

VESPERS HOMILY
PENTECOST
4 JUNE 2017

JOHN 14: 8-17, 25-27
PSALM 104: 25-35,37

Soon after I became Rector at a church in Savannah I had a phone call from the editor of the religious section of the Savannah newspaper. She asked me if our church had any “special events’ coming up that she could include in her column.

It being this time of our liturgical year I told her “Yes, we will be celebrating the Feast of Pentecost. “

We were surprised and a bit concerned when the article’s headline said “Big Pentecostal service planned at Episcopal Church.” We wondered who might show up. In the event there were no disappointed Pentecostals that Sunday; actually there were no new people at all.

This made me wonder exactly who actually read the religion page of the Savannah newspaper. Apparently our Bishop didn’t; he didn’t call. Were all the Pentecostals in Savannah already cared for and, for that matter, exactly what is a Pentecostal? What distinguishing characteristics should we look for?

In answering that last question I found that one of the principal characteristics of Pentecostals, based on Paul’s description of the Holy Spirit -filled Christian communities that Paul visited, is the gift of speaking in tongues. The Greek word for tongues is “Glossais;’ Paul used the word to mean both the fire and the words spoken by the Apostles. Hence the term “Glosalaia.”

Had Pentecostals been present at our church that Pentecost they might or might not have felt quite at home; our readers did not speak in tongues, they spoke in “dialektos” which means languages. In Acts Paul says that the crowd heard the Gospel in their own dialektos, not in glossais, not in tongues.

In those days we read the Gospel in languages such as French and Spanish, occasionally something more exotic and one year I read it in Norwegian. It was pretty bad Norwegian but who was to know?

We did that for quite some time. Actually, for some time we did that here. Then, one year, reading Paul yet again it occurred to me that, no matter what words the Disciples were saying, the important point was that the crowd gathered there understood it "...in their own language." How had I missed that?

Had we a French, Spanish, or exotic congregation, or ever one more Norwegian the practice would have made sense but we didn't and there wasn't so we stopped.

It is interesting that many, probably most churches, understand Pentecost in terms of such things as the Gospel in a foreign languages and the use of the color red; waving red wind socks and releasing red balloons.

If asked about the significance of the day they might say "it's the birthday of the church" and in a sense that might be true. Actually, there is a bit more to it than that.

Pentecost is a day, a date, fifty days after the Resurrection, after Easter. In the Jewish calendar it is the fiftieth day after Passover, the day of the "Feast of Weeks;" it is a day of pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest of corn called for Deuteronomy 16. The crowds in the street that heard the Disciples were pilgrims from all over the Jewish world; that is why they were there that day.

I sincerely doubt that you are here to celebrate the corn harvest or The Feast of Weeks. Long ago, the Christian church set aside this fiftieth day for a different purpose.

If you look at a church calendar you will note that for this day the word "Pentecost" is in big, bold, red letters while underneath it, in very small print, you will see the word "Whitsunday." Somehow, Whitsunday, being less colorful and dramatic, has of late lost its place as the celebration of this day.

As early as the 4th Century, there were Christian travelers and pilgrims to the Holy sites in Jerusalem such as Egeria who left a journal of her experiences wrote of major celebrations on this day.

For many centuries the church saw this day as the year's the second greatest feast after Easter.

In past times there was a Vigil of Pentecost much the same as the Easter Vigil that has been restored to us in the present Book of Common Prayer. The Vigil of Pentecost lacked only the kindling and blessing of the New Fire and the lighting of the Paschal Candle, but, as with the Easter Vigil, the focus was on a new birth through Holy Baptism.

The time period we know as the "Easter Season" took place between those two Vigils. At each Vigil Holy Baptism with blessed water and oil and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, after weeks of preparation, was, and is today, the foundation of the life of a Christian.

The Christian calendar and the church spoke of a season of "Whitsuntide," not a day but a baptized life

In the Easter Vigil the candidates had been prepared through forty days of Lent. In the Pentecost Vigil they were prepared in the fifty days of Easter.

At both vigils those to be baptized wore white baptismal robes, hence the word "Whit" in Whitsunday.

However, since I doubt that the church will soon abandon the traditions that have grown about Pentecost in favor of reinstating Whitsunday, we might consider what Pentecost is really about.

First there is a roaring wind that filled the room in which the Disciples were hiding and filled the Disciples themselves. The wind is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, the Counselor or Advocate that Jesus had promised would touch them and teach them all that they needed to know to carry the Gospel message to the world.

The flame resting upon the Disciples is a metaphor for both the enlightenment, an understanding of all that God had done through Jesus, the opening of their minds, and the gift of the courage to confront all those to whom they are sent, even those for whom they would have to brave danger and persecution

The crowds in the streets symbolize all those peoples throughout the world who will hear their words, down through the ages and that includes you and me.

In His Holy Name.