

PENTECOST – YEAR A (2026)

In Church-speak, the word ‘Pentecost’ and its derivatives have two connotations: first, they refer to the liturgical celebration of the descent of the Holy Spirit fifty days after Easter; and, secondly, they are associated with those ecclesial fellowships called ‘Pentecostal’, which emphasise the importance of religious experiences as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, usually manifest in exuberant worship, dramatic conversions, and ‘speaking in tongues’.

But ‘Pentecost’ isn’t originally a Christian word; and, so that we might better appreciate its true significance, it is important that we understand its roots, how the phenomena of the Pentecost-event was interpreted by those who experienced it; and, consequently, what it has meant for the Church ever since.

As with other Christian observances, the antecedent of Pentecost lies in Judaism: celebrated on the fiftieth day after the Passover, this harvest festival was the day on which farmers would bring the first sheaf of wheat from the crop to be offered to God – first, as an act of gratitude; and, then, as a prayer that the rest of the crop might be safely gathered in as well. But, for the Jewish person of Jesus’ day, neither Passover nor Pentecost were simply about agriculture: rather, both were redolent with memories of the past, and shaped the self-understanding of the people of Israel. Passover was the celebration of the time when God had led his chosen people out of slavery in Egypt by way of the Exodus and their passing through the Red Sea, having first eaten the sacrificial lamb. And

Pentecost was a reminder of that fiftieth day after the Passover, when Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai – God’s provision not only of food by which the people might live physically; but also, of a way of life, encapsulated by the Law, by which they might fulfil his purposes spiritually.

And, though it might not be obvious to us, to Our Lady and the Apostles the parallels would have been clear: just as Moses had ascended Mount Sinai and returned with the Law, so Jesus had ascended into heaven, and was returning, not in his own physical person and with a law written on tablets of stone, but in the Person of the Holy Spirit, who would inscribe his law of love on human hearts. Because the Holy Spirit is God in action; and the presence and power of the third Person of the Holy Trinity within the life of the Church since Pentecost are the presence and power of Jesus himself. The Holy Spirit is given to continue the work of the Incarnation: he is not simply the Spirit of God in his absolute and eternal existence, nor only the Spirit of God in his creative power; rather, he is the Spirit of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ. It is by the Holy Spirit that we share in the saving power of Christ’s victory over sin and death through the Church’s Sacraments; just as it is the Holy Spirit who continues to reveal Jesus to humanity, and drives the Church’s mission in every age. The descent of the Holy Spirit is, then, the consequence and complement of Jesus’ Ascension.

And, whilst *Pneumatology*, the study of the Holy Spirit is important, it cannot adequately express the untameable and unpredictable action of God, who is not

subject to human constraints and control, and is always at work in ways that confound, surprise, and delight us in equal measure. Of course, it is true that the Holy Spirit works in our lives softly and secretly, fashioning us into the likeness of Christ, and forming our consciences according to revealed truth; but to claim that this is the only way he works is impudently to stifle God's grace. Conversely, to assert that the Holy Spirit is absent unless accompanied by noise, the miraculous and 'speaking in tongues' is equally absurd, as such phenomena have not been the experience of the majority of faithful Christians throughout the centuries. And so, all that we can say with confidence is that the Holy Spirit is present in, and works through, the Church and the Sacraments – those assured channels of grace that communicate God's life, love, healing and peace. In an age in which we are encouraged to behave according to our opinions and emotions, we must be careful not to think thus of the Holy Spirit – that God is only truly at work in and through us if we feel good, or virtuous, or happy. Rather, the presence of God is manifest not in how we feel, but in what we do: in how we put our faith into practice by exhibiting the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; in short, in our attitudes and behaviour. The ongoing work of the Holy Spirit is to open human hearts to know Jesus by faith, and our eyes to see him in one another, so that we might treat them as we would him. And if we Christians allowed him to do that, then the Church's mission would take care of itself.