

**Pentecost Sunday 23 May 2010**

**Christabel Gairdner**

Probably we all heard as much as we needed about power around the time of the General Election; *an unbridled bidding war for power*, one newspaper put it as Nick Clegg negotiated with Conservatives and Labour. That word *power* is often seen in an unfavourable light, perhaps because there's such universal misuse of it. But today, Pentecost, we can turn to look at a very different sort of power: that of the driving, compelling power of the Holy Spirit coming upon Peter and the other disciples, leading them to declare the truth about Christ before an incredulous audience.

At the beginning of Acts of the Apostles, Luke has Christ before his Ascension telling the disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the gift promised by His Father. One imagines those men left in a state of suspended animation, not sure what to expect or believe. It reminds me a little of long separations from our parents when young and sent away to school. While of course we were assured of their return there was always a niggling fear you might just be left there and all the assurances come to nothing. What were the disciples thinking as they huddled together in the upper room?

Yet whether or not they believed it, the promise of spiritual support in their loneliness, and power for the tasks that lay ahead of them had been specifically promised by Christ before his death. Matthew's Gospel ends with His words *I will be with you always, to the end of time*. Luke records Christ as saying *when the Holy Spirit comes you will be filled with power*. And John returns again and again in his Gospel – read chapters 14-16 particularly – to the promise that the disciples would not be left alone but that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit would be sent to them to lead them into all truth.

And so comes Pentecost and the fulfilment of those promises. The disciples finding themselves with a new courage, new *powers* to speak authoritatively of one whom, remember, they'd so lately deserted. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and as wonderfully documented in the thriller which is Acts, they were speaking now not only themselves as convinced and committed believers but persuading others that if they turned to Christ the same powers would be given.

An interesting theme in the Bible is, I think, that so often God chooses as his messengers those who seem inadequate or unsuited to their task. He singled out David the shepherd, for example. David who later became king rather than any of his brothers. Mary the mother of Jesus was quite unknown. And the disciples themselves: what was it that Jesus saw in those simple men that he chose *them* to be his special twelve – ultimately to be so influential, so '*power*'ful?

And is it those who have no illusions about their abilities who are the ones prepared to turn to God and ask for help? I think of the centurion in Luke's Gospel whose servant was ill. *Do not trouble further* he says to Jesus. *I am not worthy to have you come under*

*my roof.* Maybe that's why John has Christ saying to his disciples in his Gospel today, *I will send you the spirit of truth. The world cannot receive him because the world doesn't know him.* Is he saying that a world obsessed with its own *earthly* power and importance cannot easily receive that *divine* power that'll unite us with our Father in Heaven? Perhaps.

The word *power* in the New Testament seems to be the one which above all others characterises the *gift* of the Holy Spirit. Those visitors to Jerusalem at Pentecost became convinced of the truth of Jesus through the *power* of the Holy Spirit working in Peter; and that same truth has, I suggest, reached *us*, two thousand years on, not alone through knowledge/reasoning but through *the powerful* workings of God's Holy Spirit.

Critics of our faith may deny there *being* a Holy Spirit, but if so then they must account for the testimonies of Christians from that day of Pentecost to this who in one way or another have been 'charged' with its *power* in ways which while not perhaps as dramatic as the events of Pentecost are no less telling. Can we not recall ourselves occasions when in some way, and often of course through prayer, we were given power to rise, as it were, above our own level? Times when we found unexpected strength and courage to cope with personal loss or disaster; the power to speak up without fear in a difficult situation or make a decision that was to change the course of our lives? If any of you saw the film *Invictus* about Nelson Mandela, surely that was testimony to one who could exceed his own expectations and inspire others to do the same?

It makes for exciting reading, the *power* of the spirit being such a source of inspiration to those disciples, and to Paul, but we shouldn't forget that Christianity ever since Pentecost, has been a religion of *mission*, of *spreading the word*. The Holy Spirit led Peter and the eleven to speak up boldly for Christ, to declare what they knew to be true and spread the good news. It leads us to do the same. We believe the power of the Holy Spirit is, in the words of the late Hugh Montefiore, *that which makes our faith not something merely of intellectual conviction but a living reality*. Call Pentecost contemporary if you like, for the Holy Spirit leads us today as it led those disciples 2000 years ago - just as Jesus said it would - into *all truth*. A truth that we, as they, are to bear witness to, rejoice in, boldly to live out and eagerly to share.