God, and rejoiced in the hope of loving Christ.

It was Whit Sunday – he immediately wrote the hymn: **'Where shall my wondering soul begin'.**

In both cases it was the Holy Spirit that led the founders of the Methodist Church into a new heart relationship with God – a necessary relationship, not an optional extra.

Billy Graham once said: **'When you come to Christ, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your heart. Something new is added to your life supernaturally. You are transformed by the renewing of your mind. A new power, a new dimension, a new ability to love, a new joy, a new peace – The Holy Spirit comes and lives the Christian life through you.'**

There may be some of you here tonight who've become Christians, but haven't allowed the Holy Spirit to fully take up residence in your heart.

I encourage you to ask to be filled by the Holy Spirit this Pentecost.

1. A New relationship
- 2. A new reach**

It's important to me that the Methodist Church is an inclusive denomination, and that Central Hall is a multi-cultural and diverse congregation.

This is how the Body of Christ should be and I urge you to work at ensuring we keep things that way.

Many churches find themselves becoming monochrome, as like-minded people of one culture or race group together.

However, for me, this church is a foretaste of what heaven will be like – it is a sign of the kingdom of God!

Remember when John Wesley was criticised for working outside parish boundaries he said, **'I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that His blessing attends it.'**

You see the Gospel is for all! That's why in Methodist Armenian theology we have what we call **'The Four Alls'** of Methodism that refutes the Calvinist teaching of a limited atonement.

All need to be saved – *doctrine of original sin.*

All can be saved – *by grace through faith*

All can know they are saved – *assurance*

All can be saved to the uttermost – *Christian perfection.*

In each case the emphasis is that it is offered to ALL who'll respond to God's love in Christ Jesus.

So, we get lines in Charles' hymns like '**Light and life for ALL he brings.**'

At Pentecost, we see a *new reach* of the Holy Spirit that had once only been given to particular people, for particular times, and for particular purposes.

Hear these verses from our reading today:

v1 'When the day of Pentecost came, they (*the 120 and not just the disciples*) were **ALL** together in one place.'

v2 '... a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the **whole** house ...'

v3 '... what seemed to be tongues of fire ... came to rest on **each** of them.'

v4 '**All** of them were filled with the Holy Spirit ...'

v5 'Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from **every nation under heaven.**'

v6 '... **each one** heard them speaking in his own language.'

v7 '... they asked: "Are not **ALL** these men who are speaking Galileans?"

v8 'Then how is it that **each of us** hears them in his own native language?'

v11 '**both Jews and converts to Judaism**'

v14 'Then Peter ... addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and **ALL** of you who live in Jerusalem, ...'

v17 '... God says, I will pour out my Spirit on **all** people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your **young** men will see visions, your **old** men will dream dreams.

v18 'Even on my servants, both **men and women**,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days, ...'

v21 'And **everyone** who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Get the message?

Many don't, because we haven't shared it!

Ordinary men and women received the Spirit of God falling upon them.

They were prepared to obey Christ and experienced a **new power** and transformation in their lives.

The Holy Spirit is for you – despite how inadequate you feel!

God wants willing, obedient, and open-hearted children and NOT experts!
God loves you, needs you, and can use you!

1. A New relationship 2. A new reach

3. A new radical discipleship

Those who received the Holy Spirit had a **new purpose** – a vision of love and of the kingdom of God.

This Church is here today because of what happened at Pentecost and because Christ's followers shared Christianity with all people.

The early Christians became world changers – and there's no reason we can't be the same.

Last night Bill Johnson told the story of a man petting a cat. Here's the gist of what I remember:

This guy was stroking the cat from the tail to the head ruffling the fur.

Someone said he shouldn't be doing that.

To which he replied, 'Well if the cat doesn't like it, tell it to turn around!'

Perhaps God wants us to turn around and point in a different direction, if we want to know his blessing in mission.

Tomorrow is the 50th anniversary of the death of the Revd Dr William Sangster – he died on Wesley Day, 24th May 1960.

In Sangster's day he would preach to a full Great Hall morning and evening – 3,000 people!

He cared pastorally for people and initiated work that related to people in wartime London, including an air-raid shelter at the basement of this building.

Are we as a church prepared to make radical changes to our life and work in order to reach as many people as possible with the good news of Jesus in word and deed?

Do we really yearn and pray for this church to be full again ... I mean really ache with longing ... or do you leave that to the ministers?

If we seek to be radical, culturally relevant, and faithful disciples, I believe that when the time is right, we will know even greater God's blessing upon our work, worship and witness.

We don't do this in our own strength: **'... you will receive POWER when the Holy Spirit comes on you; ...'**

The word in the Greek, here translated 'power' is DUNAMIS - the root word for 'Dynamic'.

Jesus had promised that the disciples would become a driving force, like a **dynamo**, And an explosive force, like **dynamite**.

Where is the 'Dunamis' in the Church today?

He wants us to burn with a passion for all those who do not know Christ; to be passionate about poverty and injustice; to be passionate about service and putting generous love into action; to turn away from our comfort zones and to be risk-takers.

'... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

If we don't think we are effective witnesses for Christ; if we find obedient Christian living hard, we must ask, are we committed enough and hungry for the Holy Spirit?

I close with some more words from Bill Johnson last night: **'Normally we get hungry by not eating. It's the opposite in the Kingdom of God – the more you feed on the Holy Spirit, the hungrier you become.'**

May all of us enter into the new era of the Holy Spirit and work together collaboratively in today's uncharted territory!

Let's be Christ's Body that isn't shaped by the culture we find ourselves in!

Rather, let's be God's radical people who become culture shapers, in a new relationship with God and each other, reaching out to all, that his kingdom may come on earth, as it is in heaven. **Amen.**

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