

## **Pentecost 2023 Mary Mags**

Pentecost was a Feast Day long before the time of Christ. In the Hebrew Bible it is called Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, and was to be celebrated on the fiftieth day after the Passover celebrations began. Hence the Greek word Pentecost, coined when the Jewish world was part of Hellenistic culture in the centuries immediately before the birth of Jesus. The Feast of Weeks combines an ancient, and probably original, celebration of and thanksgiving for the harvest, with a later and more profound commemoration of the giving of the Law on Sinai. The symbolism needs little explanation – a festival which ritualised the basic human need for food and produce became a celebration of the essential spiritual food which made the people of Israel who and what they were: the Law of the Lord was their meat and drink.

Preachers are used to demonstrating the easy continuity between the events, images and themes of the Old Testament and the use which New Testament writers make of them. For example, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 – 7 sees Jesus deliberately portrayed as the one who is giving the new law from the holy mountain, just as had happened in the Book of Exodus. In the Acts of the Apostles, however, the choice of Pentecost as the moment for the outpouring of the Spirit might seem slightly odd. We get little sense, in these extraordinary

events, that what is happening is the giving of a new law. Instead we are told something rather more like a new creation story, paralleling consciously the tale of the Tower of Babel, in which the overreaching ambition of humankind sees the world divided into different peoples and languages, a division which is reversed and overcome as the disciples are given power to proclaim the works of God in the many languages of those who had gathered for the festival.

We shouldn't be surprised at this oddity – the story of Pentecost is nothing if not startling, and the gift of God's spirit won't be packaged or predicted. But we should, I think, reflect that the twofold origin of the original Pentecost, Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, presents us with a challenge in our understanding of the Christian Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit. What had been the marking of something simple and basic turned into the drama of fire, wind, earthquake, thunder and lightning on the holy mountain, the literal carving in stone of the Ten Commandments so enthusiastically portrayed by Cecil B de Mille. Likewise, the story told by Luke which we read in Acts is one, but not the only, description of the giving of the Spirit in the New Testament. Our gospel reading, from John chapter twenty, is a contrasting account of the same thing. Here, the risen Christ, having appeared to his disciples in the upper room, performs a relatively

straightforward action – he breathes on his followers, and exhorts them to “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

We have then, two seemingly opposite poles. At one end, we have drama: the Spirit comes like a rushing, mighty wind, tongues of fire fall from heaven and the apostles are given the gift of speaking in different tongues. This is clearly, as Peter himself says, the pouring out of the spirit upon all flesh which is prophesied in the book of Joel. The end of the world seems to have come. And at the other end, we have something as simple as breathing. The gift of the spirit is, here, almost unnoticed. The action of giving is unremarkable. Both descriptions – the crash bang wallop of Acts, and the whispering of John – are equally real and equally significant.

The gift of the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the creative power of God. And nothing more powerful can be imagined. Small wonder, then, that the story of Pentecost is a dramatic one. We are watching the recreation of the world, the revivifying of all peoples so that glory of the Lord will be seen by all flesh together. But the creative power of God is also that which we take entirely for granted in every moment of our lives. It is something we assume, not something we notice. Something we rely upon, but something we cannot identify. It is the reason any of us lives. And it is the reason why there is anything at all.

To try to grasp the enormity of this truth might seem futile. But the writers of scripture don't think so. They have presented, through the narrative of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the story of the new creation which is the fulfilment of all God's promises to Israel. The Hebrew scriptures are retold, in every aspect of their story of salvation, and nothing is more important in the Hebrew Bible than the identification of the Lord as the maker of the heavens and the earth. So it is that the gospel writers find no more dramatic way of presenting the identity of Jesus than by showing him doing and saying that which the Lord, the God of Israel, does and says in the Old Testament. And so it is that the Pentecost story reverses the tower of Babel. But the gift of the Spirit as a new creation is also the breathing in of the breath of life to every human being, as first happens to the newly formed human creature in the creation story of Genesis. This breathing in is not a starting off and letting go, but the affirmation that every single moment of our existence depends on the creative love of God.

These connecting ideas, however, are far from enough. The great Christian feast of Pentecost is not simply a celebration of the Spirit, it is a celebration of the Spirit poured out upon the church, poured out upon each of us. And the challenging, even disconcerting truth which it offers, is that the gift of the Spirit – that gift which is given to you, to

me and to every Christian in baptism – is a gift as powerful, as earth shattering, as the very force of creation itself. Pause and reflect on that extraordinary notion.

Everything which characterizes your life, all the things which make you you, are the result of the Holy Spirit within you, the creative power which brings something from nothing in every aspect of our lives. God has poured out his spirit upon all flesh, upon you and me, so that all that is possible, all our blessings, all our weaknesses, all our joys and all our sorrows, are the living out of the Spirit of life. The drastic, incomprehensible truth is precisely that we take for granted, we live without noticing, the most remarkable thing about our lives as human beings restored in the image of God. It is not just that God gives us what we need, it is that there can, by definition, be nothing needful in creation which is not given by God, which is not the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is the gift which we celebrate today, that is the gift which every one of us enjoys, that is the responsibility of being the children of God, that is the challenge - the ultimate and terrifying and wonderful challenge – of living the Christian life.