**Sermon – Pentecost – 23 May 2021 (St James Church)**

Acts 2:1-21 The power of the Holy Spirit

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|  | If you were around in the 1970s, what do you remember about them? As well as bell-bottom flares and Abba songs, |

you might also recall the power-struggle between the government and the coal miners. Miners’ strikes resulted in problems for coal-fired power stations, which led to power cuts [Cue cut lights in church]. I lived in Wales at the time, and mum and dad were ministers of a small chapel in the valleys. When miners were made redundant, the Church and community made food parcels for their families, many of whom were struggling to make ends meet. Couldn’t bake, couldn’t read, couldn’t see – couldn’t do anything with power. Power - when we think about that word it doesn’t have great connotations, so what sort of power did Jesus mean when he said to his followers, “*you will receive power when the HS comes upon you*.” (Acts 1:8). Today – Pentecost – marks the coming of the Holy Spirit and I want to reflect for a few moments on how God’s power (and by extension the power he gives to us through his HS) is different from, and sometimes at odds with, our human understanding of power (and I don’t mean the electrical kind). Power is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as ‘*the capacity or ability to direct the behaviour of others or the course of events’*. What image springs to mind when you think of power? Monarchy? Government? We know the bad examples from 20th Century history: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot etc. Even in our supposedly enlightened Western democracies, we can call to mind recent leaders who have had a detrimental influence on their countries and their people. There are notable exceptions, such as Mandela and Ghandi, but we have to face it: humanity doesn’t have a great track record of remaining untainted when power resides with a small number of people, and those people have little accountability. Yet power is often taken as the defining attribute for God: ‘*a powerless God would generally be perceived as useless*’(Macwilliams). If God is not powerful, then the implication is he is unable to restrain evil or prevent suffering. I want to suggest to you that Pentecost provides a foil for the misperception of power as the ability to dominate and control. If the abuse of power is the exercising of one will *at the expense of all others*, the difference with God is that his will is exercised *for the good of all others*. I also want to suggest that Pentecost represents a reversal of the Babel of Genesis 11, and that in the incarnation of Jesus and the arrival of the HS, we have two examples of power in its true form.

In Genesis 11, Babel was a *scattering of languages* by God to prevent an excessive accumulation of power. Pentecost by contrast is a *scattering of people*, who are filled with the power of HS, which empowers them share a message of love and hope, reconciliation and forgiveness to all those who would hear it, so that all nations have the opportunity to be brought together in Christ. I had a small insight into this many years ago, when I went to Communist Yugoslavia as a short-term missionary. I was just one of 10,000 missionaries going to different countries in Europe but who met together to pray and study the Bible for a week before we departed. Imagine praying in an auditorium with 10,000 other people from different countries. It wasn’t quiet! There was a hubbub of prayer, a babble or ‘Babel’ of prayer in different tongues from people who were about to go to different nations. God works by *empowering* people, not *overpowering* people like some autocratic dictator or oppressive monarch. In Jesus we see a self-emptying of power. Theologians use a Greek word for this, ‘*Kenosis*’. So what power does Christ have? Power to release hold of the trappings of power itself and give life and freedom to others by empowering human will. Power to not hoard power, but share it - to make humanity co-creators on this planet, with purpose and accountability. Power to forgive – such that even when we abused the power God had granted us, he still came to redeem us. Power to enable God to take the form of a man and walk with us as someone who is familiar with human suffering and life’s travails. Power to bring about the restoration of God’s Kingdom, the kingdom we have been longing for and hoping for and praying for, and in our cynicism thought we’d never see. God’s kingdom: where the balance of power is finally restored and the ‘*first shall be last and last shall be first’* (Matt 20:16).

Today, we still see examples of God’s self-emptying power working through his people. Some decades after the miners’ strike I found myself redundant with a young family, living near Bristol. There was a knock on the door and it was a food parcel from South Wales, from the same Chapel in the valleys who had given food parcels to the miners 20 years before. They’d heard I’d been made redundant and wanted to do what was in their power to do to help. They gave out of their poverty. Think back to those power cuts of the 1970s – needed power to live. Today we need the Holy Spirit’s power to live as God intended. There are two points to conclude. Firstly, perhaps God is asking us to let go of something that prevents us fully knowing him, maybe some trapping of human power. He invites to be filled with the empowering of his Holy Spirit. Come and be filled afresh with the HS and find a renewing of heart and mind, die to power’s allure to find that we might truly live in Christ. Secondly, like that scattering of people at the first Pentecost, Christ is calling each of us to reach out to our community, to share the good news of his forgiveness and his love, to welcome people to a place of faith, to help them find the hope and meaning they’ve longed for and can only truly find in Christ Jesus. To share God’s love through the self-giving, self-emptying power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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