**5th June 2011**

**Traditional service**

**Focus Scripture: Acts 1:1-11**

In the film Nanny McPheee with Emma Thompson and Colin Firth, Nanny McPhee is employed to look after some badly behaved children. Obviously they don’t like her at first and scheme to get rid of her. She’s on to them very quickly and one of the first things she says to them is: ‘when you need me but you don’t want me, then I have to stay. When you want me but don’t need me, then I won’t be there for you’.

The parallel is not exact with Jesus for we believe he is always here for us. Imagine how the disciples must have felt when they knew had to leave them ‘when they wanted him but didn’t need him’.

The ascension of Jesus is a bit of a handover. It’s like the son who has been working in his father’s business and one day the father comes to the store and says ‘son, I’m not going to be coming in as much anymore; you can handle things here.’ It was a day the son knew was coming, but could he handle it? Could he keep up the things that his father had begun?

Here, Jesus is making the handover to the disciples. This was the critical moment if the disciples were to fulfil Jesus plan. The disciples understood that if the work of Jesus was to go on, it would be up to them to do it. The body of Christ on earth was no, longer Jesus physical body, but the corporate body of believers. This remains true for us today.

Teresa of Avila a 16th century saint wrote:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ’s compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good, yours are the hands with which he is to bless... now’

The handover comes with the reassuring knowledge that we know the one who sits at the right hand of god and he knows us! In those times of life when all we can see is the muck and mire of daily existence, and when it seems that all life has to offer is one problem after another, we can lift our eyes. To believe in the ascension of Jesus is to believe that the one who is truly in charge of all life is God, the Creator, redeemer and sustainers of life. For those early Christians, as they undertook the mission to continue to spread the good news about Jesus, there must have been many times when they felt at their wits end and overwhelmed by the challenges at hand. In those times, it must have been a great comfort to remind themselves that they knew –and were known by – the one sitting at the right hand of god. And so it is for us.

If the disciples were to undertake this mission what were they do? What help could they receive. Jesus had promised that they would be filled with power of the Holy Spirit but they had to wait.

Waiting is not our strong suit. In our fast food, high speed ‘don’t just sit there, do something’ age, waiting is not something we do well. Waiting is too passive; we prefer to be active, taking charge. Waiting is the acknowledgement that we are not in control. William Willimon says ‘our waiting implies that the things which need doing in the world are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort. Some other empowerment is needed.

The disciples knew that without some help- they could not undertake the task of being Christ’s witnesses. So they waited for power to come. But their waiting was not empty time. It was filled with prayer. Some may argue that they could have spent their time more productively. They could have taken charge – planning, organising and getting things in order. Instead they prayed. For the disciples at that critical moment, prayer was the only use of their time... it served as a reminder of God’s presence and power in their lives. Prayer was reminder that it was God’s will, not their own, which they were seeking. Which is a lesson we all need to learn. How often do we set out on some well intentioned project without first getting our proper bearings?

Last week I looked at the Greek word that John in his gospel has Jesus using to describe the Holy Spirit. I said it could be translated into English as the Comforter, the counsellor, the helper, or the advocate. I looked at each word in turn and how it brings our different aspects for him person of the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives.

In this passage Jesus talks about baptising his followers in the Holy Spirit and that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them to be his witnesses.

The Greek word baptizo was used in pre Christian Greek. It meant to immerse and was used literally of scuppering a ship, sinking in the mud, and in the passive ‘to perish’, ‘to be overwhelmed’.

The most common use of it in the New Testament speaks of initial conversion, beginning the Christian life, leaving the old and starting the new life with Christ. Baptism is not to be seen as a bare external rite. The bible is full of attacks on the merely outward. Baptism includes the idea of sonship, entry into the kingdom, or incorporation into Christ, of reception of his Spirit, of justification (being in a right relationship to God).

Sometimes one word is used; sometimes another, but the whole complex belongs together. There are three strands which taken together make a person a Christian. There is the human side – repentance and faith. There is the divine side – reception of the Spirit, adoption into the family of God, forgiveness of sins, justification. There is the churchy side – baptism into the body of believers. All three belong together and are the necessary parts of initiation. As you read Acts of the Apostles you get all these three stages coming in different orders in time just so that those who like tidy theological schemes will be disappointed.

Pentecostalists and Charismatic’s have of course argued for a second experience, or blessing of the Holy Spirit. They have invariably called this the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They usually see the ability to speak in tongues as evidence of this. For me I think this is an inaccurate use of biblical terms and can confuse people and can contribute to division among the one people of the Spirit.

I well remember being at university and mixing with all sorts of young Christians from all sorts of backgrounds. Some from the Pentecostal side where urging me to be baptised in the Holy Spirit. I prayed desperately for God to do this but to no avail. Looking back I knew my motives for having such an experience were flawed – it was about keeping up appearances and trying to be seen as super spiritual.

In Acts 5.32 there is a very suggestive saying. That verse speaks of the Spirit ‘whom God has given to those who obey him’. This has in it the great truth that the measure of the spirit which a person can possess is conditioned by the kind of person they are. It means that the person who is honestly and humbly trying to do the will of God will experience more and more of the wonder of the Spirit. It means the living of the Christian life brings with it its own power.

However there is a reality behind our awkward use of expressions such as baptised with the Holy Spirit and filled with the Holy Spirit. It is tragic that many Christians have robbed themselves of blessing because they have distrusted, feared or despised the Pentecostal and charismatic movement. We can be satisfied with a low level of spirituality. We can prevent God from releasing us in prayer and praise and personal relationships; releasing us from the imprisonment of age long inhibitions and prejudices, We can get into the low expectations of not expecting to see God at work in conversions, in changing tough lives, in healing, in explicit guidance. We can be content to stay in lukewarm waters terrified to launch out into the deep experience of God.

In her book Tramp for the Lord, Corrie Ten Boom tells about an experience she had during her travels after World War II. During the war she was imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp at ravensbruck. There in that camp her sister died in the gas ovens. After the war was over she became an evangelist telling people about God’s powerful forgiving love. On one such occasion she was in Germany and after the sermon she greeted many people who were in the audience. A man came forward to shake her hand. Suddenly for Corri Ten Boom there was a flash of recognition as she identified him as one of the prison guards who had stood watch at the doors to the ovens were so many people including her sister were killed. Memories of that terrible time came flooding over her. The pain, the suffering, the grief. This is what she wrote: ‘I fumbled in my pocket rather than take his hand. My blood seemed to freeze. I knew I had to forgive if I wanted to receive God’s forgiveness, still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart’. She began to pray. She knew that she could not find the power to forgive, but she could at least raise her hand. Slowly she took his hand and when she did a rush of genuine forgiveness came over her. She said to him ‘I forgive you brother’. As she tells it ‘for a long moment we grasped each other’s hand, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, but did not have the power’.

How did she do that? What was the source of the power that enabled her to shake the hand and to forgive her former enemy? Of course it was the Holy Spirit working within her.

Is our experience of the Spirit a plunging under the waters of the spirit, an inundation of God, a vitality produced by him that could cause folk to wonder if we were drunk? Have we that power in prayer, that strength over temptation, that growing Christ likeness, which marked the communities of Christ in the New Testament and of which the one baptism was the outward bond.

The early reformers spoke of improving on their baptism, by which they meant ensuring that they had the reality as well as the symbol. It is to this full surrender to the Lord who is the Spirit, this openness to his sweeping through our lives that is associated with the baptism in the Spirit and the power of the Spirit.

5th June 2011

Contemporary Service

Focus Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

A school teacher once asked her class if they knew where Jesus lives. One precocious six year old raised his hand and confidently answers ‘Jesus lives in my bathroom Miss’.

‘Really – why do you say that Jesus lives in your bathroom’ inquired the teacher.

‘Because every morning my dad pounds on he door and shouts ‘Good lord are you still in there!’

The ascension of Jesus sees him leave the earth. He is not here in physical form, anymore. Yet he promises to the disciples that he leaves behind that he will always be with them by his Spirit and that they will continue his works and be his witnesses to the end of the world.

My daughter has just had a birthday party and her and her friends went to see the Pirates of the Caribbean 4 at the cinema. Personally i think they should have stopped after the first one! Our reading to day is from the book of Acts which is written by Luke the writer of the third gospel. In many ways he could have named this book the ‘deeds and teaching of king Jesus 2’ – not Jesus the second, but the second book about what the one and only Jesus did and taught and continues to do. The mysterious presence of Jesus fills in the spaces of every word in this book. He is announced as King and lord, not as an increasingly distant memory but as a living and powerful reality, a person who continues to act within the real world.

We call the book the Acts of the Apostles but in truth it is the ‘acts of Jesus II’.

Last week we started to look at the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. We looked at John chapter 14 where Jesus is recorded as describing the Spirit with the Greek word paraclete which could be translated into English as Comforter, counsellor, helper or Advocate and I explored the various ways the holy Sprit’s works in a believers life. Here are two more verbs to describe the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptise and receive power to witness.

Jesus said to those disciples before he ascended to heaven ‘John, as you know, baptized with water, but within the next few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’. He then later promises them that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them and bear witness to him to the ends of the earth.

The phrase ‘baptise with the Holy Spirit’ occurs only seven times in the New Testament. Six of them (Lk 3.16, Mtt 3.11, Jn 1.33, Mk 1.8, Acs 1.5 11.16) refer to the baptism with which John the Baptist promised the coming Messiah would bring. In contrast to his own water baptism which was a symbolic act of repentance and renewal Jesus would plunge them into the Holy Spirit.The only other reference to baptism in the spirit is Paul’s reference in 1 Corinthians 12.13 ‘by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one spirit. The church at Corinth was deeply divided between rich and poor and those who thought they were more spiritually superior to others because they could speak in tongues, or give prophecy or perform healings. But Paul says you all have the spirit of God.

Subsequent to the day of Pentecost Christians are not told to be baptised in the Spirit in the New Testament. Pentecost was the anointing of the original disciples. They had had Jesus alongside them. They now had the Spirit of Jesus within them. And the gift of the spirit made on that first Whit Sunday, has never been withdrawn. The spirit is available for all who repent and believe and are baptised into Christ.

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There are three strands which taken together make a person a Christian. There is the human side – repentance and faith. There is the divine side – reception of the spirit, adoption into the family God, forgiveness of sins, justification. There is the churchy side – baptism into the body of believers. All three belong together and are the necessary parts of initiation. As you read Acts of the Apostles you get all these three stages coning in different orders at time just so that those who like tidy theological schemes will be disappointed.

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David Wilkerson was an Amerfican evangelist best known for his book and the film Croos and the Switchblade.

He felt the [Holy Spirit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Spirit) move him with compassion, he was drawn to go to New York in February 1958. It was then that he began a street ministry to young [drug addicts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Substance_dependence) and [gang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gang#Gang_violence) members, which he continued into the 1960s. He died in April this year after he was involved in a car accident. Rev. Wilkerson's last blog post stated the following: "To those going through the valley and shadow of death, hear this word: Weeping will last through some dark, awful nights," he wrote, "and in that darkness you will soon hear the Father whisper, `I am with you. I cannot tell you why right now, but one day it will all make sense. You will see it was all part of my plan. It was no accident."

Graham Pulkingham was a liberal priest in the Episcopalian church of the united States. he felt powerless in the face of the depressed condition of the church and his neighborhood and of his longing for a deeper experience of God. He tells of how he met David Wilkerson and went with him to a home for rescued prostitutes which David’s organization looked after. ‘It was here that i received the power of the holy Spirit. Dave Wilkerson told me to kneel down. i knelt and they came across the room hurriedly. When their hands touched my head something inside of me leapt with gladness, and even the unusual manner of their prayer was not offensive . Almost immediately all awareness of the men and their prayers , of the room and even of myself was obliterated  by the immense presence of God’s power. He was unmistakably there, and my inner response was like the clatter of a bamboo wind chime in a gale. The very foundations of my soul shook violently. He bowed low before the greatness of God, and wept at his own unworthiness.

That is how Graham Pulkingham described the experience of God which revolutionised his Christian life,. There followed a new gladness, a new power in ministry, in healing, in preaching, a liberty in prayer and worship, a crossing of denominational boundaries and a wonderful experiment in community living.

Interpreters differ over whether the Holy Spirit was at work in the lives of ordinary believers prior to Pentecost in a lesser way or not at all, except for empowering for special tasks. On either view, something new that needed to be waited for was here. This powerful new work of the holy spirit after Pentecost brought several beneficial; results; more effectiveness in witness and ministry; effective proclamation of the gospel; power for victory over sin (acts 2.42-46; Rom 6.11-14, 8.13-14; Gal 2.20; Phil 3.10) power for victory over Satan and demonic forces (acts 2.42-46; 16.16-18; 2 Cor 10.3-4; Eph 6.10-18; 1 john 4.4) and a wide distribution of gifts for ministry (Acts 2.16-18; 1 Cor 12.7,11; 1 Pet 4.10). The disciples likely understood power in this context to include both power to preach the gospel effectively and also the power (through the holy spirit) to work miracles confirming the message. The same word Greek dynamis is used at least seven times in Acts to refer to power to work miracles in connection with the gospel proclamation.

The spirit was the source of day to day courage and power. Courage to meet dangerous situations; the Christian power to cope with life more adequately. The Christina eloquence when eloquence is needed; the Christian joy which was independent of circumstances are all alike ascribed to the work of the Hoy spirit.

In the first 13 chapters of the Acts there are more than forty references to the Holy Spirit. The early church was a spirit filled church and precisely therein lay its power.

Notice the subtle difference in verses 7 and 8 between the words ‘authority’ and ‘power’. God has all authority, and it is through him and form him that all ‘authorized rule in the world must flow. We don’t have ultimate authority; no human in whatever task or role ever does. It all comes from God. But what God’s people are promised is power. The word used here is dynamis, from which we get ‘dynamite’ we need power, just as Jesus first followers did, if we or they are to be his witnesses, to find ways of announcing to the world that he is already its rightful king and lord. And in the next chapter of Acts, next week, we see what that witness and that power are going to mean.

We are living between kingdoms. In the death and resurrection of Jesus he has been declared Lord over all yet we still wait for the time when the entire world is visibly and clearly living under God’s just and healing rule. The apostles are to go out as heralds, witnesses, not of someone who may become king at some point in the future, but of the one who has already been appointed and enthroned.

There is a legend that recounts the return of Jesus to heaven after His time on earth. He returned bearing the marks of his earthly pilgrim mage with its cruel cross and shameful death.

The angel Gabriel approached him and said ‘master, you must have suffered terribly for people down there.’

‘I did’, said Jesus.

And, continued Gabriel, ‘do they now know all about how you loved them and what you did for them?’

‘Oh no, said Jesus. Not yet. Right now only a handful of people in Palestine know.

Gabriel was perplexed. ‘Then what have you done to let all people now about your love for them?’

‘Well, I’ve asked Peter James and John and a few others to tell people about me. Those who are told will in turn tell others, and the gospel will be spread to the farthest reaches of the globe. Ultimately, all of humankind will hear about me and what I have done on their behalf’.

Gabriel frowned and looked sceptical. He knew that people weren’t dependable. ‘Yes’ he said. ‘But what if Peter and James and John grow weary/ what if the people who come after them forget? And what if way down in the twenty first century people get too busy to bother telling others about you. Haven’t you made any other plans?’

No I’ve not made any other plans, Gabriel.’ Jesus answered. ‘I’m counting on them.

It is said that the Christian faith is only one generation away from extinction. That’s because with each generation comes the renewed responsibility to take the good news of the gospel to the world.

**Opening prayer**

In his final hours, Jesus prayed

for those who would follow him saying,

“All mine are yours,

and yours are mine;

and I have been glorified in them.”

May the heart of Jesus beat on in us,

the beloved community of witnesses,

as we devote ourselves

to this moment of worship.

Amen.

**Prayer of confession**

People, why do

you stand looking up to the sky? Jesus has been

taken from you and Jesus will come again in and

through you.

When we focus on the acts of faith in our past

and neglect our living witness,

**forgive us and enter our lives with grace.**

When we become complacent or lazy

relying on shallow adrenaline for inspiration,

**forgive us and enter our lives with grace.**

When we fail to share the dream of Jesus

and rest in the comfort of our own salvation,

**forgive us and enter our lives with grace.**

**Words of assurance**

Jesus said, “And now I am no longer in the world,

but they are in the world.”

May we be in the world,

fully engaged in this time and place

as a community of witness.

And the Spirit of Jesus will be with us

protecting us,

making us one,

alive in us.

Christ is risen!

**Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Joining with all who seek love,

we give witness to the Great Love

that pulses through creation.

Filled with the Spirit of Christ,

we have no reason to look upward,

for we are empowered to bring

healing, justice, and shalom.

May this be our witness.

**We go to be Christ ones alive in this world.**

*(speak names together).*

**Opening Prayer**

Almighty God,

We come today reminded of your greatness and glory,

your sovereign power and eternal purpose

all expressed so wonderfully in Jesus Christ, our Lord:

Risen and Ascended.

We thank you for the wonder of Ascension,

that marvellous yet mysterious moment

in the life of the Apostles

which left them gazing heavenwards in confusion

yet departing in joy.

We thank you for the way that it brought the earthly ministry of Jesus

to a fitting conclusion;

signifying his oneness with you,

and demonstrating your final seal of approval

on all that he had done.

We thank you that through his Ascension

Jesus is now set free to be Lord of all:

no longer bound to a particular place or time,

but with us always - able to reach even to the ends of the earth.

We thank you that through his departing

Jesus prepared for his coming again:

through his Spirit,

his Church,

and his coming again in glory.

Gracious God,

Forgive us for so often failing

to grasp the wonder of Ascension,

for living each day as though it had never been.

Forgive the smallness of our vision,

the narrowness of our outlook,

the weakness of our love,

the nervousness of our witness,

our repeated failure to recognize

the fullness of your revelation in Christ.

Give us a deeper sense of wonder,

a stronger faith,

and a greater understanding of all you have done.

Father God, Like the Apostles,

we too will never fully understand

all Ascension means.

We accept, but we do not fully understand.

We believe, yet we have many questions.

Help us, despite our uncertainty,

to hold firm to the great truth

that the wonder of Christ Jesus goes far beyond

anything we can ever imagine,

and in that faith may we live each day

to his glory and honour: **AMEN**

**2.**

**Prayers Of Intercession**

You are free, Lord,

your Ascension has set you free:

free from the constraints of human existence,

outside the limitations of time and space;

free to be here with us now,

in our worship and fellowship;

and free to be with us always;

for in your freedom

you have bound yourself to us with a promise:

**“Lo! I am with you always**

**even to the very end of time.”**

We pray, Lord, for those

who need to feel you close,

who need the assurance of your love,

the encouragement of your Spirit. [Silence]

We pray for those who are persecuted,

who are discriminated against,

who are mocked because of their faith or race or colour. [Silence]

We pray for those who are imprisoned,

who are tortured,

who are exiled,

because they have fought, struggled and spoken out

for the rights of their people. [Silence]

We pray for those who are destitute,

who are hungry,

who are refugees,

because of the selfishness and apathy of the world. [Silence]

We pray for those who are filled with guilt,

who are broken-hearted,

who are perplexed,

because a relationship has gone wrong. [Silence]

We pray for those who are feeling fed up,

who are in discomfort,

who are afraid, because they are ill

in body, mind or spirit. [Silence]

We pray for those who are numbed,

who are angry

who are desolate

because they have been bereaved. [Silence]

We pray for those caught up in war,

and violence,

and hatred;

especially the innocent victims of these evils. [Silence]

We pray at this time of financial turmoil,

for those who have lost jobs,

those who struggle to pay bills,

and those who have the power to affect positive change. [Silence]

Be with us all, Lord:

in all our daily struggles

as we seek to follow you.

Be with us all, Lord:

in our periods of doubt and despair;

and in our times of happiness, health and loving.

Be with us all, Lord:

until that time

when in your in your Kingdom of Love

our joy will know no end: **AMEN**