

Pentecost – Fired Up!

Pentecost (the fiftieth day) was the name given to the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which fell on the 50th day after the Passover, when the first fruits of the corn harvest were presented. [Deuteronomy 16:9-14] In later times the commemoration of Moses' giving the Law was also added during the feast. As the scripture tells us the Feast of Weeks was a time of giving free-will offerings to God in proportions related to the blessings that were received from God from the grain harvest. It was a time for rejoicing before God in worship and thanksgiving for life and all its benefits from creation.

According to the Book of Acts it was during this Feast on Pentecost that the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles on the 50th day following the resurrection of Jesus. [[ii] Acts 2:1ff] The popular celebration for this feast on Sunday became known as Whitsunday in early church history and was ranked as the second important feast after Easter. In the Nicene canons (canon 20) the title of Pentecost was also used for the whole period between Easter and Whitsunday. It was during this paschal time when no fast was allowed, prayers were only made standing, and the Alleluia was sung more frequently. [The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, London Oxford University Press, NY and Toronto, pg. 1043, pg. 1456.]

The essence of this important day in summary is noted in Acts 2:1-4; *“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* Noting the sign of the “tongues of fire” and that they were enabled to speak in “other tongues”, to communicate to those around them from varying linguistic areas who were gathered for this popular festival, I would like to focus on these two points; Fired Up and Speak Up.

Fired up about what?

Pentecost can represent a lot of varied ideas and celebrations for religious communities and individuals. Briefly we have seen that it was a sacred time in our Jewish and Apostolic roots. For the Hebrews it was gratitude for the provisions of food and physical nourishment. For the Apostles, it was a unique awareness and coming of the presence of the Spirit of God. In Jewish custom it also became a time to include gratitude for the giving of the Law through Moses and the early church expanded it from one day to a whole season following Easter. In both cases these were primary days of celebration for acknowledging God's gifts for the people of God.

Growing up in the Pentecostal Tradition it was much more than a day or a season; it was the power of Pentecost in each believer's life that was demonstrated by the gift of speaking in other tongues. From this others could receive one or more of the nine gifts of the spirit named in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. Through these gifts, in outward and visible ways, they assume the posture of being ministers of God as they are gifted to serve in the Name of God. These outward manifestations were treated as ways of knowing that you were in God and God was in you.

When I later became a Baptist minister I was clearly taught that these kinds of manifestations had ceased. There was a clear distinction made between the “known tongues” witnessed to on the day of Pentecost and the “unknown tongues” that were practiced among the Corinthians. It was noted that later in 1 Corinthians 14 that Paul himself makes a clear distinction in tongues that speak not to men

but unto God since no man can understand them. He says that in the church he would rather speak five words people can understand rather than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. Not eliminating ecstatic language altogether, Paul ends chapter 14 by saying, *“Let all things be done decently and in order”*.

It was shortly after this that I became an Episcopal Priest. Sacraments were indeed the *“outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace”* [Book of Common Prayer, pg. 857] that were dispensed among the faithful by those who were ordained. Traditionally there are seven sacraments of which Jesus himself ordained two, Baptism and Holy Communion. The Sacrament of Confirmation is the rite in which one expresses a mature commitment to Christ and receives strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop. [Book of Common Prayer, pg. 860] It is also clear, however, that *“the ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons”* who are expected to serve *“according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world, and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.”* [Book of Common Prayer, pg. 855]

Obviously there are many more interpretations and nuances among other faiths regarding Pentecost and God’s Spirit. In almost every case it is clear that each group is fired up about and anxious to have you join them is seeing things, as they understand it. As I continued to mature and grow in my life of faith, I began to sense a greater and more central focus as to who I am and what I should really be about. Gradually my faith began to focus on God, especially as Jesus seemed to focus on what he called The Kingdom of God. Perhaps this is where we need to focus in order to claim to be followers of Jesus?

It’s All About God:

Surely the origin of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks held 50 days after the celebration of Passover, is all about God. Celebrating the Source of all that is and the phenomenal energy of the continuance of all life on our planet and the universe is our basic theme. By including the commemoration of Moses’ bringing the Law of God to his people reminds everyone of the ethical morality that is necessary for the individual and communal enjoyment of all that is given to us.

The story of Pentecost given to us in the Acts of the Apostles is all about God. The apostles and people who knew Jesus, as well as the crowds that had gathered for the Feast of Weeks, witnessed something that was hard for them to explain. The scripture in Acts tells us, *“Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting”* – they heard a sound like violent wind? *“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them”* – what seemed like tongues of fire on each of them? Can we even fully understand what is meant by; *“all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit”*? Being a situation that is complex and hard to explain, perhaps the tongues enabled those with differing linguistic abilities to understand what was being spoken? They were trying to explain God’s presence and action among them as best they could – it was all about God.

As a variety of religions have developed over the years, from my point of view, we may have lost a basic and important focus on God in our scriptures. By focusing on the human actions and reactions to God instead of God’s presence and actions among us, have we lost sight of the authentic story? In addition, religions have established rhetoric and requirements by enforcing codes and customs on the human response to God instead of simply reminding us of God’s love, care, and concern for us as the

people of God. Because of this many people have a fear of God as being judgmental with resulting punishment for their deeds. The fear of God in scriptures should convey more a spirit of respect than dread and can be more easily seen when the stories of scripture are primarily about God's activity and not our human response. My point is made in one of the Bible Dictionaries, *"While the normal meaning of fear as dread or terror is retained in the theological use of the terms, a special nuance of reverential awe or worshipful respect becomes the dominant notion."*

[<http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/fear.html>]

One of the most compassionate aspects of God's care for us is remembered, and frequently acted out, in the Liturgy on Thursday during Holy Week. It is the washing of feet by Jesus as beautifully described here by Samir Selmanovic, *"In my Christian denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we regularly participate in a reenactment of a quite peculiar event from the life of Jesus. In biblical times, a slave or a servant would wash the feet of all guests when they arrived as a practical courtesy, after they had trod unpaved dusty or muddy roads. One of the gospel writers reported that when all of the disciples arrived at the Last Supper, Jesus decided to show them God's glory. He got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he washed everyone's feet. And that was supposed to show God's glory? 'The full extent of it,' as the gospel writer puts it. That's why a basin and towel are, for me, the most potent symbols of Christian faith. They make me love God. From this story, I learn that instead of a Cosmic Big Kahuna, God turns out to be a Cosmic Servant, kneeling before creation with hands extended in humble service."* ["It's Really All About God; Reflections of a Muslim Atheist Jewish Christian", by Samir Selmanovic, from Chapter 6 – Your God is Too Big.]

Earlier in the Psalms the writer tells us that, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." [Psalm 46:1] In the Christian Scriptures Jesus was describing the loving care of God for his people when he said, *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"* [Luke 13:34] Out of our selfish concerns we too often entreat God as a Santa Claus in the skies by asking God to gift us and to do things for us. Instead we should be acting like the children of God by looking for ways to expand the care we are given and by seeking ways to share that love with others who lack the awareness of God in their own lives. We might be more productive and successful if we stop asking God to do things for us and start seeking and expecting God to do things with us and through us. As mature people of God we have the promise, *"Now to God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to the power that is at work within us, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."* [Ephesians 3:20-21] It is, after all, the power of God working in us that we celebrate in Pentecost today.

Speaking (tongues of fire)– from Monologue to Dialogue:

The early church, according to the book of Acts, tells us they became witnesses and held everything in common. [Acts 2:43-47] There was great unity of life among believers but not uniformity. There were a variety of gifts among them, both spiritually and materially. They pooled their resources, worshipped daily in the Temple, and ate meals together in their homes. Everyday their lives and the lives of many around them were being changed in many ways.

As time moved on and the message traveled to places farther away, things were not always as they were in the beginning. When their witness advanced into areas with different cultural understanding, adaptations were necessary to accommodate and assimilate their message and way of life. This

same freedom to adapt is even more necessary today with the speed of communications and our need for interdependence, not independence. We need that loving spirit of God to enable us to share our resources, spiritually and materially, in the maturity that is necessary to bring fullness of life and freedom to all. We need to stop speaking just to hear ourselves talk and learn to listen as others speak to us. The world needs dialogue, not monologue. A clear presentation of this notion is found in this video of a presentation made by Professor Leonard Swindler: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nu4ssQHRLP0&feature=youtube_gdata_player]

Knowing and understanding is never in the custody of any one individual or group and certainly not by any one religion or scientific authority. Comprehension and perception of information in our world today continues to change and grow more rapidly as time progresses. Discoveries and facts about every facet of our lives are so vast that specialties continually develop in all areas of learning to research and analyze the details. There is so much to talk about that dialogue and discussion is essential for clarification and explanation. Like the early Christians, we need, more than ever, to pool our resources, contemplate daily, and share our lives together in homes and larger gatherings all over the world.

Actions speak loudest (the blowing of a mighty wind):

Listening and Acting, I believe, are the true results of an experience of Pentecost. It has been said that we have two ears and only one mouth for a reason. Another important comment is that “actions speak louder than words”. A person’s verbal witness without the support of appropriate actions is often destroyed as illustrated by another common remark, “Your actions speak so loudly that I cannot hear what you are saying”. When a person has been empowered from within, like those who were filled with the Holy Spirit on that eventful day, it is natural to articulate in words and especially in actions that will demonstrate the all encompassing love of God for all people, everywhere, in all time and places.

However we may interpret or accept the accuracy of the account of Pentecost in the Book of Acts cannot negate the fact that this early group of Christians lived and spread their message of life to many areas of their world. Even with dissension among them and with a diversity of culture, this inclusive understanding of God’s love became the dominant religion of Rome. From the Scriptures it seems that the early church was about community. This powerful experience of God’s Spirit brought them together and the result was sharing everything together. How wonderful it might have been if this continued and became a part of the actual formation of the church that came to be. Unfortunately, as time went on self-centeredness and divisions became the rule. It seemed more important for people to be right rather than be together to share this gift we call life.

As our world becomes smaller will we be able to reclaim this possibility of community? Our economy, after our recent almost total collapse, demonstrates how much we are involved with each other. The Internet is another sign of global communications and interdependence. All the signs of life today seem to point to the fact that we need to learn to live together in harmony in spite of whatever our differences may be in more local environments. Since any denigration or violence effects us all it may be in everyone’s best interest to find ways to get along and share appropriately. I wish to suggest three simple, yet profound, words that might facilitate such a world - **Love, Care, and Peace**. If we were to practice these each day with gratitude and reverence as God extends Love, Care, and Peace to everyone, how might our world be different? I hope these three acronyms will give you further

consideration by which to meditate and reflect on what you might do as you realize - **It's All About God!**

LOVE – **L**imitless **O**fferings **V**eraciously **E**xpended

CARE – **C**onstantly **A**ppreciate and **R**espect **E**veryone

PEACE – **P**eople **E**nergizing **A**lternatives **C**ausing **E**quality

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.