

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

PENTECOST SUNDAY – YEAR B

Pentecost

The word Pentecost comes from the Greek word for fiftieth. In its original context it refers to the Jewish Festival of Weeks (*Shavout*), celebrated on the fiftieth day after Passover – a major feast marking the grain harvest, when Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate. (Rabbinic tradition teaches that this was also when God gave the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, and *Shavout* is still observed by Orthodox Jews.)

This annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem is the background to the scene described in today's First Reading (Acts 2: 1–11), when the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles on the day of Pentecost. As Christians, we now celebrate the feast of Pentecost fifty days after the Resurrection – the culmination of the fifty days of Eastertide.

First Reading Acts 2: 1–11

Only St Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles (also thought to have been written by Luke) see the Resurrection, the Ascension (Luke 24: 50–53), and the coming of the Spirit as three different events that took place at different times. (In St John's Gospel, for example, everything seems to happen on the same day: see John 20.) However, it is Luke's account that has shaped Church practice and liturgy over the centuries.

Just four verses (Acts 2: 1–4) tell us about the coming of the Spirit itself. Otherwise the main focus is on the words spoken by the disciples and the people present. The Spirit transforms them into a community of prophets speaking about the 'marvels of God'.

Theologians have written much about the wide choice of nations mentioned by Luke. As the event was taking place at the time of the Jewish Feast of Weeks, which occurred fifty days after the Passover (see above), many Jews from all over the then known world will have been coming to Jerusalem on pilgrimage.

The different languages mentioned bring to mind the Tower of Babel episode (Genesis 11: 1–9). However, in this case, although the multiple languages remain, people are able to understand each other.

Gospel John 15: 26–27; 16: 12–15

The passage chosen for the Gospel consists of two extracts from Jesus's farewell discourses (John 14–17), where Jesus announces the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Paraclete

St John is the only evangelist to use the word **Paraclete** for the Holy Spirit (see also John 14: 16, 26). Here it is translated as '**Advocate**', though the words 'comforter', 'intercessor', 'teacher', and 'helper' are also used. The term Advocate belongs to the Roman legal system, and means a person in a trial who argues your case.

A Spirit of Truth

John also describes the Holy Spirit as the 'Spirit of Truth' (see also John 14: 17, 15: 26, and 1 John 4: 6). This term is also found in several other documents of the period, and may well have been a Jewish expression of the time.

The function of the Spirit is to '**lead you to the complete truth**' (16: 13). As elsewhere in John's Gospel, the 'truth' is the belief in Jesus Christ as the one who speaks the words of God. The Spirit's coming does not depend simply on our being able to understand.

'He will be my witness and you too will be my witness'

The Holy Spirit will give the witnesses the words they need (see also Mark 13: 11 and Luke 12: 11–12): '*Do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you have to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.*'

'He will tell you'

The Greek word for 'you' is plural, so Jesus is not addressing one individual but all his followers – including us too. What the Spirit will 'tell' us (note that this verb is used three times in these few verses) will not be anything new, as the Spirit will not be speaking '*as from himself*', but will glorify Jesus and tell us what the Father has given his Son.

