

Pentecost

May 31, 2020

Pentecost is the great festival that marks the birth of the Christian Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish harvest festival that was celebrated on the fiftieth day of Passover. While they were indoors praying, a sound like that of a rushing wind filled the house, and tongues of fire descended and rested over each of their heads. This was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on human flesh promised by God through the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-29). The disciples were suddenly empowered to proclaim the gospel of the risen Christ. They went out into the streets of Jerusalem and began preaching to the crowds gathered for the festival. Not only did the disciples preach with boldness and vigor, but by a miracle of the Holy Spirit, they spoke in the native languages of the people present, many who had come from all corners of the Roman Empire. This created a sensation. The apostle Peter seized the moment and addressed the crowd, preaching to them about Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. The result was that about three thousand converts were baptized that day.

Some churches receive new members on Pentecost, commemorating the first baptized people that joined the church after Peter's Pentecost sermon. Centuries ago, in Britain, those joining the church wore white for baptism. So, this Sunday was called "White Sunday" or "Whitsunday."

What is the spiritual significance of Pentecost? What might God want to do in our lives and in our churches on Pentecost?

What difference does it make for us today that the first Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit two thousand years ago on the Jewish festival of Pentecost?

I will suggest two possible ways that Pentecost matters for us today.

1. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit is still taking place today. We might not all speak in tongues as the disciples did, but as Christians, we too live in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that helps us confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3), empowers us to serve God (1 Cor 12: 4-11), binds us together as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12: 12-13), helps us pray (Rom 8: 26), and even intercedes for us with God the Father (Rom 8: 27). The Holy Spirit guides us (Gal 5: 25), helping us to live in this changing world like Jesus (Gal 5: 22-23).

At a personal level, Pentecost presents us with the opportunity to consider how we are living each day. What is our support system? Are we relying on the power of God's Spirit? Are we that channel that the Holy Spirit uses to transform the world around us? How attentive are we to the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Are the fruits of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, etc.) growing in our lives? Pentecost offers a chance to confess our failure to live by the Spirit and to ask the Lord to fill us afresh with his power.

2. The role of the church in God's work in the world

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended individually on the disciples as they were gathered in Jerusalem. This gathering became the first Christian Church. New believers in Jesus were baptized as they joined this church. With the first disciples, they shared life together, focusing on teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. They shared their belongings so that no one was hungry or needy. As these first Christians lived out their new faith together, "the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2: 47). So, when we talk about Pentecost, we are talking about the birthday of the Church. The Holy Spirit is not only given to individuals, but also the people of God who were gathered.

Many Christians, especially those of us who have been influenced by the individualism of the Western culture, live as if the church is useful but not necessary. We seem to believe that as long as we have a personal relationship with God, everything else is secondary. But Pentecost is a vivid illustration of the truth that is found throughout Scripture: the community of God's people is central to God's work in the world. Thus, Pentecost invites us to consider our own participation in the fellowship, worship, and mission of the church. It is a time to renew our commitment to live as an essential member of the body of Christ, using our gifts to build the church and share the love and justice of Christ with the world.

Prayer

**Almighty God, who on this day
didst open the way of eternal life
to every race and nation
by the promised gift of thy Holy Spirit:
Shed abroad this gift throughout the world
by the preaching of the Gospel,
that it may reach to the ends of the earth;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth
with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.**