

A Reflection from the Revd Andrew Haines for Pentecost - Acts 2: vs 1-11

We first visited Israel in 1984, just before I went to theological college to start training for ministry. We stayed with friends in Haifa, and they took us out one day to a kibbutz in the hills near Nazareth. We joined with other friends of theirs in a joyful community celebration of Pentecost, or the 'Feast of Weeks'. The name means, literally, 'fifty days', the length of time between the great feast of Passover and Pentecost. The cause of the celebration is thanksgiving to God for the gift of the harvest. Pentecost marks the end of the barley harvest, and the beginning of the wheat crop. It contains, too, the promise of all the other fruits of the land, each in due season. As well as thanksgiving for what has been given, there is prayer and hope for what is yet to come.

So Pentecost is a kind of harvest festival. But it is not just that. It also has a second point of significance. The great foundational event of the Israelite people was their deliverance from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses at the time of the Passover. God 'passed over' their households when he struck Egypt with the last of the ten plagues, and in exasperation Pharaoh told them to go. They were fifty days into their journey through the wilderness when they came to Mount Sinai, where God gave to Moses the laws by which the people were required to live. So as well as thanking God for the harvest, Pentecost is a time for celebrating His gift of the framework of laws by which they live together as the distinctive community of His people.

Many people have the idea that the Christian Pentecost is a completely new beginning - a complete break with the past. It is true that, in a sense, it is the birth day of the Church. There is, however, also a deep continuity with the nature of the events celebrated by the Jewish people through the years, even up to today. We can rejoice in that continuity because it shows us that God is utterly consistent, faithful and dependable. His character does not change, and His concern is always for the good of His people.

Saint Paul (in 1 Corinthians 15) sees Jesus, through his resurrection and ascension, as the 'first fruit' of a new creation. That event holds within it, for us, the guarantee that we too can be part of that new creation, that fuller harvest, if we live our lives in Christ. Last week, we saw that heaven and earth are not separate places, with no interaction between them. As the ascended Jesus has already taken our humanity into the heavenly realm, so he has released to us, from the Father, the energy and power of heaven to inspire and transform our lives here on earth. It is not just a spiritual process, so that we become so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly use. Instead, it is God working in and through us to bring the life of heaven more and more into the earthly realm - creating the new earth that He has promised will one day be complete. In order for us to do this work He gives us the gifts we need; some supernatural, others natural but sanctified in His service. Saint Paul gives us different, but overlapping, lists of 'spiritual gifts' in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

When Moses received The Law from God, he received a framework by which God's people were required to order their lives. But that Law, written on tablets of stone, was always an external yard-stick by which they could measure themselves, and from which they often fell short. Pentecost internalises the law for the new people of God, the Church. It fulfils the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:33): 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts'. Living a life that is pleasing to God is no longer an externally-imposed chore. Instead, because the Spirit of God dwells within us, the desire to please Him wells up within us as a part of our very being. As Moses ascended the mountain and then came down with The Law, Jesus has 'ascended' and returned back down to give us his life through the Spirit.

So, as we have seen before, we can praise God for what has been and also for what is yet to be. Pentecost is a moment of transition, an end and a beginning. But through it, and through every changing circumstance, God is faithful and true, calling us to love and trust Him more and more. He is with us, He is for us, and He equips us by His Spirit to be His people today.