

Today the Church celebrates the Day of Pentecost, the culmination of Eastertide and the great Feast of the Holy Spirit. When we talk about celebrating, usually we mean celebrating the past. And we do have a glorious past. The arrival of the Holy Spirit in her fullness was an event of profound splendor, the account of which left the eloquent Saint Luke grasping for the right words, while emphasizing their inadequacy. The Spirit's arrival was *like* a rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house; divided tongues as *of* fire appeared among them, and one rested on each of them. Sacred art usually depicts the Twelve neatly arranged with a little orange flame sitting over each of their heads. Like most depictions of Pentecost, it literalizes a description that is explicitly figurative.

Anyway, the Pentecost event itself has a glorious past. Its very name was appropriated from the Jewish festival commemorating God's gift of the Law, saving the people from the terrors of anarchy and tyranny. That festival also has a material dimension. The Jewish festival was originally a harvest festival, 49 or 50 days after Passover, observed with the giving of the first fruits of the wheat harvest, which is an act of profound faith. If we are inclined to make a gift to God, usually we feel comfortable seeing what God will do for us and then giving from what's left over, giving what we think we won't miss. An unambiguous sign of faith is to give to God first and unconditionally, especially in a place and time when people lived much closer to starvation than we ever do, and with far fewer options if they fell on hard times.

When the Jewish festival became fused with the celebration of the Torah, it also gained an association with economic justice, for the same Torah commands that the harvest not be complete, but leave sustenance for the poor and the alien. On Thursday at Bible Study, I was thrilled to hear the story one parishioner told us of how her father, who raised corn, insisted on not picking his fields clean for that very reason, even though he wasn't Jewish. Symbolically, Christians also can see in our celebration of Pentecost an echo of the gift of prophecy to the seventy elders, or a reversal of the curse of Babel, with God destroying the language barrier originally handed down as a punishment for humanity's arrogance. We can see a realization of Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones restored to life by a divine wind. We can see a new gift of life, to do as much for those already alive as the breath of God did for a lump of clay named Adam.\*

So now you see why I resist our efforts at taming the supernatural, even as I still appreciate traditional sacred art. We don't need to be distracted from one of the most basic concepts which should be front and center in this scene: God loves us, and empowers us, but not for our own benefit. In its very foundation, the Church is not for the affirmation of her members, but for the revelation of God's love to the world. Church is not about us. Worship is not about us. The Christian life is not about Christians. We are filled with the Holy Spirit through word, sacrament, prayer, and Christian love, not to retain that Spirit, but to spread her abroad, to the ends of the Earth, no matter the cost

to ourselves.

Jesus foreshadowed the Pentecost moment at another festival, the Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles, where water was brought “from the Pool of Siloam to the Temple, as a reminder of the water which sprang forth from the rock in the wilderness.”\*\* Jesus reinterpreted this symbolic ritual, describing a time when, filled with the Spirit, his followers would share her with the world, like streams of living water flowing from our hearts. So our celebration of Pentecost is not just a celebration of the past, but also a celebration of what God is doing for us now, and what we believe in faith that God will do for us in the future — celebrating in the humility of knowing that we are celebrating God’s deeds, done for God’s purposes, and the joy of being in a covenant with God, a covenant that became open for anyone to join on that day.

Unlike on the Day of Pentecost, God’s presence in the world today can be overlooked. Even Christians can succumb to this despair. We should know better, but we’re only human. And when we make that mistake, we capitulate to the pessimism that would be appropriate if God were not present, living and active, in our hearts. That grim misconception can easily be dispelled whenever we remember, and whenever we see, how God is still transforming the world, and every act of charity, every word of encouragement, blessing, and Christian love, is a whispered breath of hope, a shaft of fiery Pentecost light driving out the darkness of the world. Just as she did on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit is giving the world her leaders, creating common dialogue and common purpose for the glorious realization of God’s plan for creation. This news is too good to keep to ourselves, so I pray that you take on for yourself the mission of sharing the good news that began on the first Pentecost day.

\*Paraphrased from

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/06/pentecost-and-shavuot.html>

\*\*<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/apentm.shtml>