

# The Feast of Pentecost

(May 31, 2020)

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor 12:3-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23

Today, we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. Let us begin our reflection on this Feast by first trying to understand the etymology (that is, literal meaning and the origin) of the word “Pentecost.”

## Etymology

‘Pentecost’ is a Greek word meaning “fiftieth.” It refers to the festival celebrated on the fiftieth day after the ‘Passover’ (“Holy Thursday” for Christians). ‘Pentecost’ is the Greek name for Hebrew *Shavuot*, literally “Weeks,” and is known as the “Feast of Weeks” or Pentecost. 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 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 Jewish people received in the form of both the Torah 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** in the form of the Torah and the new **material blessing** in the form of the new harvest. Significantly, it is on this day that the Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples giving them new life, thus giving birth to a new community called the “Church.”

## Biblical References

Now, a few words about the biblical references on the descent of the Holy Spirit. Matthew’s Gospel is silent about the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. As we reflected last Sunday on the feast of Ascension, the risen Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel does not ascend to heaven; instead, He stays on earth with the disciples (Mt 28:20). The Gospel of Mark too is silent about the event of the Pentecost. The original Gospel of Mark, as we reflected last Sunday, ends with the fear and silence of the women after they encountered the risen Jesus (Mark 16:8). Even the Longer Ending of Mark’s Gospel (16: 9-20) does not give us any account of the event of the Pentecost.

Coming to Luke’s Gospel, here too, there is no account of the Pentecost proper, except a statement by the risen Jesus that He **is sending** upon the apostles what His Father had promised, that is, “the power from on high” (Luke 24:49). However, this “sending” happens **not** fifty days later, but on the same day of Jesus’ resurrection (See Luke 24:13). Finally, we come to the Gospel according to John. In John, on the day of resurrection, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and sends them on mission. It is at this time that he breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). This is Johannine

Pentecost, and this takes place **not** fifty days later, but on the very same day of the resurrection (Read John 20:19), as it was in Luke's Gospel.

The upshot of all this is that Matthew and Mark are absolutely silent about the event of the Pentecost. And, while Luke's Gospel promises only a "sending what the Father has promised," the Johannine Jesus already breathes the Holy Spirit upon the disciples on the very same day of the resurrection. So, the question is: who gives us the account proper of the event of the Pentecost as the descent of the Holy Spirit that took place **fifty days after** the Passover?

It is Luke who gives us a proper account of Pentecost, but not in his Gospel; rather, 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, fifty days 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 languages.

Luke the evangelist is known as the evangelist of the Holy Spirit unlike Matthew or Mark. John the Baptist had already foretold in Luke's Gospel that "He will baptize you with the **Holy Spirit and fire**" (Luke 3:16). It is the Jesus of Luke's Gospel who had assured the disciples not to be anxious when they would be brought before the rulers and authorities because "the **Holy Spirit** will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say" (Luke 12:12-13). In the scholarly circle, Luke is known as the theologian of the Holy Spirit.

## **Theological Significance**

The preceding paragraphs gave us a bird's eye view into the biblical texts regarding the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. Now it is time to reflect upon the plausible theological significance of this feast for our Christian life and mission. As I said last Sunday with regard to the feast of Ascension, every religious experience should lead towards a transformation in the life of the believers. 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). Our baptism by water as infants was only a sacrament, making us members of the Body of Christ. 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/inclusive**

The Holy Spirit descends upon **everyone** gathered in Jerusalem, irrespective of their religion, race, and nationality. 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 Book of Sirach 50:25-26 say that even the Samaritans are a "foolish people," and they are not a "nation." The Holy Spirit

demolishes this myth and corrects this aberration, by making even the Arabs and the proselytes, among others, understand the Word of God on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10-11).

Yet another prejudice was that anyone who did not know or follow the Law of Moses was a sinner. The great Jewish Rabi Hillel once 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, race, and nationalities, and reveals to the Jewish Christian community that people of every nation are God’s children. And, if people from every nation have received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, 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. They 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 (that is, the Spirit is given to us freely)**

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. According to the Jews, the people of other races and nations did not deserve or merit the Holy Spirit because they were pagans and, therefore, sinners. 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. Basically, we are all God’s children because God is our Father (Mt 6:9; Lk 11:2). By birth, no one is bad or impure. Our D N A (the 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). So, **first of all**, to be a charismatic, it is not enough to just babble, but people need to understand what we speak. Leonardo Boff, the renowned Latin American theologian, observed, “The one who speaks in tongues is truly charismatic only if his or her speech is understandable to others.”

**Secondly**, in the true spirit of *Shavuot*, we should be grateful to God for the new and abundant life we continue to receive every year both materially (the land and its resources) and spiritually (the Word of God and God’s continued providential care). We should take nothing for granted, and develop an attitude of gratitude and humility. **Finally**, as the gift of the Spirit was given to everyone freely, we too must be able to give ourselves freely and generously to the service of others with fraternal concern, graciousness, inclusivity, and universalism. Amen.

**I wish you all a very happy feast of the Pentecost**

Vargheese IMS (vargheseims@gmail.com)