

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the Church, but is that correct?

The day the church was born?

OK...let's look at the small print first !

Pentecost Sunday is one of the movable feasts in the Church calendar.

This is because it depends on the date of Easter.

In the Church calendar it falls seven Sundays or 50 days after Easter Sunday.

Pentecost was traditionally known as Whitsun.

This comes from the term White Sunday, because historically people wore white gowns on Pentecost.

In some countries they still do.

The day after Whitsun was Whit Monday.

Now,

Bank Holidays were introduced into the United Kingdom by the Bank Holiday Act 1871, and Whit Monday was one of the first British Bank Holidays.

On this day, in many places around Britain, it was the custom that Sunday Schools went on parades carrying banners through the towns and villages and finished with a big party.

It was a time when all the churches of different traditions would come together for a big party, because Pentecost was considered the birthday party for the Church.

In 1971, the British government had reviewed the 1871 Bank Holiday Act on its 100th anniversary.

It was then decided to fix Whit Monday Bank Holiday as the last Monday in May.

Whit Monday became Late May or Spring Bank Holiday.

Now the Jewish connection!

Pentecost is actually the Greek term for the Jewish holiday Shavuot.

In the Jewish calendar the Passover (which is our Easter) was followed by Shavuot, which was called the Feast of Weeks, and it was the Jewish Harvest Festival for the first fruits of the wheat harvest in the Holy Land.

The Feast of Weeks lasted seven weeks.

The Hebrew words for seven and week are related, so it was a week of weeks or 49 days.

The Sabbath following a week of weeks is the 50th day, as explained in Leviticus 23.15–16.

The New Testament was written in Greek and the Greek for 50th is Πεντηκοστή (Pentēkostē), hence Pentecost.

End of small print!

Acts 2 tells us that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples.

Peter stood up and preached, telling the story of Jesus to the **crowds**.

That Jewish Harvest Festival was in fact, truly, **the first fruits of the great harvest of souls**.

According to Acts 2.41, ‘about three thousand were added to their number that day’.

These people were Jews of the diaspora, the scattered Jews and also some Gentile converts to Judaism.

They returned to their homelands and synagogues **with** the Gospel message.

That Gospel message was now in the hands of the people.

Jesus had passed on the baton to these new spirit filled Christians and those who were inspired by them to take that Gospel message of God’s unconditional love and his kingdom principles of justice, love and peace,

What a wonderful thing for God to do!

God’s timing was, as always, perfect

According to the list in Acts 2.9–11 the people returned to their places of origin in what is today, wait for it....to:

Greece and Italy in Europe; the Holy Land,

Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Arabia in the Middle East; as well as Egypt and Libya into deeper Africa.

Sometimes Jews also come from further afield as well.

A bit later we also read in Acts 8.27 of the Ethiopian eunuch who came to Jerusalem to worship.

In fact, these are the geographical areas where the Early Church was **strongest**.

So, was this day the birthday of the church...I don't think it can be!

A birthday is an anniversary of your birth. ...it's not your birth day is it?

Your first birthday is held a year **after** your birth day.

So, Pentecost was not the birthday, but the empowering of the early church.

So, when was the first church created?

The early church was birthed when Jesus aged 30, started walking, leaving behind Jewish ritual
(we have created our own rituals and rules today).

Jesus wore ordinary peasant clothes not holy robes or artifacts
(we created these robes we are wearing today in the 2/3rd Century AD and beyond).

Jesus walked strongly and purposefully away from the idea of clean and unclean...(we still have our stigmas and biased and prejudiced views today... so many of them, destructive and ungodly).

Jesus dismantled the whole structure of the Jewish faith
(and we have just restructured another in its place!).

Jesus' only accountability was to his Father God... I have accountability to many others in between me and God.

This was the early church.

It was called by John 'the Beloved Community'. I have the book!

If you read John's Gospel as being a part of Jesus' beloved community you become a part of it and it all starts to make sense.

It consisted of men, women and children, those unclean mentally and physically, pariahs, outcasts of no one's fault, but a misguided sense of all God's people must be clean... that still haunts us today, doesn't it?

And, it consisted of prostitutes, extremists, professional people, lawyers, dark and murky financial people, some who came to him at night, afraid of being seen, but acknowledging him as Lord, Master Saviour, and Messiah.

If we can move from being the institutional church, to the Beloved Community, this post Covid

I will hold my hands up to God and say...

Praise you, God of the Pentecost, our transforming empowering God! Because I believe, it truly needs to happen.

We are in a crisis. The Church is, but crisis is not something to be feared.

The church began with the crisis of the cross. God empties himself of all privilege and power, identifying fully with the oppressed and the marginalised.

And this leads to the crisis of not just an innocent man, but God himself, being nailed to a cross.

And those who followed Jesus have to just stand there and watch.

They have a front row seat to the injustice of this world.

But Jesus came back to them, to help these followers not get stuck in their trauma, but to get moving.

To let God's love heal them, and motivate them to go out and proclaim that God is Lord, and not Caesar.

And then another crisis comes, the crisis of Pentecost.

In the first century world that is run by patriarchy, and military power, and economic exploitation, (sounding familiar for today?)

In a world such as that, the Holy Spirit empowers this beloved community of Jesus to overcome those systems of oppression and violence that divide us by living with one another in love.

Pentecost isn't just about speaking in new ways that people hear us...

Pentecost is about living in new ways that bring people together, people who have been separated by the sins of patriarchy, classism, and racism.

And the institution of the church proper.

When such a community exists, it, we should pose a crisis, a threat, to the status quo of power, violence, and oppression.

If such a community existed today, it would present a crisis to our status quo. But the Church has always fallen short of this.

If you read Paul's letters, you learn that really fast.

It's important to remember that the church has never fully embodied this vision of a Beloved Community which is painted in Acts 2.

And so, in our own lives...

any one of us could name various examples, both large and small, personal and systematic, in which the Church did not fully live up to our identity as the Body of Christ. And we have lost people and hardened others.

This Pentecost, post Covid time. We have another chance.

To be who we will be in God's future reign of justice and mercy.

To be who we will be when the Holy Spirit has finished Her work of transforming us once more.

Into the beloved community of Jesus himself, Amen.