

Pentecost Sunday, 28th May 2023 – Acts 2:1-21 ‘The Spirit enabled them’

November 1993. It was a cold Friday evening in Oxford, I was 21 years old, and I was about to give my first Christian talk. I was terrified. It was only a 5-minute ‘God slot’ to our outreach youth club, and the audience would be 2 or 3 fellow leaders plus 7 or 8 bored 14-year-olds, whose main source of enjoyment when opportunity arose was setting fire to the church bins and stealing stuff from the gift shop of any visitor attraction we went to on trips out.

I still remember one particularly disastrous trip to the local golf driving range, where after a tormented hour watching these lads swing golf clubs wildly round their heads and pleading with them not to throw golf balls at each other but to try and hit them into the large green field in front of the booths, we then discovered them in the minibus on the way back to church excitedly handing round one of those woolly club covers which they’d stolen from the shop, despite the fact that none of them owned any golf equipment. I think they spent the time trying to squeeze it over their heads – or rather their friend’s head – to wear it like a hat. Actually, despite all the disasters, what I remember most about that club, crazy as it often was, is that those lads also turned up every week and often gave us moments of great joy and deep spiritual insight. I still think about them sometimes, and where they ended up.... But anyway, I digress.

30 years later, I can still picture the moment that my talk started, and the small room where I gave it. I can’t remember what I talked about, and I very much suspect that would also be true of those 14-year-olds, who probably sat fidgeting while I fumbled and stumbled over a simple message which told them how much God loved them. That 5-minute talk probably only changed one person’s life in the room that night – mine. 30 years later, I sat down this week to try and write *this* talk and I found myself thinking about that first one, jotted in blue ink into a ring-bound notepad.

And the truth is, I still get that nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach: that mixture of awe, dread and excitement that God has tasked *me* with sharing something about his beautiful word to a bunch of people who are going to turn up or tune in, hoping to be fed. I’ve written more than 500 Sunday sermons, hundreds of other verbal and written reflections, I’ve preached in cathedrals and prisons – and yet every time I come to write a new talk, that sense is the same: Lord, at the moment I have nothing to set before the people, and I don’t know what you want me to say – please show me!

And somehow, he always does. Even now, I can’t quite explain it – but what it demonstrates, every week, year in, year out, is **the truth of this saying: God doesn’t call the one he equips; he equips the one that he calls.** (REPEAT)

You see, useful as it is, it’s not my experience, or my theology degree, or the vast back catalogue of sermons that gets me by every week – it helps, of course, but any preacher who comes to rely on those things quickly stops preaching effective sermons. In the end it still comes down to two things, **it *always* come down to two things: first, God has called me to do this. And second, God *always* equips those whom he calls.** That’s the faith bit – and it’s still the faith bit for me after 30 years of preaching and 1,000 talks and reflections. We come with a call, but also with empty hands – and God fills them.

Or to use the phrase in our iconic passage for today (v4): **‘the Spirit enabled them.’** Now, we know that the disciples already had a call. They first received it 3 years previously on the shore at Capernaum: ‘come, follow me,’ Jesus said, ‘and I will make you fish for people.’ But they’d also had that call renewed very recently, in two separate encounters with Jesus which we’ve looked at over

the last couple of weeks: in Galilee, where Jesus calls them to ‘make disciples of all nations’ (Mt 28:19) and then at the Ascension where he calls them to be his witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8). So, they had the call – but something was missing. Now they needed the power, the equipping, the enabling.

And at Pentecost, the enabling comes. It is a gift of God – a supernatural equipping to do what Jesus had called them to do. And again, we observe that they had lots of valuable experience – they’d spent 3 years with Jesus, they’d seen and learned and practised most of what they’d need to do after he’d gone back to heaven. But it wasn’t enough – they needed the empowering of God, they needed the Holy Spirit.

And when the Spirit comes, suddenly God takes that call, combines it with their experience, and now empowers it to be effective for him. He equips those whom he has called. In the case of the disciples, it begins with something that was totally outside of their experience – they were largely unschooled, as is noted later in the book of Acts, and yet somehow they found themselves speaking in languages that they did not know and had never learned.

This was exactly what was needed for their first mission event after Jesus had ascended to heaven. A global crowd was gathered, and this outpouring got their attention. They didn’t have to wander up and down with a placard or produce nicely printed fliers or offer free salt-beef bagels, God gave them the best strategy, and one they would never have thought of. And we know what happens next – many, many come to faith, the church is birthed, and the rest, as they say, is history.

But, in another sense, it’s not history – because the lesson is exactly the same today. We too operate on the same principles: God calls us, and then he equips those whom he calls. And can I stress that calling is not just for people like me. In Jesus’ kingdom, God calls everyone: first to follow Jesus, but then to serve Jesus. The gifts of the Spirit are for everybody, and they cover all types of things: generosity, encouragement, helping, administration, healing, prayer, wisdom and discernment.

My dream has long been – and still is, by the way – to see **a church where everyone plays a part, everybody contributes. But let’s take the pattern to heart.** First, God calls. We have to be listening to God. Listen for those divine nudges. It might not be to spend a life preaching and teaching – but you might have a passion that you’ve always wanted to offer God and which God can use. You might be drawn to a particular group of people or a particular place. Don’t reject these things as insignificant! It might, just might, be God’s call for you. For this time, *this* season in your life.

So listen out for those little nudges, which often reflect the calling of God. And when you sense them, then the next part is the hard bit: you have to dive in! You have to go for it – you may feel out of your depth, but let’s hear the lesson from Pentecost: God equips the one he calls, and not the other way round. That’s the faith bit. If you wait till you have all the experience you need, you’ll never do it, and both you and the kingdom of God miss out. If the calling is true, then God will equip you to do it.

So as we give thanks today for the pouring out of the Spirit, let’s remember that this is not just a story for then – it is for *now*, for every day, every season of the church’s life. God still calls ordinary women and men; and God still equips every one whom he calls. Perhaps some of you listening today have a nudge, a prompting – don’t ignore it! However big or small, take it seriously. Pray, get the advice of wise friends. And if you sense it’s real, then hear the encouragement from today’s passage: the Spirit enabled them – and will enable you, too. Amen.