

Day of Pentecost 2020

For the Jewish people Shavuot celebrates the revelation of the Five Books of the Torah, in the Jewish Bible by God to Moses and to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, a week of weeks (i.e. 7 lots of weeks - 49 days) after the Passover. For Greek Jews it was also known as Pentecost.

Pentecost means 50th in Greek - and so on the fiftieth day after Passover.

Shavuot has a double significance, agricultural and spiritual.

Agriculturally it marks the all-important wheat harvest in the Land of Israel and spiritually it commemorates the anniversary of the day when God gave the Torah to the nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai

On Passover, the people of Israel were freed from their enslavement to Pharaoh; on Shavuot or Pentecost, they were given the Torah and became a nation committed to serving God.

After the death of the Lord Jesus at Passover time, the Spirit is poured out on the whole community, who became the People of God, committed to living and spreading the news of the New Covenant of the love of Christ.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit was given to particular people for specific purposes, for prophets to prophesy, for the builders of the temple, and so on.

But on the Day of Pentecost the Spirit was for all those who believe - quite a dramatic shift, but prophesied by Joel , as Peter tells us in his sermon in Acts.

And we see the result.

.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ^{Acts 2.42}

So the Day of Pentecost was indeed the formation of the church, the Community of faith in Christ. Energised to live and die for the Good News.

At the moment our community is scattered, but it is still present, and I think we appreciate so much more what a great blessing the Community of Faith actually is.

Pentecost was and is, then, an extraordinary blessing. The Holy Spirit is God's own presence with us, as individuals and as community.

Not God watching at a distance. Not God as an interesting intellectual concept. No, but the Spirit as the experience of God's unique power. As when Jesus was actually present in person, but for all.

The disciples and their friends had been a small and vulnerable community. But on the day of Pentecost they no longer felt either small or vulnerable. They were ready to go out into the world.

The Holy Spirit did this. They had a personal experience of the intimacy and power of God. It was so amazing that they later struggled to convey what happened. They described it as a sound like a mighty, rushing wind which filled the whole building. Again they explained it as being like tongues of fire, resting on each head. That word "like" grapples with the difficulty of describing the actual nature of the Holy Spirit's arrival. It is beyond words yet they had to attempt to describe it in words.

Luke gives us two metaphors: Rushing wind and tongues of fire.

"When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were gathered together in one place. And suddenly there came a noise from heaven like a mighty, rushing wind, and it filled the building where they were sitting. And there appeared something like tongues of fire, distributed to all and resting on each. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, as the Spirit gave them speech." Acts 2: 1-4

Wind and fire? Using a metaphor is a much better way to describe the experience of the disciples than trying to employ a philosophical description. Metaphors take us closer to the truth than abstract statements. There is nothing abstract about the presence of God in our lives.

Wind and fire are two of the most beneficial yet also destructive forces in our world.

The gentle wind, the very air that keeps us alive, in motion and sweeping through our cities and across our countryside, refreshing all living creatures of the land. The warmth of fire, warming, cooking our food, giving light, and providing protection.

Yet as we know the wind in cyclone form can exhibit awesome power. And the power of fire when let loose in our bushland this last summer was profoundly, devastatingly destructive.

Wind and fire, the Holy Spirit of God resting on us and moving within us as individuals and communities. Astonishing power and love. A great metaphor for the presence as the holy, personal energy of God!

Thinking about the Holy Spirit on one hand should give us a sense of profound awe. The presence of the maker of all things, seen and unseen. Our source and our end. The One who reads our most secret thoughts.

There is a time to tremble with awe. And yet also the presence of the love, peace and healing of Christ in the Third Person of the Trinity - The Holy Spirit.

Today as our levels of anxiety and depression have increased significantly in our society, as we worry about our own health and how and even if our “normal” lives will ever return.

All of these things are circumstances beyond our control.

Our employment may disappear.

We may run out of good health.

By the accidents of life we may one day run out of friends.

Our love ones may leave or be taken from us.

Life may exhaust all our reserves of optimism.

And the hour will certainly come to all of us when we will have run out of time.

But there remains the ultimate constant. The Holy Spirit who is the ultimate Friend and Counsellor (as Jesus promised) will be with us always.

Come Holy Spirit, come!