

The Festival of Shavuot / Pentecost

As Jesus was growing up ...

What, if anything, would Pentecost have meant to Jesus when he was a boy, a teenager, a young man? For a start, he would have known it as Shavuot. The word, Pentecost is a Greek translation of the original Hebrew word, Shavuot.

What, if anything, would this have meant to the first generation of believers? According to the presentation in Acts 2:1-41, this was still a significant festival for them - and it was about to become even more significant.

Shavuot

The festival of Shavuot is a biblical festival, beginning at sundown of the 5th of the Jewish month of Sivan, and lasting until nightfall of the 6th of Sivan. It is one of the three pilgrimage festivals of Israel, during which Jewish men, during biblical times, were obligated to go to the temple in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:5). The three festivals were: Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles).

Initially, Shavuot was a harvest festival, commemorating the ancient obligation to bring the harvest's 'first fruits' to the temple in Jerusalem as an offering to God. Therefore, there would have been immense excitement and hard work in the time leading up to the festival, with men preparing for the trip to Jerusalem, joining with others to transport their produce on large carts, drawn by oxen and donkeys.

The word Shavuot means 'weeks'. It marks the completion of the seven week counting period between Passover and Shavuot. As it says in the Torah:

Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then celebrate the Festival of Weeks to the Lord your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the Lord your God has given You. (Deuteronomy 16:9-10)

In other words, Shavuot falls fifty days from the second day of Passover.

Pentecost is the Greek name for Shavuot, and means 'fiftieth', referring, in context, to the 50th day after Passover. In the same way that Shavuot is celebrated seven weeks after Passover, Christians celebrate Pentecost seven weeks after Easter Sunday.

The Day of First Fruits

Shavuot marks the celebration of the wheat harvest and the ripening of the first fruits, which is the reason for this name.

Celebrate the Festival of Weeks with the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering at the turn of the year. (Exodus 34:22)

On the day of firstfruits, when you present to the Lord an offering of new grain

during the Festival of Weeks, hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. (Numbers 28:26)

It was not only wheat that was brought to God at the Festival of Ingathering. The land of Israel was particularly known for seven fruits of the land. It was

a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey (Deuteronomy 8:8)

The honey in the verse refers to date honey, not honey pollinated by bees. The first fruits of these seven species were a particular delight to offer to the Lord.

The Harvest Festival

This name also commemorates the harvest festival aspect of Shavuot.

Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the firstfruits of the crops you sow in your field. (Exodus 23:16)

Pentecost Sunday does not come at the time of Harvest Thanksgiving in the UK, of course, but thinking of the fruit of the harvest does make us think of the fruit of the Spirit, clearly associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit in the life of Christians.

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-25)

Perhaps you could consider a special morning or evening time in your church, or shared with other churches, in the week after Pentecost, at which you celebrate the fruit of the Spirit?

This time of reflection could also include acknowledging the real challenge that this brings to us, since we do not always provide this fruit in our lives.

This time of fellowship could actually involve some crafts associated with different fruits, sharing skills with each other as we make things together. The craft pieces could even focus on the seven species of the land of Israel, as mentioned above.

This time could involve a tea/coffee and cake interval, or even a meal with desert courses only, with people making (or buying) the food, based on fruit.

The Time of the Giving of Our Torah

Shavuot is also celebrated as the time when God graciously gave the Torah to Israel, enabling them to know how to live in order to please him.

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt - on that very

day - they came to the Desert of Sinai. (Exodus 19:1)

This third month is the month of Sivan.

With the destruction of the temple, it was no longer possible to make offerings in Jerusalem. The focus settled on the historical experience of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, which also happened in the month of Sivan. This happened in 70 CE, and so after the time of Jesus, but it happened in the time of at least some of the apostles and other believers. Although we don't know with any real confidence when the Torah customs associated with Shavuot began, there are several significant customs which may have had their origins, or at least their early expressions, at the time of the first couple of generations of followers of Jesus.

One custom is for Jewish people to study Torah through the night on the first night of Shavuot. At the very least, they stay up as late as they can. This is done to this day. It developed as a way to proclaim to those Gentiles who accused them of empty legalism, and/or reluctant living in accordance with God's laws and direction, that they loved God and his Torah. Their commitment and enthusiasm are such that they will celebrate with a night of study and conversation on the Torah.

Could there be an appetite in our churches for people to stay up all night at Pentecost to study portions of the Bible? How about a gospels night?

A possible game for children can be played in the sanctuary during the service, or in a church room after the service when people are gathered for tea / coffee before going home. The room is divided in two. The leader calls out books of the Bible at random and the children have to run to one side of the room if they think they are part of the Hebrew Bible, and the other if they think they are part of the New Testament. There can be prizes of sweets or the like for various aspects of this activity – perhaps for every book that they get right (adult counters will be needed!).

An added piece of fun would be to make up names for a couple of books.

Another custom is for all men, women and children to hear the reading of the Ten Commandments, as they are known by Christians, on the first day of Shavuot. This is not because the Jewish people consider the Ten Commandments to be the real essence of the Torah, or the most important part of the Torah. In practice, that is the position that has been taken by Christians and churches down the centuries. The other laws and commandments generally receive either no attention or are understood allegorically, typologically or 'spiritually'.

The Jewish custom is based on the understanding that the whole Torah was not given to Israel on that first day of Shavuot. Only the Ten Commandments were given that day, and even they were only transmitted verbally. The physical tablets were not given for another 40 days. For example, the laws of inheritance weren't taught until near the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, according to Numbers 27:1-11.

It is important to clarify the importance of the giving of the Ten Commandments. As mentioned above, this term is the Christian term for this collection of words. In the

Jewish tradition, they are known as the Ten Words, based on the fact that this is the term used in the actual Hebrew text. The Hebrew does not use any word for a commandment or law; it uses the common word for ... words.

And God spoke all these words. (Exodus 20:1)

Is this important? Yes it is, because when you look at the presentation in the passage about the giving of these words, it does *not* begin with a commandment.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Exodus 20:1)

In other words, the passage opens with a statement, not a commandment. Not only that, but the statement is about what the Lord has done for his people. Before he gives any command to them, he reminds them of his commitment to them, and what he has done for them. He has delivered them and is making them his people. Only then does he go on to state that if they wish to be his people, they must live as his people, in accordance with his ways, reflecting his character and purposes.

The initiative in this is the Lord's, and it emphasises his grace and mercy. This is the context in which we should see the requirements of the Lord from his people. First he gives; then he calls for our response (c.f. Exodus 19:3-6).

There is a wonderfully suggestive verse in the Book of Exodus, recounting the response of the people of Israel when Moses read to them the Book of the Covenant:

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." (Exodus 24:7)

We see hear a lovely echo of the commitment of the Lord to his people. As we noted above, at the start of the Ten Commandments there is a statement of the Lord's commitment to his people, expressed in his delivering of them from slavery in Egypt. Here, we see the people expressing their sense of commitment to God before they have even begun to put the covenant into practice.

This is particularly poignant in the Hebrew text translated here. The Hebrew simply has the people say: 'we will do and we will hear'. It is probably better rendered as: 'we will do and we will listen'. But the point is that they say that they will 'do' before they say that they will listen / obey.

We see the same dynamic regarding loving God and obeying him in the teaching of Jesus; we cannot separate love for Jesus, grateful for all that he means to us and has done for us, from the command to obey him, to do as he commands us. Of all the writers of the New Testament it is John who has best captured this insight for us. For example:

If you love me, keep my commands. (John 14:15)

You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:14)

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. (1 John 2:3-6)

It is therefore important to understand the Ten Commandments in this context. They are not a burden to be borne patiently, but a way to express our commitment to God in the way we live our lives together.

Perhaps you could consider following up the Pentecost Sunday with a service the next week focused on this issue of discipleship: committing ourselves to obedience to God's ways, alongside rejoicing in his grace.

Reading the book of Ruth

There is a Shavuot tradition that we know developed later than the time of Jesus or the apostles, namely the tradition of reading the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. Why would this be? She was not even an Israelite; she was a Moabite.

Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. (Ruth 1:3-4a)

Why would her book be read at Shavuot? Because, although she was a Moabite, she was an ancestor of king David, the precursor of the Messiah. There is therefore a messianic aspect to the celebration of Shavuot. Ruth is also celebrated in this way in the New Testament; Matthew includes her in his genealogy of Jesus.

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David. (Matthew 1:5-6a)

But why is this remembered at Shavuot? Because Jewish tradition, based on particular interpretations of biblical verses, holds that David died on this day. If this is not a biblical teaching, nor a custom that would have been known to Jesus or the apostles, why would we take note of it?

Well, we need not take note of it, of course. But it does bring to mind the great truth that Gentiles, along with Jewish people, are part of God's Kingdom, established in Jesus.

Perhaps, if you decide to have an all-night bible reading group at Pentecost, or even a special long evening for reading a portion of the Bible, the Book of Ruth could be included, prompting us to rejoice in the integration of believers in the Body of Christ?

Seventy Tongues

There is a very old Jewish tradition, perhaps in people's minds on the day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, or perhaps even formed in response to that great event, that when God gave the Torah to Moses at Shavuot, God's voice was heard in 70 languages. The number 70 is symbolic of universal significance. In other words, the tradition is that everyone in the world, not just Israel, could hear what God was saying.

It is a way of saying that all the nations of the world were somehow involved in what God did for Israel and was now doing as he formed them into his treasured possession.

This is possibly the context in which to see the significance of that first Pentecost day:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:5-12)

What happened on that day made most immediate sense to those who had been part of the Jesus story until that time, and within that group, it would have made most sense to the devout Jewish believers in Jesus. However, God's grace was also reaching out to everyone.

Perhaps, to celebrate the gift of translation of the Bible into languages all around the world, reaching into so many cultures and sub-cultures, you could include in the Pentecost service a series of readings of a verse? These can be found and downloaded from the internet. As many people as possible could be included, reading the verse in turn, perhaps for more than one rotation of readings.

If there are children present (or even if not), this could be turned into a fun quiz. Can people guess what the various languages are? This is also fun if the readers are struggling to read some of the translated versions.

You could make a very large map of the known world in Jesus' day (perhaps sticking together a number of A3 partial maps), and ask the children (and adults) to find the places mentioned in Acts 2 as where the people came from on that day.

Tongues of Fire

In Acts 2:3 we read the following:

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

We sometimes use the metaphor of tongues of fire today, since sometimes flames can have that appearance. We even carry the metaphor on by speaking about flames licking at the substance that they are burning. But perhaps this metaphor was particularly appropriate on that day, since the appearance of tongues symbolised the miracle of the use and comprehension of all those tongues / languages.

The other phenomenon that would have been scary to experience that day was the sudden sound of the violent wind.

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. (Acts 2:2)

We can easily gloss over these events, forgetting that it would have been a scary event, especially at the start, as well as one full of wonder.

Perhaps, for the Pentecost service, people could prepare by having arranging for a lot of fans (or a couple of industrial size fans, if accessible) to be placed in the church ready for switching on at the given signal? This could left unexplained for a while, to see if people catch on to what this symbolises. Then the text of Acts 2:2 could be projected on the screen, if there is one. Or someone could stand and call out the verse, unannounced, in a strong voice.

In addition, people who enjoy sewing or embroidery might be invited to make long, flowing, bright red and orange forked banners, which could be hung from the ceiling, from lights, or on tall stands of some sort, to evoke flames of fire coming down to touch worshipers' heads when the fans catch them. Again, this could be part of the unannounced action, with Acts 2:3 eventually being projected or proclaimed.