

# Power in the Spirit

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Richard Dawson – 5<sup>th</sup> June, 2011

Acts 1<sup>6-14</sup>/ John 17<sup>1-11</sup>/

Three years ago at Christmas I had one of the worst experiences of my life. It wasn't an accident; it wasn't a work story; no one died but on that day I stood in Momona airport and said goodbye to my son Philip as he headed to America to be with his then fiancée. For him it was a time of great hope and joy and we tried to be as happy and as positive as we could. We knew this was right for him and we were so pleased with the woman who had agreed to marry him. For us, however, for us it was like a death. For us a whole third of our children walked away from easy contact; from joyful interaction; from just being together. I realised a number of things that day. I realise how much I loved Phil and my other children. I realised anew that love cannot be a selfish thing; that there must always be give along with take and it was our turn to give. I realise also how precious the time we have our children with us is – that I would've given anything for just another Saturday watching him play soccer or going to a movie with him and, I realised that God has had to go through something similar not just with us but with the whole Church. God has had to say goodbye to the Church so that it will grow up and you know, I think God understands what Fran and I went through that day.

As parents we will all face the time when we must let our children go. To a certain extent this begins to happen almost from the beginning since children naturally begin to assert their will very early on. 'No' means more than just 'No' for most very young children. Rather it means, 'I am discovering that I can determine things for myself and that I want to do this.' Having an identity is as much about having freedom as it is about anything else. Being free to determine things for myself is very important for young people who are growing into themselves. And this doesn't mean that there shouldn't be rules and boundaries but that learning

to respect those rules and boundaries requires an exercise of the will which cannot happen if we've allowed them no freedom to choose in their lives.

In many ways Jesus also leaves His fledgling Church at this point for much the same reason. It must be allowed to exercise its will in this new relationship with God which has been made possible through His death and resurrection. Jesus has made the way; He has cleared a path to God but we must walk that path. **God will not rob us of the joy of being ourselves in relationship with Him.**

Just as in a marriage husband and wife commit to each other for life **not to lose their will** in the other but to **blend that will** into a loving unity for the sake of a new relationship so God would have us enter into a relationship of discovery with Him where mistakes will be made on our behalf but which the new covenant in Christ is more than able to handle. If Christ could forgive the incredible betrayal of all the disciples during His trial and crucifixion then He will also be able to handle our betrayals from time to time.

The point is this... we the Church now have the task of working out our relationship with God in an atmosphere of freedom and choice. Again please don't hear me encouraging bad choices. I am not saying that God is happy for us to experiment with drug taking, theft and adultery. Rather I am suggesting that our passage today invites the Church into a wonderful experiment with God whereby we might find an amazing variety of ways of serving and witnessing to His love. But that is not what the disciples are looking for is it?

**<sup>6</sup>So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1)**

Why do they ask this question just as He is about to go? What are they looking for? They are looking for a King but why this? Because a King will be able to rule and will defend them against the forces of evil which are arraigned against them. In short, they are looking to have someone do the hard yards for them, for security, direction and provision. You see a kingdom doesn't just represent glory for the King. It also represents security for the subjects who choose to remain

under the protection of the King. And the fascinating thing is that it is precisely that security which Jesus will not offer them. Instead He says to them...

**“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. (Acts 1)**

In other words, ‘**No, this is not the time and you do not need to know the time when that will happen.**’ The new kingdom is not to be restored now. You will not be able to hide behind such a thing. You will not be able to conduct yourselves within the security of someone else’s rule. Indeed, Jesus seems to indicate elsewhere that God’s kingdom doesn’t even work like this. It is not like earthly kingdoms which establish territory and authority. Rather, says Jesus, ‘the Kingdom of God is within us...’ But why should this be?

Why won’t God do this for us? Why is it that God won’t come down and by His power simply wipe out the bad people and destroy the evil so that He reigns in a Kingdom which is secure and in a Kingdom in which we can live without evil? Why is it that we have to live in this dangerous world where life can be snuffed out so quickly and where what is so precious to us can be removed so easily? Even our flesh is so weak. Genes get mixed up, babies are born with serious defects, cells go wrong and form cancers, bits start failing after only 30 or 40 years. Why is it that we live in this dangerous, insecure place?

Jesus doesn’t answer this question specifically but He does offer the beginning of an answer in these words...

**<sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1)**

So God is not going to simply come down and make it all better. God is not going to make the pain go away immediately but we are going to receive power, power that will help us to witness to Jesus throughout the world. Now we don’t have a further conversation here between Jesus and His disciples but we might imagine some further questions which arise for the disciples. Wouldn’t a kingdom be better God? Wouldn’t just dealing with the problem using your power be quicker

God? Just say the Word and all evil can be done away with. Just zap the problem God and we can get on with much happier lives!

What I imagine the disciples are looking for and probably what we look for often is a very specific solution to very specific incidences of evil and, to a certain extent, it appears that this is the way Jesus works. After all, doesn’t He heal specific illnesses? Doesn’t he heal the lepers, the lame, the blind, the dumb, the deaf. Isn’t Jesus into people’s specific problems? Yes, of course he is and the lesson for us in this is that God’s love demands attention to the specific. God is interested in the specific; in the individual and in the local. The very incarnation teaches us this. But notice that these miraculous works were not the primary reason for the incarnation. Indeed, in many cases these works do not result in the furtherance of the gospel or even of a thankfulness in the person concerned. Of 10 lepers healed in Luke only one returns to give thanks to Jesus. We hear nothing again of the paralytic whom 4 friends bring to Jesus. Hundreds perhaps thousands come to Jesus to be healed at the height of His ministry and yet no one is left to support Him when He is crucified. God’s love is specific but what we learn from the Gospels is that specific solutions do not address a general problem.

Sin is not dealt with by the miracles – it is only dealt with by the death and resurrection of Jesus. This doesn’t make miracles unimportant but it should put them in perspective. We might have continued providing good nursing care for smallpox sufferers for many years but in the end a vaccine was by far the better solution. God, so it seems, is far more interested in a general solution to the problem of sin and that general solution is not to come and form a new earthly Kingdom of Israel which would provide strength and protection from a pagan world and, indeed, from an unbelieving Jewish one as well. We already know from Israel’s long history of kingship that establishing a kingdom does not deal comprehensively with evil. Even at its best under David, the Kingdom struggled if not with external threat certainly with internal division and strife.

What the disciples are effectively saying to Jesus here is that ‘If you were in charge of this world Jesus or at least of this nation – wouldn’t that make a difference?’ And Jesus, quite simply, says in short, being in charge might make a difference but it won’t change the essential nature things. Jesus rejects this offer

of Kingship for pretty much the same reasons He rejected Satan's offer of 'all the kingdoms of this world' which is that the offers weren't comprehensive enough – He wanted more! Jesus doesn't just want our citizenship – he wants our hearts as well. Kings, like the taxman, can only ask so much of a people. Jesus wants more than authority. He wants our heart as well.

A further problem with this whole approach to sin is that it tends to assume that it will be easy to separate the weeds from the good seed, the wheat from the chaff, sinners from the saint. The Gospels, however, are pretty clear that this just isn't the case. **The potency of sin in our life is not discerned by the absence of a single virtue or the presence of a single sin.** This was something the Pharisees did not understand. Often what we can see in a person represents nothing of what they are truly like. Thus Jesus would call some of the religious leaders of his day 'whitewashed tombs' and claim that ordinary people who were clearly 'sinners' were getting into heaven ahead of them because they were prepared to believe.

In short we don't generally cut off a hand because one of our fingers has become infected and neither can we deal with people based on the small knowledge we may have of their lives. God has full knowledge of us and His means of dealing with sin is quite different.

So what is God's solution? If not a Kingdom then what? Jesus offers instead... the Holy Spirit.

**<sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1)**

The Spirit is given and with the Spirit comes power. I am fascinated by the use of this word power because the NT is not shy of this word. In our critique of the world this word stand out. We are not happy with the way the world uses power and it has been traditional in some Christian circles to demonise the word – to make of it something that is essentially evil. But the NT does not. **Power is both necessary and, in most cases something good. Only sin makes power a force for evil.** Power, rather, is something we must live with and learn to handle. Even

worldly power is given by God for a purpose even if the world usurps that purpose occasionally for its own evil designs.

The key in this passage is, of course, what the power is for. It is to witness to Jesus. Why do we need power to do that? The passage is clear – we need power to achieve the kind of witness God wants the Church to be. We are not meant to be without this power. It is by power that we become witnesses for Christ. It is by power that God turns what is evil into something for the good. It is by power that we who are so timid with the Gospel will learn to be witness both here and to the world. Wherever weakness abounds God's power is able come in.

We need this power but the question remains, what is the nature of this power and I will not attempt to answer that today. Let me finish, however, with this.

I began by recalling how difficult it has been for Fran and I to see Philip shift to the States. However, as time has passed I've watched God take that pain and make something quite beautiful out of it. My own heart has been softened towards those who also face grief and loss of any sort. We've been able to relate in different ways to Liz and Michael and, as we've gone through this together our own relationship has strengthened.

In many ways we will continue to live with this sadness but it seems to me that the hole it leaves is a place God can fill if we will let Him.

What are the sadnesses and griefs you live with? Are you willing to ask God to fill those places? I promise you that if you will He will make something new and fresh and beautiful out of those places.