

Ascension Sermon
Ephesians 1:15-25
His Immeasurably Great Power for us who believe
Dr Stephen Pietsch

When I walk into Christian Bookshops like the one we have here in Adelaide, I am always struck by the titles that are put out on display, titles like “Harness the power of God in the life of your church” or “Tapping into the Power of the Spirit” -not that I have seen books with those exact titles, but very similar.

These titles are quite eye catching and compelling for a pastor, at least the first time you see them, because they promise so much. After all **power** is exactly what we need, isn't it? In our lives, in the church?

Power to overcome obstacles, power to live effective lives, power for mission!

Now there's a gaping hole – power for mission, in today's church which as far as external indicators go, seems to be weak and struggling – ineffectual some would say, because we are not harnessing the power of God.

We need to break through, overturn, transform, we are told, take hold of, claim the authority and power of God, over situations, over problems, over relationships, even over cities and towns.

God's power, Christ's power is very real. That is clear from the Bible. But the question is: how does this power work?

If it is God's power we need, and it is, then this is the text for us: Paul speaks here about God's power and its working in the world and in the those who believe. In verse 19 Paul uses four words here in a kind of crashendo, to describe the hugeness of God's power – immeasurably great power, the working of his mighty strength.

Today - the Ascension - is all about God's power raising Christ from death and exalting him to the highest place of power and authority in the entire universe – and not just as some reigning figurehead, but as a ruling king, present in and filling the whole cosmos. This is power, over every being, force and object in the entire cosmos; over death, over satan and his angels – over whom Christ's power has been demonstrated and exercised completely, so that now ascended, enthroned, crowned, lifted above all, Jesus' name is the name above all names, and all things are under his feet.

This, Paul says, is the immeasurably great power of God **for** us who believe. We read here that Christ's power exalts him far **above** all rulers and authorities, that all things are put **under** his, and that he is head **over** all things. But God has put his immeasurable power to work **for** us. God is not flexing his muscles, standing **over** us, subjecting us to his power, but his power to work **for** us (literally in the Greek text, **into** us), on our behalf, for our salvation, for our sharing in Christ's glory as we sit with him in the heavenly realms. It's our glorious inheritance, as newly adopted children of God, Paul says. It's wonderful.

But, many would say to us, let's ask that key question: are we using it? Are we really harnessing this immeasurable power of God in our lives and in the church, in our worship and outreach?

The answer is no, and we never will. Because it is not our role to take hold of God's power and use it. If we look at this text it does not take long to see that *we* don't harness God's power and put it to work.

It's the other way round: it harnesses us and puts us to work.

God's immeasurably great power works in us according to what, does Paul say? Our initiatives and wishes? Our vision for our ministry? No, according to the working of *his* (the Father's) great might, which *he* accomplished, and is still accomplishing in the church and the world, and the whole universe.

Notice here (especially verses 18-19) what the flow of traffic is: God is the subject of the sentence (the doer) and we are the objects (the receivers of God's doing) – he is the one who works, accomplishes and gives, calls, raises, enlightens. We only appear in the passive voice, as receivers of God's action.

It is God who deploys his immeasurably great power – and we who receive it and live and love in it and through it. In this way Jesus makes his power available to his people safely and without the very real danger of our human nature rising up to exploit and misuse it. You will receive power (Jesus says to his disciples before his ascension, in Acts 1:8) and on Pentecost day that is exactly what happened, and is still happening. The apostles received power to preach the Gospel to all nations, as God intended and planned for them to do. We too receive Jesus' power for the ministries and good works God has called us to do, but we never possess this power, as our own.

Instead through the Spirit's working, God's power works in us: we go on being enlightened (first in our baptism then continually, as we are led deeper into God's grace through his Word and into Christ himself through his Body and blood) we go on being called to show God's power in our work and our callings. We are given the gifts of wisdom and revelation and knowledge, and this powerfully works in us and through us in many mysterious ways, as we ourselves begin to see, as God "enlightens the eyes of our hearts" God is already at work with his immeasurable power, as we live our lives with him. He has harnessed our gifts, our skills, our minds and bodies, and even our suffering and our weaknesses, pouring his power into our families, into this community, into our church and the world, the places where he has put us.

And at this moment he has put us here in this place of worship where together with the whole universe, we kneel before Christ, because God has placed all things under his feet and made him head over the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.