

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My doctor cancelled a scheduled appointment with me for this past Monday because of a Jewish holiday, *Shevuot*. I had to look it up. It's sometimes called Pentecost (from the Greek word for 50 because it occurs 50 days after the first day of Passover, so that it is also referred to as the *Feast of Weeks* or *feast of the first fruits*). Our word Pentecost, however, refers to something different because it marks the 50th day after Easter and celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples and other followers of Jesus and represents the birth of the church. By contrast, the Jewish celebration occurs on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of *Sivan* (somewhere between May 15 and June 14) and marks the wheat harvest in Israel. On *Shevuot*, the Jews were given the Torah and became a nation committed to serving Yahweh, the God of Israel. So, another example of what the New Testament owes to the Old and the extent to which Judaism and Christianity are intimately intertwined.

However, that is still a long way around beginning a homily on the Day of Pentecost. I mention it only because it also marked the beginning of *my* study of the passage in Acts which is the principal lesson for today's Eucharist. It is a very familiar story, of course, but there is always something new we can discover about it, something to deepen faith and arouse new interest. For example, Jewish law dictated that observant Jews had to make several pilgrimages to Jerusalem annually: at *Passover* and the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* (in March and April); *The Feast of Weeks* (Pentecost) at the end of May or beginning of June; and *The Feast of Booths* in late September or early October. The Feast of Weeks or Pentecost was a harvest festival. Though Passover has a fixed date, the Feast of the Weeks does not because it depends upon the ripening of the grain.

If the Book of Acts followed immediately upon the Gospel of Luke rather than the Fourth Gospel, we would have a better understanding of its connection with Luke's gospel, as both have the same author. If this were the case, we'd be in a better position to see that rather than the words "now when the day of Pentecost had come" would better be expressed in the words of the angel to Mary in Luke: "the Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." This line actually fulfills the prophecy of John the Baptist that "he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire." The birth of the church in chapters 1 & 2 of Acts actually parallels the birth of Jesus in chapters 1 & 2 of the Gospel of Luke. And Jesus alluded to the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when he told his disciples to "wait in the city of Jerusalem until you are clothed with power from on high" (in Luke 24: verse 49). If Jesus began his ministry "spirit-filled," so does the church. The reading for this week is the first part of Peter's sermon which concludes with the indictment: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know certainly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

There are, of course, parallels between the first Christian Pentecost and Moses' experience in receiving the Law --- wind and fire at Pentecost and thunder and lightning on Sinai. Peter parallels Moses as God's spokesman. And Pentecost takes place in Jerusalem where Jesus was tempted and where he died.

The people gathered to observe the giving of the Spirit are presumably the 120 disciples mentioned in Acts chapter 1, verse 15. And the Spirit has a long lineage in the Old Testament going back to Creation itself when God breathed into the nostrils of humankind bringing life itself to God's created beings. God also breathed life into Israel, the first people of God, and their dead bones came to life in Ezekiel 37: 7-10. Here, then, God's great wind or breath breathes life into the new people of God: the church.

The outpouring of the Spirit, fulfilling the predictions of John the Baptist and Jesus, results in "the ability to speak in foreign tongues." This is because the crowd gathered there in Jerusalem represented Jews from the Diaspora, some of whom had acquired languages other than Hebrew in their new adopted locations. What we are witnessing, then, is "the restoration of the faithful remnant in Israel" at this critical juncture. Gentiles will be of interest, but only later. Here the entire group is made up of Jews; it's just that they come from all over the Mediterranean basin. God is keeping his word to his people, Israel, in sending the Holy Spirit to accompany the announcement of Peter. And Peter's pronouncement is based on a text from the Book of Joel. That passage tells us what Pentecost is about: "the outpouring of the prophetic Spirit, which marks the beginning of the 'last days' and an offer of salvation in Jesus' name." Those who are moved by Peter's preaching are baptized in the thousands in the name of Jesus "whom God raised from the dead and seated at his right hand." This marks the beginning of an age of "testimony, repentance and salvation for Israel ----- the God who created the heavens and the earth, who raised Jesus from the dead and poured out his Spirit, can be trusted to bring to completion the good work he has (already) begun."

Sources

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