



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Empowered for ministry

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Acts 1:8

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

During my time at Wesley Mission, I have always considered this Service of Dedication to be very important, as we offer to God in prayer all those involved in separated ministry at Wesley Mission.

My own particular ministry has twin emphases:

- the daunting task of leading a large caring organisation
- being the recognisable leader of the church.

These two roles are not only complementary, but also difficult to separate. But what is true for me is also true for all in ministry as we seek to serve God at the centre of this great city.

As I look back over my own ministry, there are inevitably a number of special preaching occasions that stay in the memory. None is more important to me than when the Methodist Church invited me to preach at a Conference Ordination Service in 2005. That year about 90 people offered themselves in response to God's call and began a lifetime's journey of ministry:

- It was in the context of pledges and promises.
- It was in the setting of a supportive church.

In this high moment together at Wesley Mission, I turn to the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples are in Jerusalem, waiting for the Holy Spirit to be given. In Luke's second volume, a brief introduction summarises the period prior to the Ascension and sets the agenda for the next stage of the Apostles' journey—and, in a sense, for all of us.

Acts 1:8

'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

I want to explore how these words might have something to say to us in the particular context of the ministries we exercise here and throughout the wider life of Wesley Mission.

Our text reveals the stretch in the mind of the writer which is to the end of his immediate world. We could call it another kind of Great Commission that will be fulfilled through the Spirit. We remind ourselves in ministry that our calling is a long-distance race and not a sprint.

We too are in need of the outpouring of the Spirit, because we recognise the truth of the words of Jesus that “apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Let me offer three pointers as we begin this year together.

The essential core of ministry is continued

In his on-going work, Luke introduces this account of the beginnings and development of the church. He does so by saying to Theophilus that he is continuing where he left off.

I find it quite helpful to think about ministry in terms of the following:

- an indelible link with the past is undeniable
- an instructive call both back and forward is understandable
- an incentive of the Spirit is unchanging.

The link of Pentecost in our own ministry is clearly required, if we are to be effective in the continuing story of God’s people in our day.

In the biblical context, these words straddle the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gifting of the Holy Spirit in power.

It is this gift that both empowers the church and those who seek any kind of ministry.

We live in a disposable society and are obsessed with newness—so it does not easily fit in people’s minds when we talk about the essential core of ministry being something that is handed down. Each of you brings distinctive gifts in ministry and we affirm that we belong to a glorious succession which stretches back to the Apostles themselves.

None of this is to say that either our gifts or our lives are exactly the same. But it is to affirm that the origins of our ministry and the source of our calling have a unanimity which is derived from God’s great gift in the Holy Spirit. The same gift, then, is at work in the church and handed down through his ministry amongst us in each succeeding generation.

So we hold in our minds the thought that what we exercise is a continuation of the ministry of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. But our challenge is that we also recognise:

- the world is constantly changing and we cannot simply rely on old trusted ways—we must find new methods of reaching out to people in need and offering the good news of Jesus Christ
- words are taking on different forms—it is often texting rather than text that makes sense to a new generation. I continue to believe that we must find ways in each of our settings to ask what our ministry looks like in a totally new language
- our work in the wider Wesley Mission will need to be done very differently. The compassionate care and struggle for justice which marks out our witness present themselves in a situation of increasing levels of change.

So our succession in ministry is not going to be one of ‘what we do’ in terms of our timetable, but a much deeper and richer succession:

- a succession of truth ... the word of life!
- a succession of teaching and table, where the gospel is freely shared
- a succession of care and service—in churches, chaplaincy and community.

This whole area of succession relates to successors also! We live in a day when the role of ministry is complex and changing. During the whole of my ministry I would say that one of the chief causes of stress for those in ministry and leadership has been brought about by people who don't move on. Whether this is in ministry or any other kind of leadership, it is important that leaders move. We must let those who follow us provide the leadership that they are best able to offer.

The effective credentials of ministry are conferred

Jesus told the disciples to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. Too often in life we barge ahead, reluctant to wait—then we become discouraged when plans backfire. Jesus told the disciples to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit, without whose strength we will always flag and droop.

- Waiting is necessary because it confirms that God is in control ... calling is a gift, not a skill
- Waiting will reflect ministry at all points as it speaks of expectation and vision
- Waiting takes us back to the need for prayer and our seeking God from the outset

All of this sits alongside the need for on-going training, continual reading and meaningful oversight.

I have an individual who, for 7 years, has been an accompanied self-appraiser for me and has helped me in my thinking and praying—and particularly when I have had to face those challenges which come to us all in one form or another. From the days of reading Ken Leech's book *Soul Friend*, I have become convinced that spiritual direction ought to have a significant place in all our lives, especially those of us engaged in ministry.

- Pastoral skills need to be continually harnessed and new ones discovered, in order to help us handle the complexity of ministry
- Organisational skills do not belong to the select few. It is true that 'administration' is listed as a spiritual gift, but basic organisational skills must come with ministry. We must never use the concept of delegation as another way of talking about 'passing the buck'.
- Appropriate delegation is of course essential, but it involves recognising the right people and thinking through the relationship of such delegation and responsibility
- Continual fulfilment in ministry is what will sustain us when the going gets tough. Some aspects of ministry have dullness about them and there is no way of avoiding this—therefore, a gift of power is awfully relevant when we are working at such a coal face.

In Charles Williams' *He Came Down from Heaven*, Jesus departed, 'scattering promises of power'. The promise of power was in reply to a question about the kingdom. In the Upper Room, according to John, Jesus had already promised the Apostles that the Spirit of Truth would remind them of what he had taught them—and give them what they had not yet received.

Our worship this evening involves our dedication to God and it's good to draw on the resources that we all share together. My advice to ministers, chaplains and pastors is to remind yourself of who you are:

- Not an expert, but a servant of Christ
- Not a puppet, but a person with leadership skills
- Not a giant, but one of God's foot soldiers

Under this point, I offer one final thought—and not with a little hesitation for fear of sounding critical of others. One aspect of the essential credentials of ministry is a deep love for God. This cannot be instructed or even taught; it grows and develops out of our calling.

An early definition of a Methodist was one that John Wesley himself offered—that a Methodist is one who ‘had the Holy Spirit shed abroad in their heart’ and this authentic and defining mark controls everything else:

- It relates to our devotion and personal engagement with God himself
- It is a guiding and meaningful principle in relation to other people, both inside and outside the church
- It will always determine how we speak of others in ministry

The expanding character of ministry is compelled

The concentric circles of mission are outlined in this text and they are further explained in the account of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, which I think is a better title than the Acts of the Apostles.

- The early days up to Pentecost (Chapter 1)
- The Day of Pentecost (Chapter 2)
- The developing church (Chapter 4)
- The death of Stephen (Chapter 7)
- The scattering of the church (Chapter 8)
- The conversion of Saul (Chapter 9)
- The conversion of Cornelius (Chapter 10)
- To the ends of the world (Chapter 13 onwards)

When we examine the scriptures, we see at the heart of the whole of this journey is the work of the Spirit. So it is in the ministry of all of us.

- Of course it is not only geographical ... it extends to all aspects of life—both personally and in the community
- Ministry is always growing ... ordination, if that is our journey, is a lifelong commitment and doesn't cease with retirement
- We live in the interim between the Gift of the Spirit and the final coming of Jesus—and, in this period of time, we are captivated by a worldwide mission which must begin in the arena of our own small area.

This truth about the expanding character of ministry lives in tension with the earlier point—that the core of our ministry is handed down. We hold up two scriptures and examine them—and see that they both talk to each other when we think of mission and ministry, ie Hebrews 13:8 and Revelation 21. The temptation today is to value one at the expense of the other.

People will sometimes want us to oil the machinery and others will want us to forget the machinery and simply bring new ideas. The truth is that both matter!

Another aspect of our ministry must always understand the social fabric of our community and not only to note but also to handle the enormous amount of change people have to deal with. Too often the church is seen as the stable factor—and, therefore, change at church can be even more difficult to anticipate. What is true in the local church context is also true in terms of our chaplaincy care and other pastoral ministries.

This evening we reaffirm our commitment to God and ministry in this place. Our lives are set on a journey which involves a lifelong search for deeper meaning. May God the Holy Spirit guide you in your ministry with him. Such a ministry:

- Requires flexibility ... firm at the centre, but flexible at the edges ... too often people are firm and flexible in the wrong places
- Demands vision ... have the determination to carry vision through. We are not called to be an 'ideas' people, but those who catch the dream of mission in Christ and can see it through to completion
- Readiness for responsibility ... There is much talk about willingness to say 'No'. I am waiting for a conference or an event where the emphasis is upon a willingness to say 'Yes'.
- Capacity to make difficult decisions ... Because of the very nature of women and men who are called in ministry, this is sometimes a challenging aspect—but there are times when we have to make difficult decisions that can be unpopular amongst good people
- Maturity in all things ... God has never finished with us and is always calling us deeper into himself—and closer to the calling which is ours in Christ.

Cultural observers talk about the waning in the church's influence—at least in western culture and particularly in Europe, the United States and Australasia. However, I think it is true to say that we are living in a pivotal and defining age. It may be less religious, but these are exciting times to be involved in ministry.

When they talk about leaders and leadership in the church, most people focus on the leader's behaviour or skills and seek to offer ways to improve leadership style and methods ... so the emphasis is on the hands of the leader. However, we know that to lead in the way of Jesus there is a heart issue at stake. The truth here is not just for ministers, pastors and chaplains—it is for all of us!

We live in a culture that has set itself in the direction of 'give a little—take a lot'. This proposition is motivated by exactly the opposite—by the calling which we have been given in Christ.

Whatever our calling happens to be, it is a privilege. If that calling is abused, it will be taken from us—because that is the nature of a gift. For all of us, leading like Jesus Christ can only be accomplished by continuing to walk more closely with him in a relationship of trust and love. That is the way to a real legacy in ministry.