

Today is Pentecost! One of the biggest celebrations of the Christian year. But what exactly is Pentecost, and what were its roots? Today I want to do a bit of detective work about the origins and meanings of Pentecost.

Pentecost is actually a New Testament word for an Old Testament Harvest Festival. Long before it has any associations with the Holy Spirit and the early Church, that's what it meant. Back in the OT, it's called the 'Feast of Weeks'. And during the Feast of Weeks the community would celebrate the safe arrival of the grain harvest with a one-day festival.

And because it was about thanking God for his faithfulness to them at harvest time, it became a focus for the Jewish people to renew their Covenant with God. Long ago, God had called Abraham and his descendants to be a 'chosen people'. And their side of the covenant was to be faithful to God, live by his laws and take his message to the nations. God remains faithful to his side of the Covenant. And at Pentecost the people reaffirm their side of the bargain.

So how did this Feast of Weeks come to be known as 'Pentecost' in New Testament times? That's because it comes exactly 50 days after another OT festival, Passover. The New Testament's written in Greek, and 'Pentekoste' is the Greek for '50th'. So it's a harvest festival, 50 days after Passover, when the Jewish people thank God for his faithfulness, and reaffirm their covenant bond to him.

So the followers of Jesus were together 'on the Day of Pentecost'. But it's what happens next that matters. What they experience has such a dramatic effect on them that it changes the way we define Pentecost. They each receive the presence of God's Holy Spirit in their lives in such a powerful way that from that day on, we use the word Pentecost to mean not a Jewish Harvest Festival but the day God sent his Holy Spirit. But why is it still important for you and me today?

Well, the place we've got to start is in the OT again, with the idea of the 'presence of God'. Of course, God isn't limited by time or place like we are. God is everywhere. There's nowhere we can go where we can say we're cut off from the presence of God. But it's equally true that God's personal presence can be particularly 'focussed' in certain places in the Bible. It's as if God arranges for there to be a particular concentration or intensity of his presence in certain locations.

When I was small, on sunny days I used to take a magnifying glass into the garden and burn holes in leaves and bits of paper. Sometimes you could start a fire that way. And the reason you could burn things was that the magnifying glass so concentrated the rays of the sun that they had an intensity and heat that the sun's rays wouldn't normally have. The sun's always there, giving light and heat. But it took the magnifying glass to make it so intense that it could burn holes in things.

It seems to be a bit like that with God's presence. He's always there, giving life, sustaining the universe, sending messengers, and so on. But there are times when his presence is magnified and made more intense, so much so that the presence of God becomes like a burning fire.

God appears to Moses in a burning bush at Sinai, and tells Moses this holy mountain is the place of his 'dwelling'. It's a holy place. Later God tells Moses to build a Tabernacle in the desert, a tent for the presence of God. And sure enough, we're told the glory of God 'filled the tabernacle' when it was made (Ex 40:35).

Later, King Solomon builds a Temple in Jerusalem, and this is the ultimate place where the magnified presence of God is found. The same glory or presence of God that filled the burning bush and the Tabernacle filled the Temple (1 Kings 8:11).

Hence the importance historically of the Temple for the Jews. The thing that makes them distinctive is the magnified, burning presence of God in their midst. And that's focussed on one place: the Temple. Read the Psalms. That's why they keep on about how wonderful it is to go to God's Temple. What that means is that it's wonderful to come so close to the burning reality of God's presence on the earth.

But what happens next? Well, from the Israelites' point of view, the unthinkable happens. They're invaded, and taken off into exile, and the Temple's destroyed. Years later, when the exiles return and rebuild the Temple again, and King Herod later enlarges it, it's then destroyed again. This time by the Romans in AD 70.

So you've got a crisis. It's not just like a local church building being destroyed, although that's bad enough. It's that the magnified focus of the presence of God on earth has been destroyed. And that raises hard questions: if God's presence was so powerful, how on earth could God let his Temple be destroyed? It's a crisis of faith.

But into the crisis come two voices with explanations of what's going on. One's the voice of the Prophet Ezekiel. He says the destruction of the Temple isn't just an accident of history. It's something the people in some way brought on themselves.

He says they've been taking God for granted, worshipping false gods, abusing God's Temple and mistreating the poor and needy.

So in Ezekiel's prophecy you see a vision of God's presence departing from the Temple (Ezekiel 10). The people have driven away God's presence, his 'glory'. So the destruction of the Temple was only the next logical step. Once the glory had gone, the building was just an empty shell.

The second voice that comes onto the scene is a voice of hope. It's not gone for ever. One day God's magnified, personal presence will return to his people (Ezekiel 43 on).

So is all this ever fulfilled? Does a new Temple for the presence of God ever get built? Well, if you look at Jerusalem today, the only bit of the Temple that's left is what they call the 'Wailing Wall'. And on top of it is the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. That's partly why the Middle East is still such an explosive place. Some Jews believe the whole Temple will one day be rebuilt, and of course this is unthinkable for Muslims.

But that assumes the presence of God is going to be focussed on the Temple. What if the promise was fulfilled, but in a different way than people expected?

That's what somebody in the early church came to believe. And it made him reassess everything he'd ever believed, or at least to see it fulfilled in places he's never expected. He's Paul. And in his letter to a church in the city of Corinth he says this: 'Don't you know that **you yourselves are God's temple**, and that **God's Spirit lives in you**, God's temple is sacred and **you are that temple**' (1 Cor 3:16-17).

And he applies this to each of them as individuals too. He says: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,?' (1 Cor 6:19-20). So why does Paul now believe the presence of God will no longer be focussed in the Temple, but in the church and individual people? The answer is one word: Pentecost.

Here's what happens. Jesus leaves his followers when he goes to be with God. But he promises that God will send his Spirit on them. In other words, God's personal, invisible indwelling presence. And then, on harvest festival day, it happens. Something like tongues of fire appear on each of them and they're filled with the power and presence of God himself. The same awesome presence of God that filled the burning bush, the tabernacle and the Temple is now coming to fill people.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of all this. This is the key factor that explains the growth of the early church. It's that people began to see that here, happening before their very eyes, was the long-awaited return of the personal, magnified presence of God on the earth.

And here's where it all comes up to date. It means the Spirit of God isn't just an idea, the Spirit is a living person and an experience. The Holy Spirit isn't just words in the Creed. He should be a real experience in our lives. God's personal presence.

There's so much stuff that we associate with church – finances, buildings and so on! We'll think about some of that at our AGM later this morning. But Pentecost reminds us what the whole church thing is really all about. It's about knowing God and experiencing the power and presence of God for ourselves. As individuals and as a community.

So my prayer this morning for each one of us, is about receiving God's Holy Spirit in our life. That the Holy Spirit will make the indwelling presence of God a living reality in my life and your life.

In the words of a very ancient prayer: 'Come, Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your people. Kindle in us the fire of your love.'