

The Feast of Pentecost

Today, we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. A few words about the etymology (that is, the origin) of the word “Pentecost.”

Etymology

‘Pentecost’ is a Greek word meaning “fiftieth.” Originally, it referred to the Jewish festival *Shavuot* celebrated on the fiftieth day after the ‘Passover’ (which is “Holy Thursday” for Christians). ‘Pentecost’ is the Greek name for Hebrew *Shavuot*, literally “Weeks,” and is known as the “Feast of Weeks” (or ‘Pentecost’ in Greek). It is the spring harvest festival of the Israelites, and is a Jewish holiday.

Historical Context

Shavuot has both an agricultural and a spiritual meaning. Agriculturally, it marks the wheat harvest in the land of Israel (Exodus 34:22). And, spiritually, it commemorates the anniversary of the day when Yahweh gave the Torah (Law) to the people of Israel gathered at Mount Sinai. On Passover day, the people of Israel were liberated from their slavery in Egypt, and on *Shavuot*, that is, 49 days (7 weeks) after the liberation from Egypt, they were given the Torah, and they became God’s own chosen people. So, every year, on the fiftieth day after Passover, the Jewish people commemorated this agricultural and spiritual feast as instructed by Leviticus 23:15-17 and Numbers 28:26.

So, *Shavuot* (Pentecost) is the commemoration and celebration of the new life: the Law and the new harvest. Thus, on this day, the Jews offered the first fruits of the wheat and olive harvests to Yahweh in thanksgiving for the new **spiritual life** (the Torah) and the new **material blessing** (the harvest). Significantly, it is on this day that the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples and brings to birth a new community called the “Church.”

It is **St Luke who gives** a proper account of Pentecost, not in his Gospel, but in his second volume – the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:1-11). In this passage, Luke says that on the day of Pentecost (that is, on the fiftieth day after the Passover), the Holy Spirit of God descended upon the disciples gathered in Jerusalem, and the disciples started preaching boldly about Jesus, as prophet Joel had already foretold (Joel 2:28-32). People from all over the world, speaking different languages, heard and understood the preaching of the apostles in their own native languages (Acts 2:8 -11).

Theological Significance

Every religious experience is meant to lead the believers towards a transformation in their life. So, what significance does Pentecost have for us?

1) Baptism with the Holy Spirit

To be a Christian, to be an evangelizer, we need to be clothed with the power from above, the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49), and we need to ‘**breathe in**’ the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). The sacrament of baptism we received as infants was a baptism **by water** which invited us to belong

to the Body of Christ, the Church. However, to be able to live our life as a member of this Body of Christ, we need to “be baptized with **the Holy Spirit and fire**” (Luke 3:16). It is then that we are guided by the Spirit (Galatians 5:25) to be able to **bear the fruit** of the Spirit in our life. **The fruit of the spirit are:** love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). This should be the result of Pentecost in our life.

2) The Holy Spirit is Universal and Inclusive

The Holy Spirit descends upon **everyone** gathered in Jerusalem, irrespective of their religion, race, and nationality (Acts 2:8-11). This universalism or inclusiveness was a corrective measure to the narrow Jewish particularism & exclusivism of those days. The Jews believed that the people of other races and nations were not religious and, therefore, were excluded from God’s grace. The Jewish Book of Sirach even went to the extent of saying that the Samaritans are a “foolish people,” and they are not a “nation” (50: 25-26). The Holy Spirit demolishes this myth and corrects this aberration, by making even the Arabs, Egyptians, and Libyans, among others, understand the Word of God preached by the apostles on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10-11).

Yet another prejudice among some Jewish groups was that anyone who did not know the Law of Moses was a sinner. The great Jewish Rabi Hillel said that “an illiterate and ignorant person can never be religious.” Now, the Holy Spirit eliminates all these distinctions and discriminations based on religion, color, and race. If people from every nation have received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost irrespective of their religious or racial identities, then, every people and every land has now become a holy Land. It is not only Israel or Palestine that is holy, but even Mesopotamia, Libya, Asia, Africa, Canada are all holy Lands. We are all holy people. This spirituality of universalism and inclusiveness is yet another meaning of the feast of Pentecost.

3) The Holy Spirit is unmerited

The third and the final message that St Luke is giving us on this day of Pentecost is that the **Holy Spirit is unmerited**. God is gracious towards us in spite of our unworthiness. I don’t need to become “worthy” to receive the Holy Spirit; I am worthy by the very fact of being God’s child. According to the Jews, the people of other races and nations did not deserve or merit the Holy Spirit because they were pagans. However, God pours out his Spirit upon everyone gathered in Jerusalem, irrespective of their worthiness and unworthiness. It is we humans who categorize people as good or bad, moral or immoral, pure or impure, and worthy or unworthy. We all are God’s children because God is our Father and Mother (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2). By birth, no one is bad or impure. Our D N A (deoxyribonucleic acid) is divine, because Genesis 1: 27 says that God created humankind in his own image. Our DNA is divinity.

Summing Up

According to Luke’s report, people from all over the world heard and understood in **their own native language** what the apostles spoke (Acts 2:5-12). The renowned American theologian and author Brian D. McLaren writes:

“The Spirit of God … is multilingual. The Spirit isn’t restricted to one elite language or one superior culture, as almost everyone had assumed. Instead, the Spirit speaks to everyone everywhere in his or her native tongue.” (Quoted from his book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, New York, Jericho Books, 2014, p. 205).

So, the Feast of Pentecost invites us to the Gospel values of God's unconditional grace, inclusivity, and universalism.

Secondly, in the true spirit of *Shavuot*, we are invited to be grateful to God for the abundant life we continue to receive every day in our life: both material (our land and its resources) and spiritual (God's unmerited mercy). We should take nothing for granted, but develop an attitude of gratitude and humility. Amen.

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