



Pentecost – Why Celebrate?

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Year B, Pentecost

Acts 2: 1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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One of the things we often take for granted about church communities is the intergenerational aspect of a healthy church. Having been a lifelong church attendee I have always known and interacted with people whose age is at times very different to my own. For most of my friends, particularly my non-church friends this is not the case. Most people only connect deeply with those of their peer group, or maybe those a year or two either side. Belonging to difference church communities has given me connections with people far outside of my peer group, which has been an enriching part of belonging to a church.

I was struck by this last week during two different conversations with people I know through church. The first was the child of a friend of mine. The subject of the conversation was her upcoming birthday. Birthdays are very important when you are young.

The second conversation was with a much older person who I also know through church connections. When this person was asked if they were 94 years old, they responded, "I'm almost 95!" It would seem that the most enthusiastic people about upcoming birthdays are the very young and those blessed with longevity.

Today, the feast of Pentecost, is often referred to as the birthday of the Church. We don't tend to celebrate with quite the vigour that we reserve for our own birthdays. I'm always quietly hopeful that we might get cake at church thereby putting the feast back into the feast of Pentecost, but it hasn't happened yet. That said, just like our own birthday's, Pentecost is a day that we make sure we remember every year.

What is it we are remembering? Our reading from the book of Acts recounts the story of the apostles receiving the gift of the spirit. Christian tradition remembers this as a pivotal moment, the event that renewed the apostle's commitment to the Gospel. The Acts story also suggests that it is the Spirit who equips the people of God with the skills required for sharing God's message of redemptive love with the world. Today I don't really want to attend to these ideas, because many of us have walked over this ground many times. Instead, I wish to share a small idea about part of the Pentecost tradition that is often overlooked.

Pentecost – the birthday of the church, like many other Christian festivals did not actually begin as a Christian festival. A few years ago, I picked up a copy of a fantastic little book called *A Christmas Cornucopia: The hidden stories behind yuletide traditions*. In his introduction the author Mark Forsyth comments on how when it comes to many traditions, be it Christmas, Easter or Halloween, that lots of people like to comment on how the Christians stole their traditions from the pagans. His comment is that people do this because it makes them sound terribly clever, even if they don't know the slightest thing about what this ancient pagan tradition might have been. His further comment on this topic is that just because different cultures have chosen similar times to celebrate festivals, this does not always mean that one culture stole another cultures idea.

Certainly, seasonally based celebrations have grown up in many different cultures and occasionally look quite similar despite being created in completely different parts of the world. In anthropology this is known as convergence, meaning that isolated cultures have similar practices despite having no interaction with each other. This is a long way of saying that Pentecost was not a festival stolen from the pagans. However...it was stolen, from Judaism.

Acts chapter 2 verse 1 states, "When the day of Pentecost arrived..." I have always read this verse from a Christian

perspective. What I mean by that is that I understand Pentecost as being the day when the apostles received the gift of the Holy Spirit, so when I hear “When the day of Pentecost arrived...” I interpret it as an announcement about what is about to take place. This interpretation is a misunderstanding coloured by my ideas of what Pentecost is, rather than being based in an understanding of what Pentecost was.

In the book of Leviticus and in the book of Numbers we can find passages that talk about a Jewish festival called *The Festival of Weeks*. The festival of weeks was a type of harvest festival based around the first fruits of the season. The greater purpose of the festival was to remind the Jewish people of their liberation from enslavement and that they have come to enjoy freedom and a land of abundance. The response to this prosperity was to take various offerings to the temple. The book of Leviticus gives very clear instructions about what was to be offered, when and where.

In these instructions there is also a specific directive that when gathering in the harvest, Jewish people were not to take everything that was available. Some food was to be left at the edges of the fields. This is because the remainder was to be left for widows, orphans and foreigners. This time of abundance and celebration always included reaching out to the most vulnerable members of the community.

The Festival of Weeks was a celebration, and as such it was not just about harvesting or making offerings at the temple. When the last day of the festival arrived, it was time for a party! This final day, the day when everyone let loose, was known as the day of Pentecost.

So, the day on which the church began was a day already set aside to give thanks to God for liberation from enslavement and for setting something aside for those in need. Only then would the party begin. I think that is part of the tradition worth recapturing. Perhaps today could be a day for reflecting on the ways God has

set us free, or perhaps how God might be trying to free us now. Today could also be a day for setting something aside for the most vulnerable in our society, the poor and the homeless. Maybe if we do those two things better, we will rediscover deeper reasons and a greater desire to really celebrate the life of this church. Amen.