

Pentecost 24 May 2015

Acts 2: 1-21; Psalm 104:26-36; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-16:15

[Day of Pentecost B May 24, 2015](#) Textweek

What is Pentecost? Is Pentecost a Christian festival, a Jewish festival or a pagan festival?

A brief, very brief, exploration of the origins gives us some interesting connections:

Pentecost, the word comes from the Ancient Greek: [Πεντηκοστή] for "the fiftieth [day]" and is the old Greek and Latin name for the Jewish harvest festival, Shavuot, which can be found in the Hebrew Bible. Shavuot is called the Festival of Weeks in Exodus 34:22 and Deuteronomy 16:10; and is also called the Festival of Reaping, Exodus 23:16, and Day of the First Fruits, Numbers 28:26.

According to Jewish tradition, Pentecost commemorates God giving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai fifty days after the Exodus. The Talmud derives this from a calculation based on Biblical Texts.

There is a Jewish tradition that David was born and died on Pentecost. This may be why, in Peter's speech that we have in the first reading he continues and from verse 29 refers to David's tomb and some of his quotes.

Later, in the Christian liturgical year, Pentecost became the feast commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Christ as described in the Acts of the Apostles that we had as our first reading today.

The feast is also called White Sunday, or *Whitsunday*, especially in England, where the following Monday was traditionally a public holiday, as per the tradition of Shavuot which also has a prohibition on working.

In England it took on some characteristics of Beltane, which originated from the pagan celebration of Summer's Day, the beginning of the summer half-year, in Europe. Whitsuntide, the week following Whitsunday, was one of three vacation weeks for the medieval serfs as it marked a pause in the agricultural year.

Beltane is mentioned in some of the earliest Irish literature and it is associated with important events in Irish mythology. It marked the beginning of summer and was when cattle were driven out to the summer pastures. Rituals were performed to protect the cattle, crops and people, and to encourage growth. Special bonfires were kindled, and their flames, smoke and ashes were deemed to have protective powers. The people and their cattle would walk around the bonfire or between two bonfires, and sometimes leap over the flames or embers. All household fires would be doused and then re-lit from the Beltane bonfire.

So there are a number of traditions and practices associated with Pentecost and when we ask "What is Pentecost" we can appreciate that it has changed over time and so we have permission to ask the question for ourselves in this time and place.

Starting with the gospel we have John's account of Jesus teaching the disciples about what we call, and celebrate as, Pentecost; *"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."*

It is a teaching to inspire the disciples, to stimulate, motivate, stir, encourage, enthuse, move, and arouse the disciples.

He is not teaching about Shavuot, for there is no mention of a harvest festival, or the Ten Commandments; and he's not teaching about the coming of summer and the movement of cattle, nor is he foreshadowing a public holiday.

He also does not mention flames of fire popping out above their heads and the appearance of multi-lingual abilities.

He is handing on the inspiration of Divine enlightenment, and asking the disciples to let go of him, and to trust in themselves: *"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."*

Luke, in the reading from Acts, provides us with a dramatic account of what Jesus has spoken about; and that's exactly what it is, a drama that has been crafted for those early listeners to fully appreciate the reality of what Jesus had taught them.

And woven into that drama, as we engage the unfolding story, we too find the inspiration that was handed on through the teaching of Jesus.

The enlightenment that is given through Christ illuminates a new appreciation of our relationship in and with the world; this Spirit is inclusive; and it leaves no one out.

The Spirit is illuminated not by the flame but in the ability to communicate with all; and communication by definition requires more than one; and so we are drawn out of individualism into a discovery of relationship, the "I" becomes the "We".

The enlightenment of Pentecost is made real when *"they were all together in one place"*; no one is left out, there are no refugees in this new worldview.

And again *"each one heard them speaking in the native language of each"*; all were attentive to each other, and again there were no foreigners.

Our inability to hear the 'other' is so often driven by our own sense of self-righteousness, here Pentecost unveils a new understanding and invites us to let go of our agendas and be attentive to the voice of all.

The more we engage this drama the more we begin question its reality, and just as we are about to write the whole thing off: we find ourselves mentioned in the play: *"others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine.""*; and so we are encouraged to stay with it and look even deeper.

Having experienced, or even encountered, the new truth that Easter reveals to humanity; that life is not bounded by death, and that birth from the tomb is a rolling away of the stone between us and a new Eden, a new version of the world; we are now being left on our own.

Once Jesus is ascended; that is, he is no longer with us; once the hot-cross buns give way to the other supermarket specials, we might just fill ourselves with new wine and go back to former times.

Pentecost is the reminder, for us to be inspired by all that we encountered; and to realise that Christ's teaching revealed more fully who we are.

Another drama that knows the reality of Pentecost is Shakespeare's Hamlet:
"What a piece of work are we[is man]! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! ". - (Act II, Scene II).

And we should remember; the enlightenment of Pentecost is made real when *"they were all together in one place"*; no one is left out, there are no refugees in this new worldview; this is your day and my day and our day.

In the drama of the first reading, Peter, a good Jew and so steeped in tradition, refers back to the prophets of old to further add weight to the reality the enlightenment he encountered in Christ: *"God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."*

Old, young, women and men, slaves and free; once again, no one is left out; and more than that Peter makes clear an orientation for all; *prophesy, visions and dreams* all these have a future orientation.

Easter brought together the life and teachings of Jesus; and we know, or have glimpsed much of what was revealed.

The church has made that a story about Jesus; but read it carefully and we'll see that Jesus was telling us about ourselves.

Pentecost makes this clear, rather than Pentecost being the birth of the Church; it is a very clear course correction for the Church.

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come"

When the Spirit of truth comes[when the penny drops], we will know we are enlivened "in Christ", and the future is entrusted to each and every one of us, and to each and every word we utter.

That future will find us together in one place... no one is left out, there are no refugees in this new worldview.

Be Inspired – and be an inspiration.

Peter Humphris