

“Power for witnessing” a sermon for Pentecost based on Acts 2:1-21 and John 20: 19-23 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 31 May 2020

It can be accessed from the Knox Church YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYksSjG0llf00NeogNIGs7A>

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Prayer - God who speaks every language of every people, crossing every barrier of ability and disability, we ask you, step into our lives as we seek your Spirit to empower and send us. In Christ. Amen.

A question – knowing what you now know about what happened at Pentecost, when the invitation came, would you have accepted that invitation? I have to confess that I might hover between yes and no. The possibility of being in a confined space with people thought to be drunk doesn't appeal to me. I've been with drunk people and they're unpredictable and at times scary. They're not inhibited by social expectations so you're not sure what they will say or do. And I wouldn't like to be thought of as drunk. And we know about the disorder, violent wind and tongues as of fire and the speaking in different languages. Whereas I like order. The two words used of Presbyterian process are “decency and order”. We like an agenda and guidelines, one person speaking at a time, people addressing the issue. but Pentecost was messy. And then the possibility that I might not understand what was happening to me because I had not experienced this before, speaking in languages that others understand. I like to be in control of my own behaviour and make thoughtful contributions. So if the invitation came, yes or no?

When we wonder about turning up at an event, much depends on who does the inviting. The disciples knew enough of Jesus to trust his invitation - “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ... “The invitation is to receive power, but do we want power? I know people who don't like the word because they have experienced power as power to direct or power over or the power that made them do what they don't want to do. And we may know the people who seem to like power, people whose egos need bolstering with something other than their natural gifts, people who like to control what happens, gatekeepers. They put us off power. And don't we already have enough power? Our congregation has a building to gather in, a history and a heritage and knowledge and a way of doing things that has worked for many

generations. We have good music and a mix of gifts and more. Maybe we can get by without the power of the Holy Spirit.

But the challenge is this – that we are called to more than what we ourselves can generate. To witness. And nothing I listed about the church will take us on to the street with Jesus for Jesus. Maybe we can talk about the church, but that's marketing. It's not witnessing. Those early disciples weren't exactly marketable. Judas had been one of the inner circle – how would they explain what he did? And Peter denied Jesus three times at the crucial moment. How would they explain that? And then when Jesus was crucified, they all ran away. There wasn't a lot here to market. As is so for us, their lives did not speak for themselves.

Witnessing is what comes from within, through the Spirit. Witnessing is pointing beyond ourselves to Jesus and what Jesus does in our world. For that, we need power, because none of this comes naturally. Power to overcome our hesitation to speak, because we don't want to be glib or simplistic or judgemental. Power to overcome barriers of culture and language and distrust. Power to receive the gospel from people we didn't expect to receive it from – religious Jews received from ignorant Galileans. The power of the Spirit created relationships beyond their natural circle.

At Pentecost a lot happened in the room – the wind, the tongues as of fire, the speaking in the languages of people. But much more happened on the street, where people were amazed by hearing their own language. I want to draw on thoughts from John Flett a New Zealander who teaches theology in Melbourne. He says that the Holy Spirit is not for our sake, but for the sake of the world, that the blessing we receive from Jesus is not for us for our sakes, but so that we can witness in our community. If we stay in the room, soaking in the spirit, inwardly focused, that is not Christian faith nor is it church. John ritualises that understanding. When he leads worship, near the end of the service for the pronouncement of the benediction, he asks people to face the door of the church, because the blessing is for people to be a blessing to their community.

Power for witnessing. The power of God's Spirit, the Spirit who renews creation, the Spirit who points to the wondrous work of Jesus in our world, the Spirit who makes us part of what God is doing. That is why we exist. That is what we are for. So the invitation – yes or no?

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