

THE POWER OF GOD

Acts 2. 1-21

Romans 8. 22-27

John 15. 26-27, 16. 4b-15

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Pentecost, together with Christmas and Easter, is one of the three greatest solemn feasts of the Church; and yet it still requires explanation.

Firstly, the name: Pentecost is an ancient biblical name, meaning the fiftieth day ('Whitsunday' is an old English term, referring to the white robes that were used on Pentecost during Holy Baptism). Originally, Pentecost was the Jewish Feast of Weeks, mandated by the Torah and falling fifty days from the beginning of Passover.¹ At the beginning of the Passover, there was an offering of the first sheaf of the spring barley; and on Pentecost, the priest waved two new barley loaves before the Lord (Lev 23. 15-21). It was a day of joy and thanks for God's deliverance in the Exodus and for his continuing providence over the Chosen People.

In the course of time, Pentecost came to be regarded as the anniversary of the giving of the Law (that is, the Torah) to Moses on Mount Sinai. This only added to Israel's sense of the day's importance as a festival.

Given that the first disciples of our Lord were Jews, their experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus was naturally situated within the Jewish calendar, between Passover and Pentecost. So it was that during the first forty days after the discovery of Christ's empty tomb on the first Easter Sunday, our Lord impressed the full reality of his Resurrection on his disciples by many various appearances and proofs that he

¹ A 'week' of weeks (7 x 7 days, or 49 days), followed by the next and 50th day.

was alive. On the fortieth day, his appearances ceased with his Ascension into heaven.

During that climactic appearance, Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem. The disciples, still thinking in this-worldly messianic terms, asked him if at last he was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. He replied that it was not for them to know times and seasons, but said: 'you will receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon you'. Power for what? To be 'my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1. 6-8).

This came to pass ten days after his Ascension. On the Day of Pentecost, while thousands of pilgrims were entering Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks, the disciples were gathered in the Upper Room, where they had been accustomed to be with Christ. The Spirit of God descended with power. There was a violent wind and tongues as of fire.

But it was the transformation of the disciples that was most noticeable. They spoke the praises of God in the various languages of the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem. This itself was a miraculous sign of something still more remarkable; namely, that these formerly perplexed and frightened people, cowed by the enemies of our Lord, were now openly and boldly preaching him as Messiah and Christ.

If we had continued in our reading from Acts, we would have seen St Peter preaching the first explicitly Christian sermon in history, right in the centre of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. This is the same Peter who, fifty days earlier, denied Jesus three times to save his skin. We need to remember that Pontius Pilate was still governor of Judea. Annas and Caiaphas were still running the religious authority. Yet here is Peter, telling the world now that Christ's death was no accident, but God's plan.

Listen to what Peter said: ‘God raised (our Lord) up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power’ (Acts 2. 22-25).

The transformation of the Church on the Day of Pentecost is the strongest evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus himself. What can account for the change, for example, in Peter, from the Good Friday coward to the self-forgetful, bold witness fifty days later? People do not give their lives lightly, especially in the persistent commitment we see over and over in the apostolic Church, converting doubtful kin of Christ like James, or enemies of the Church like Saul of Tarsus into witnesses for our Lord and fellow apostles with Peter and the Twelve.

The power from on high did not stop with the passing of the apostolic generation, either. Jesus’s prophecy at his Ascension was fulfilled in due course. After two centuries of martyrdom, the Church was the most powerful spiritual force in the Roman Empire, converting eventually the emperors themselves. What followed was not without many troubles, but there came many glories that had been predicted by Christ himself. It is he who had said to his disciples, ‘The one who believes in me will ... do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father’ (Jn 14. 12). All this is the work of God the Holy Spirit.

The power of Pentecost produced Christian kingdoms and cultures, Christian art and architecture, heroic service to the sick and poor, intellectual insights and profound wisdom, deep prayer and mystic contemplation, self-sacrifice and missionary heroism. Christianity is now still the largest faith community on earth, growing rapidly in Asia and Africa, and yet we are said in the West to live in a ‘Post-Christian’ era of newly-found secularity and New Age spirituality.

I have a question for you. *Where is our Pentecost?* Just exactly where it was in the beginning, with the apostles. We are called to be open to receiving the Holy Spirit.

We are called to give the reasons for our faith and hope. We need to be able to share the Gospel and to make the case for what we believe. How much does it mean to us? The more it means to us, the more power we have to be its witnesses.

The more devoted we are to our Lord, the more open we are to receive the continued indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the more *power* we will receive to speak and live as Christians. That 'Post-Christian' world out there may be materially wealthy, but it suffers from starvation of the soul. Whether it knows this or not, it is hungry and thirsty for the food and drink of our Saviour.

Dear friends, we do not have to hear wind and see tongues as of fire here to know the power of Pentecost (although it might be very exciting to see those tongues on our heads). We need to believe Christ, to be open to the Holy Spirit and to let God have his way with us. Then Pentecost comes; and just watch what will happen.

Amen.