

Views from the Pews - Pentecost

In Jewish custom, Pentecost was an ancient festival called the Feast of Harvest, mentioned in Exodus (twice), Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It celebrated the beginning of the early wheat harvest, which meant that Pentecost always fell in spring. The High Priest took two loaves of freshly baked wheat bread, made from newly harvested wheat, and gratefully offered them before the Lord.

Pentecost was a pilgrim festival, which meant that, according to the Law, adult men would come from wherever they were living to Jerusalem and personally attend this celebration. It was also a holiday, so no ordinary work was to be done. Schools and shops were closed. It was a day to celebrate. The streets of Jerusalem were clogged with thousands of pilgrims who had come from every point of the compass to celebrate the goodness of God and the bringing in of the wheat harvest.

A few weeks earlier, Jesus' disciples had been distraught at the prospect of his imminent departure from them. John 14 is a heart-breaking account of how Jesus tried to console them, promising that:

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live..... I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

So, Acts 2 reports that, after they had witnessed Jesus returning to heaven, his followers were gathered together, as the Law required, for the Feast of Harvest. As promised, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, empowering them to carry out God's direct command which they had received at the Transfiguration, to tell the world that they had listened to the Son of God himself, and wanted everyone to know what he had said. Peter, the one who was always getting things wrong (even at the Transfiguration!) and who denied his Lord to save his skin, was the one chosen to stand up before thousands of people to proclaim the gospel, there in front of a Hebrew crowd that were already open to messages about the grace of God.

The transformation of the disciples at Pentecost was a truly dramatic demonstration of the power of God to change lives.

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