



2006 in Cape Town

Zurich. For the New Apostolic Christian Pentecost is celebrated in remembrance of the day of God's outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believing Apostles. The New Apostolic Church also recognizes this event as the time from which the church started its work, and that it was the moment of the birth of the church of Christ. To this day it is the belief that the Holy Spirit is the animating force of the true church of Christ.

Name and origin of the feast of Pentecost

Apart from its appearance in Tobit 2:1 in the Apocrypha the word Pentecost is otherwise mentioned in the New Testament only; the name, however, comes from the Greek pentekosta hemeras 50 days - on the 50th day was the feast of Pentecost - referring to the number of days from the offering of the barley sheaf at the beginning of the Passover. It was originally a Jewish harvest festival, on the fiftieth day after the second day of Passover. Since 7 weeks had passed it was also known as "feast of the weeks". The feast is known in Hebrew also as yom habbikkurim "day of the first fruits". "And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number 50 days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the Lord" (cf Leviticus 23:15,16).

Pentecost was also proclaimed a "holy convocation" - an assembly or calling together - at which no servile work was to be done, and every male Israelite was obliged to appear at the sanctuary to come before the Lord God (cf Exodus 23:14,17; Leviticus 23:21). Among the things that were offered at the feast as a sign of

gratitude for the harvest were two loaves baked from the meal gained from the first harvest, the firstlings of the harvest; there is also reference to "day of the firstfruits" (Leviticus 23:10,20; Numbers 28:26).

In the course of time this feast gained, or became broader, in its interpretation among the Jews, and it eventually came to be an annual affair when the covenant between God and Israel was renewed; Pentecost also became to be regarded as the anniversary of the law-giving at Sinai. After the ascension of Jesus Christ God gave this day of Pentecost a new significance through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was to be of irreplaceable importance for mankind's salvation.

Jesus promises another Comforter in his absence

Before we go to the account of the events at Pentecost found in The Acts we first want to turn our attention to that which Jesus, the Son of God, said when he promised that he would the Holy Spirit. On the eve of his death he spoke with his disciples and proclaimed that after his departure to the Father the Holy Spirit would come down upon them. One can read this in John: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (John 14:16,17).

In this declaration given by Jesus there is a marked difference to be read concerning the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in Old Testament and New Testament times: in the old dispensation specific persons were targeted by the Holy Spirit through whom it then worked temporarily. But now, in the new dispensation, Jesus promises the disciples that the Holy Spirit would be with them for ever. The expression "Comforter" is used in the sense of someone who is called in to help.

And then Jesus also revealed the distinguishing signs of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit:

- The Holy Spirit is the Comforter that would - after the departure of Jesus to the Father - ensure that the teachings of Christ, the gospel, be kept alive (cf John 14:26).
- The Holy Spirit testifies of Christ (John 15:26).
- The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit that continues to reveal the truth and those things which Christ has not yet revealed to his Apostles: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you" (John 16:12,14).

Good Friday to Pentecost

After the Lord had given these promises he was arrested in that very night in the Garden of Gethsemane where he was with his disciples; his captors were the soldiers who had been instigated to do this by the high priests and the Pharisees. What followed was the hearing by the judiciary, and his total humiliation, physical suffering and eventual death on the cross on Golgotha on the day that became known as Good Friday. On the third day after this indescribable suffering Christ

arose from the dead and Easter became the Christian commemoration in remembrance of Christ's resurrection. During the subsequent 40 days he appeared to his disciples on more than one occasion telling them about those things pertaining to the kingdom of God. He told them that although - John truly baptized with water, - they would be "baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (cf Acts 1:2,5).

And before Jesus ascended to heaven he said to his Apostles: "And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). And more about this power of God one can read of in Acts 1:8: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

After Jesus' departure all that which he said would take place was: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you" (John 16:7).

After Jesus' ascension the Apostles returned to Jerusalem and secluded themselves and prayed with Jesus' brothers, and his mother, Mary.

Then, at one stage, Peter stood up among the followers - the Bible reports there were about 120 of them - and declared that they would need to replace Judas Iscariot. They chose two, Joseph Barsabas and Matthias; they prayed and the final indication was that Matthias was the man; he then joined the eleven Apostles.

The wonder of Pentecost

On this day, 50 days after the resurrection of Christ, and ten days after his ascension, the Apostles were in a house in Jerusalem, and were visited with signs from heaven. What happened is described by Luke: "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (Acts 2:1,4). And now the promise was fulfilled, of the Comforter; the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, had come from heaven and filled them who had waited so faithfully. Enabled by the Holy Ghost they all began to speak in different languages.

The descent of the Holy Spirit seemed not to be an unobtrusive event, for one is told of a tremendous whoosh as if of a gushing wind from the heavens. And, of course, the sound was heard so that it drew crowds who came to see what it was all about. Jews they were, of all origins, who had come to settle in Jerusalem. And, besides, it was festival time so that there were many more people in the city than usual. But what was astonishing for them was that each was hearing his mother tongue being spoken although they knew that the men were all Galilaens. Luke tells too what these Spirit-inspired men were saying, speaking of the great deeds of God. The people must have been quite perplexed and at a loss to understand it all; some of the onlookers even concluded that they were inebriated.

The wonder of Pentecost is often used as a counter example to the confusion caused by the language differences at the building of the tower of Babel. Until that time there had been a language common to all people. God confounded the language of the people so that they no longer understood each other, and they fled into all the world (cf Genesis 11:1,9); with the advent of the descent of the Holy Spirit, however, God did the opposite and made it possible that everybody was able to understand what the Spirit of God was revealing. One might see the events at Pentecost too as a clear indication that God's message of grace and salvation through the gospel of Jesus was for all people irrespective of origin, culture or any other considerations.

The Pentecost sermon

Looking back to the day of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit one cannot but be aware of the fulfilment of yet another promise. The Lord Jesus had said to Peter: "thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the gathering of faithful followers of Christ became the congregation of Christ (cf Acts 1:13,15), and it was Apostle Peter, the rock Christ spoke of, who, on this occasion, in this decisive moment, stood up and spoke very forcefully, addressing the people. First he made it quite clear that these men certainly were not drunk, but that what they were seeing - this wonder - was the fulfilment of the prophecies of the prophet Joel that God would send his Spirit. Furthermore Peter testified to the fact that Jesus was indeed the Messiah promised by God, and of whom King David referred to already prophetically in his psalms. Peter then quotes some psalms of David (verses 8 and 11 of Psalm 16) in which he spoke of the resurrection of Jesus; the first verse of Psalm 110 Peter quotes as well and interprets it as a pronouncement of the ascension of Christ.

Jesus who was crucified by the Jews was the central figure in this first apostolic sermon that has come down to us: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32,33,36).

Peter touched the heart of the people listening to him, and they asked him what he thought they should do next. As spokesman for the Apostles he said: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (verses 38,39). The Scripture says some 3,000 people believed and had themselves baptized, and so became part of the community of Christ's followers. And so Pentecost is also a symbol for the compelling power of the Spirit-inspired sermon, and it is a symbol for the growth of the congregation through the activity of the Apostles.

Luke had the following to say about this first congregation, the embryo of the church of Christ: "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (verse 42). These four things - steadfastness, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer - have remained distinguishing marks of the faith stance of the church of Christ.

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