

## **Pentecost**

*"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:1-4 RSV)*

The event in the above verses describes what has commonly become known as the "birthday of the church"—the coming of the Holy Spirit, after the sacrifice of Jesus, on a much more widely available basis than it had been in the Old Testament era.

**Pentecost** was originally an Old Testament festival, since the time of Josephus, calculated as beginning on the fiftieth day after the beginning of Passover. In the Christian calendar, it falls on the seventh Sunday after Easter. It was called the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), and in the Old Testament was originally an agricultural festival celebrating and giving thanks for the "first fruits" of the early spring harvest (Lev 23, Exod 23, 34).

By the early New Testament period, it had gradually lost its association with agriculture and became associated with the celebration of God's creation of His people and their religious history. By the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the festival focused exclusively on God's gracious gift of *Torah* (the "Law") on Mount Sinai. It continues to be celebrated in this manner in modern Judaism.

While there are other references to **Pentecost** in the New Testament (*e.g.* 1 Cor 16:8), it is most significant in Acts 2 and the familiar scene of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those in the "upper room." The New Testament writers associate the events of Acts 2 with Pentecost, and relate it to the prophecies of Joel 2 and promises of Jesus (Acts 1:8). In both, the emphasis is on an empowerment through the Holy Spirit to enable the people of God to witness to Jesus the Christ.

There is much debate in some circles about exactly what happened at Pentecost, whether it is a repeatable event or only for the early church, or whether it should or should not become a paradigm for personal religious experience. Those who advocate it as a paradigm are sometimes termed Pentecostals, although that term usually refers more specifically to church traditions who advocate speaking in "tongues" or a special Spirit-inspired prayer or praise language.

In any case, what seems clear is that Pentecost represents God's gracious, enabling presence actively at work among His people, calling and enabling them to live out in dynamic ways the witness of being His people. Perhaps at this point there is direct contact with the Pentecost of Judaism, for in Judaism the Torah, God's instruction to His people, is the means by which they become His witness to the world.

The word "pentecost" is a Greek word meaning "fiftieth day." In most Christian traditions, Pentecost Sunday occurs 50 days following Easter Sunday (counting Easter Sunday since it is the first day of the week). Those 50 days span seven Sundays after

Easter, so Pentecost is the seventh Sunday after Easter (7 weeks times 7 days = 49 days, plus Pentecost Sunday). Since Easter is a “movable feast,” meaning that it occurs on different days in different years (it is tied to the lunar cycle while the calendar is solar based), Pentecost is also moveable. It can occur as early as May 10 and as late as June 13 (see The Church Year for current dates). Some Christian traditions, Eastern Orthodox for example, use a different religious calendar and so have different dates for much of the Christian Year.

The sanctuary color for Pentecost Sunday is red, the color of the church. Technically, red is used only for the Sunday of Pentecost, although some churches use red for the Sundays between Easter and Pentecost Sunday. The red symbolizes both the fire of Pentecost as well as the apostles and early followers of Jesus who were gathered in the Upper Room for the empowerment from God to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world. For Christians, Pentecost Sunday is a day to celebrate hope, a hope evoked by the knowledge that God through His Holy Spirit is at work among His people. It is a celebration of newness, of recreation, of renewal of purpose, mission, and calling as God’s people. It is a celebration of God’s ongoing work in the world. Yet, it is also a recognition that His work is done through His people as He pours out His presence upon them.

The Old Testament Lectionary reading for Pentecost Sunday from Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14) dramatically illustrates this sense of newness and renewal of mission. The reading from Isaiah 44:1-8 also connects renewal with the "breathing" of God in beautiful imagery of "streams in the desert" and the recreation of His exiled people. The reading from Genesis 11:1-9 emphasizes the restoration of community and unity of purpose that had been disrupted by sin and selfish ambition. The Psalm reading (104:24-34) is also in creation language that speaks of newness and renewal. The New Testament readings include Acts 2, as well as John 14:8-17, 16:5-15, 20:19-23, all of which carry through this theme of God-enabled mission in the world. The Epistle reading from 1 Corinthians 12:3-13 emphasizes the gifts of the Spirit that enable God’s work in the world.

This focus on the church’s mission to the world, and the enabling presence of God through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church to empower that mission, should provide a powerful impetus for churches, especially those in the evangelical traditions, to recover this season of the church year. There is tremendous opportunity to use this sacred time to call people to renewal through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.