**Pentecost: 12th June 2011**

**Acts 2.1-21**

The last two weeks we have been looking at the work of the Holy Spirit. How the Greek word ‘paraclete’ could be translated as helper, comforter, counselor, and advocate and how those various translations may give different insights into the way the Spirit works in a believers life. Last week we reflected on the ascension of Jesus – Jesus leaving his disciples to it, to get on with his work on this earth but how he would still mysteriously be with them through His Spirit. They had to wait for the Spirit to come on them, to baptize them and to receive the power of the Spirit to be witnesses to Jesus to the ends of the earth. We considered last week what those phrases ‘baptize with the holy spirit’ and the power of the Holy Spirit meant in reality.

On Thursday of this week we had a visitor from the ends of the earth. Revd Nayak is a minister of the Church of North India and he had come to us as part of our world church link. Sadly not that many people came out to hear him. Revd Nayak has two churches in the Durgapur Diocese which is about a hundred miles west of Calcutta. His church ministers to the poor and the dispossessed. They work with slum kids; they try to empower women to give them skills to help them climb out poverty. He spends his week travelling from house to house sharing about Jesus, praying for healing, and teaching about the Christian faith.

Before the meeting he asked me what I wanted him to talk about. I said it would be good to be encouraged by your work. I said we in Britain live in a skeptical, grasping, insecure, materialistic culture and it gets us all down in the church because our prevailing culture, the attitudes and spirit in our society, is mostly at odds with the way of Jesus. Anything you can share with us to encourage us we would be grateful for.

I thought he would speak about his work and what the church over there did. Plans, strategies, activities. No, he hardly spoke about himself. He started by quoting the verse from 2 timothy 1 ‘for this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of god, which is in you through the laying on of hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self discipline’. He said we have the gold of faith within us but sometimes that gets tarnished and we need to rub it now and again and make it shine. He then quoted Isaiah 40 verse 31 ‘those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. He said sometimes we can be like birds who molt and shed their wings and feel grounded for a while. But the feathers grow back, stronger, and they soar again. He prayed we would hope in God, be filled with his spirit and soar again. Then he shut up.

As I prepared this sermon the other day I just broke down in tears. I hadn’t got it till then. There we were wanting to know about India, as if it was a geography lesson. Curious about how the church may be different to us or similar to us. Interested in what they do., getting frustrated that he wasn’t telling us that. It was easy to be prejudiced – to make fun of his Indian accent and mannerisms. Or to expect the moment when he would be asking us for money – though that moment never came. Instead he encouraged us to be open to the Spirit. I wept tears because I was humbled by this man and his witness and I am sad that you missed him.

We have our plans and activities but unless the Spirit of God is at work through them they will lack power. Unless the spirit of God is at work in us we will still be pulled by our sinful nature. Our self centeredness will win in the end.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the greatest Christian evangelist alive at the time called a special convocation. D L Moody summoned people to his hometown in Northfield Massachusetts for prayer and waiting on the Lord for a new endowment from on high. Moody who had started out his working life in the shoe business, had never received ordination but nevertheless was greatly used of God in America and Britain seeing hundreds come to Christ. He became a household name but always stayed humble. Hundreds came to his convocation. His talks were written down. This is some of what he said.

*Unless God attend the word in power, vain will be the attempt in preaching it. Human eloquence or persuasiveness of speech are the mere trappings of the dead. If the living spirit be absent, then prophet may preach to the bones in the valley, but it must be the breath of heaven that will cause the slain to live…*

*If we want the power to quicken our friends who are dead in sin, we must look to God, and not be looking to man to do it. If we look alone to ministers, if we look alone to Christ’s disciples to do this work, we shall be disappointed. If we look to the Spirit of God and expect it to come from him and him alone, then we shall honor the spirit and the spirit will do his work.*

*I cannot help but believe that there are many Christians who want to be more efficient in the Lord’s service. It is from the Holy Spirit that we may expect this power.*

When you look at the apostles that Jesus chose you can ask the question why did he choose them? Why didn’t he choose select rabbis, scholars of the law, gifted orators? Instead fishermen, tax collectors, zealots, ordinary men. No executive search process. No Lord Sugar weeding out the weak apprentices. These are the last peoel you would choose to start a religious movement. Of course Jesus did this on purpose. He knew it would be almost impossible for them to depend on their human ability; instead they would have to reach out to his promise of power from on high. He recognized that all too often the more educated people become, and the brighter they are, and the better their connections to human influence, money and power … the more they tend to look away from the power of god. They trust in god’s grace less and less.

Even worse is that in that upper room, waiting for this power were men of recent spiritual failure. Those who in the moment of crisis had deserted their leaders a few weeks ago. Would you want to build any kind of future on this group? I wouldn’t.

Yet they waited, in prayer, together in that upper room – for power. The issue is not our ability but rather our availability to the person of the Holy Spirit. Men and women who are truly used by God are necessarily humbled, because they know the true source of their strength.

There is no easy formula for making it happen, no magic word that you can say and, presto, there will be God. Our lives are unique and complex. Our life experiences have led us into many different places in life. Our abilities — and disabilities — to perceive and to relate are all different. The experience of the reality of God is likely to come to each of us in a way that is uniquely our own. It is always a mistake to try to have a religious experience just like someone else had, and it is always a mistake to try to require someone else to have an experience just like ours.

Our religious experiences are unique and personal. But there is a possibility for each of us. Each in our own way, we can experience the reality of God. The invisible reality of God is all around us. The Bible tells us that God is always trying to get through to us so that each of us can have an experience of the reality of God and live a life shaped by a relationship with God. That active presence of the invisible God is what the Bible calls the Holy Spirit.

It’s always a dangerous thing to set about giving hard and fast rules and prescriptions for letting the Holy Spirit empower your life. The imagery of the Spirit in the story of Pentecost is that of wind and fire. Jesus used these analogies elsewhere to describe how the Holy Spirit may act. *The winds blows where it will* he said in John 3– you can’t control it - just be open to catch it when it blows – get your sails up and wait for the wind. Where is the wind of the spirit at work? Get involved – feel the breeze!

From what I see and hear, the family café in this church on Wednesday mornings has really taken off and I do believe God’s Spirit is working in this place. About sixty adults and as many children came through the doors of the church in the three hours this week, majority of which have no church connection. Emma shared at the Gathering how one young mother was saying her oldest child is being taught about the big bang at school and although she can accept it scientifically she just feels their more to life. Emma shared with her about the God who is behind all of creation and who loves us and seeks to be in relationship with us.

As you know recently we baptized a little boy who was about to go in for a serious operation – and he has come through all clear. Health professionals are now meeting vulnerable clients down here. Stuff is happening - but it is hard work and help is needed – please get behind it because I sincerely believe God is behind it and if that is the case I want to go with the wind. Bit like cycling - it’s hard work cycling into the wind – opposed to the wind. Much better to cycle with it!

We can’t control the Spirit but we can wait and ask and be open and available for his prompting and movement. On Pentecost frail men and women were not just given help around the edges, but were filled with God the Holy Spirit. Who can deny that this is the great need in our churches today? This is what all pastors desperately require, starting with me. We need something with the mark of heaven upon it. Too much of our religious life is made up of programs and human ideas, talents and strategies. Of course all those have value. We have natural gifts and abilities, we need to act responsibly, be good stewards and all that. We can prayerfully plan and organize guided by the Spirit. But we need something from heaven itself. Something from God the Holy Spirit that fills and floods our lives otherwise this is all a game and pretty soon we will get resentful, religious niceties and routines. There is nothing from heaven.

The New Testament church was often chaotic and wild. Paul’s list of the holy Spirit’s gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 is in a letter where the Christians in Corinth were coping with divisions and splits because the rich didn’t respect the poor, and some thought they were more spiritual and superior than others and Paul is trying to hold them all together and say you all drink from the one Spirit – you all have different gifts, thank God for them and build one another up with them. Many churches decided that they don’t want disturbing nor to run the risk of becoming chaotic and wild and so ignore the gifts that God offers through the Holy Spirit. They would rather have a calm quiet life. It is very quiet in a grave. If someone offered you a gift would you say no thank you bit worried about what it will do to me/ no thank you bit scared of it. No thank you I want to stay as I am.

Your suspicions and fears are well founded. The Holy Spirit produces a climate that is anything but dull and ordinary. Fire is a compelling image of his work. Warming, exciting, glowing, energy, yet also burning and dangerous.

Two persons were talking together before a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The first man spoke in a voice which could be heard above the voice of the firemen: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church." To this the second responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire."

I am not issuing a call for fanaticism. I am not issuing a call to leave your brain at home so that you can’t be a thinking curious person. We don’t need musicians working up the congregation into frenzy. We don't need manipulated manifestations or counterfeit gifts. But we do need the real Holy Spirit upon us in power, in all our churches, of all denominations and traditions. He works in all sorts of ways - quiet ways as well as dramatic ways. Spectacular ways as well as gentle almost hidden ways. Different gifts, different ways. Let no despise your experience or make you feel inadequate. If you have decided to follow Christ, had a change of mind and heart (repent is the biblical word) and asked to receive the Holy Spirit, Christ is in you, the hope of glory. Be open to his work in your life and let us as a church keep praying and humbly asking God to pour out his Spirit on us a church and as a community and as nation that there will be a turning to love and compassion for one another and for God.

The Christian life, like the life of Jesus, is a combination of waiting and activity, of prayer and service. Balance our activities for God with time spent with God in expectant prayer and worship. Don’t neglect either. Ultimately we depend on the power of god

In a word as tormented and confused as ours we desperately need ‘something from heaven’

An elderly Chinese woman had two large pots, each hung on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck.
One of the pots had a crack in it while the other pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water.

At the end of the long walks from the stream to the house, the cracked pot arrived only half full.
For a full two years this went on daily, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water..

Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments.
But the poor cracked pot was ashamed  of its own imperfection, and miserable that it could only do ha lf of what it had been made to do

After two years of what it perceived to be bitter failure, it spoke to the woman one day by the stream.
'I am ashamed of myself, because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house.'

The old woman smiled, 'Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?'
'That's because I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we walk back, you water them.'
For two years I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table.
Without you being just the way you are, there would not be this beauty to grace the house.'

Each of us has our own unique flaw. But it's the cracks and flaws we each have that make our lives together so very interesting and rewarding..
You've just got to take each person for what they are and look for the good in them.
SO, to all of my cracked pot friends, have a great day and remember to smell the flowers on your side of the path!