There are 28 Zechariahs in the Bible! The best-known is the one from whose writings we have just heard this evening. He came from a family of priests, and the book in the Bible that bears his name needs to be read alongside the neighbouring book of Haggai. Both of them were closely involved in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem following the return of the people of Israel from a period of 70 years exile in Babylon five centuries or so before the coming of Christ. His message came at a time when God’s people had lost heart and given up the task they had of rebuilding the temple, the great sign of God’s presence among his people. Zechariah encourages them to believe in God’s promises, to put him first, and to express that by getting on with the rebuilding and looking forward to a bright future.

His prophecy begins with eight ‘dream visions’ in chapters 1-6 and our reading this evening came from the first section of vision number 5, the vision of the gold lampstand, within which comes the verse that we are going to focus on in our time together this evening: ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts’.

God’s message through Zechariah is basically very simple. His people are not to be put off by the seeming impossibility of the task of rebuilding the temple nor by the overwhelming strength of those opposed to them completing the project. This is the encouragement which, in one way or another, God’s people need in every generation, isn’t it? Including us! Let this truth soak into your mind for a moment: as far as God is concerned, the impossibility of any task to which he calls us and the overwhelming strength of any opposition we might be facing are completely irrelevant.

I wonder if you have ever noticed what we might call the ‘Gideon principle’ at work. Remember Gideon? In Judges 6, an angel comes from God to recruit him to save the nation from the occupying forces of Midian. But despite being addressed by the angel, perhaps rather tongue in cheek, as “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior”, Gideon points out that “My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” But this doesn’t seem to matter one bit. On the contrary, it’s a positive advantage. He is God’s man, whether he likes it or not. So, later in the chapter, Gideon accepts the job and manages to get together a substantial army.

Far too substantial as it turns out. We read that ‘The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’ So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.’ Imagine the expression on Gideon’s face as he watches more than two-thirds of his army slope off! But God isn’t finished! ‘The Lord said to Gideon, “There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them out for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.” So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.”

Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.’ Which do you think God chose? The 9,700 who got down on their knees? Or the 300 who lapped with their hands? Yes, you’ve guessed it! ‘The Lord said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.”’

And, of course, as we go on to read, the three hundred were quite enough. The Midians were completely routed. You can read all about it in Judges 7. ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts’.
Why does God choose to do it like this? Well, as he explains to Gideon, ‘in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her’. As we saw last week when looking at Ezekiel 36, the perspective of the God we worship is that ‘It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name...’.

This is a theme which is picked up and developed in the New Testament, perhaps most clearly in the experience of the apostle Paul. Here’s what he has to say in 2 Corinthians 12.7-10: ‘...to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.’

Which leads me to ask us this rather difficult but important question. How relaxed about weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities? How much do such things get in the way of our doing what God wants us to do? You see, Paul could easily have concluded that the continued presence of whatever his weakness was meant that he wasn’t able to do what God had called him to do. ‘I’ll just wait until this has been sorted out...’ But no. The continued presence of his weakness was actually what enabled him to do what God had called him to do. Otherwise, why would the Lord have said ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness’?

It’s tough, isn’t it? We really don’t like weaknesses. We’re put off by insults. We try to avoid hardships. We’re discouraged by persecutions. We do all we can to steer clear of calamities. We prefer to be on top of things. We like to be in control. That’s not to say that we should never seek to be rid of the things that hold us back. It’s good to do what Paul did as three times he ‘appealed to the Lord about this’. And if God says ‘yes’, that’s fine. But it’s also OK if, for whatever reason, God says ‘no’. My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Let’s drop in on one more passage as we draw to a close. It’s a few weeks after Jesus’ resurrection. Jesus has been speaking to his followers about the kingdom of God. Acts 1.6-8 takes up the story: ‘So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 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.’

The disciples are expecting that now that Jesus has defeated death and returned to them, he’s going to set about sorting everything out. That he’s ‘going to put a bit of stick about’, as we might say. So, come on Jesus, ‘is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’

They’re thinking in terms of a return to the status quo before the Romans came along and invaded. Their vision is limited to that. But this isn’t what Jesus means by God’s kingdom. He doesn’t mean a political dominion, limited to trying to get things to work smoothly on the outside and which is only concerned with this life. He means a spiritual kingdom, God’s rule on the inside, God reigning over people’s hearts, a kingdom that is not limited to life on earth but goes on to include life for all eternity.

This doesn’t mean that God isn’t interested in what’s going on in, say, the Houses of Parliament or the Council House over there. Of course he is. One day he is going to exert his authority and judge the world. One day everything will be sorted out once and for all. One day all that is evil will be swallowed up and replaced by what is right and true and just. The precise date is a piece of information that he has chosen to keep to himself. All we know is that one day it will happen.

But meanwhile, God has his eye on an even greater goal. The extension of his rule into people’s hearts. So that what is right doesn’t have to be imposed from above but grows from within.

And this is the reason he will pour out his Holy Spirit. Not so that each of the disciples can fly around Jerusalem like a sort of spiritual Superman, beating up the Romans and leaping tall synagogues with a single bound. Biff! Zap! Pow! No. God will pour out his Spirit so that this inner rule of God can come about, first in them and then through them in others.
Look on to verse 8: ‘But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...’ Excellent. I like the sound of that. Maybe there’s some mileage in the spiritual Superman idea after all. But no. Jesus is very clear about what the power of the Holy Spirit is for. ‘...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...’

This is what the power of the Holy Spirit is for. The power of the Holy Spirit turns the likes of us into the witnesses of Jesus - that is to say, he transforms us into those whose lives demonstrate to others the evidence that Jesus is alive. By the sort of people we are. By the things we say. By what we do. With the aim of helping others to join us in submitting to his rule and becoming part of his kingdom.

Sometimes, as the stories about what went on in the early church tell us, it’s necessary for this evidence to be pretty spectacular. And maybe there’s scope for us ‘raise our game’ when it comes to our expectations of what, as we pray, the Holy Spirit is able to do through us to demonstrate the reality of who Jesus is.

But at other times, it’s more run-of-the-mill and straightforward. Sometimes the evidence is more about who we are and how we behave despite having to cope with the weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 12.

Either way, let us ask God to fill us afresh with his Spirit that we may receive the power we need to live lives that point to how wonderful Jesus is. That we in our generation may show that the principle God works by continues to be ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.’ To his praise and glory. Amen.

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