

THE PENTECOSTAL SPIRIT

By NICHOLAS LASH

WHEN the day of Pentecost had come, they were all gathered together in one place.¹ What happened on the day of Pentecost, or rather, what aspect of the 'whole mystery of Christ'² do we celebrate on the feast of Pentecost? In view of the fact that the event described in the Acts of the Apostles took place on a Jewish feast, it would seem, at first sight, that an investigation into the Jewish feast would be an adequate background for an understanding of the Christian Pentecost. In fact, it is not quite so simple as that. In this article we shall try to do three things: firstly, outline the historical development of the feast; secondly, place the doctrine of the 'sending of the Spirit' in the context of the whole Paschal mystery, of which it is an essential element; thirdly, draw some conclusions for our own understanding and celebration of Pentecost.

Pentecost – Jewish and Christian

When the chosen people conquered Canaan, they tended to adopt the religious customs of the country and adapt them to their own understanding of theology and of history. Thus the greatest feast of the Jewish year was the result of the fusion of two distinct celebrations: the Passover, 'the spring-time sacrifice of a young animal in order to secure fecundity and prosperity for the flock'³ and the feast of Unleavened Bread, the celebration of the beginning of the harvest.⁴ The two feasts were finally combined about the time of King Josiah, and marked the beginning of the great annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

But the whole life, and therefore the liturgy, of the chosen people was dominated by the memory of one event: the exodus from Egypt. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread, at first separately, and then together, increasingly lost their original significance and became the annual celebration of the exodus, of their liberation from Egypt, and of the covenant that had made them God's own people.

¹ Acts 2, 1.

² *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 102.

³ De Vaux, R., *Ancient Israel* (London, 1961), p 489.

⁴ Cf Deut 16, 9.

In addition to the feast of Unleavened Bread, there was another feast which had its origins in the agricultural life of Canaan. This feast marked the end of the harvest, and was the feast of the first fruits. It took its title, the feast of Weeks from the fact that it was celebrated fifty days (seven times seven plus one) after the feast of Unleavened Bread.

'You shall count seven weeks; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you put the first sickle to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the feast of Weeks to the Lord your God'.¹

However, in contrast to the other Jewish feasts, this feast did not develop into one of the annual celebrations of saving history. 'It remained a harvest festival which in course of time diminished in significance and in the time of Christ had become merely the joyous concluding day of the Jewish Passover – the time when one went on pilgrimage'.² This, then, was the day on which that special outpouring of the Spirit took place which Luke fastens on to develop his theology of the sending of the Spirit from the side of the glorified Christ.

Before passing rapidly on to consider the development of the Christian feast, there is one further fact to be taken into consideration. About the beginning of our era the Jewish Pentecost did acquire significance in terms of salvation history. The sealing of the covenant on Mount Sinai had taken place fifty days after the escape from Egypt: there is evidence that, by the second century A.D., the feast of Weeks had also become a covenant celebration, and the annual commemoration of the giving of the law to Moses. Did this development have any influence on the early Church? One of the greatest of contemporary biblical scholars is emphatic that it did not: '... there is no connection between the Christian feast of Pentecost and the feast of Weeks as understood by the Qumran community or, in later days, by orthodox Judaism. The story in Acts contains no allusions to the Sinaitic covenant nor to the new covenant of which Christ is the mediator'.³ But this judgement perhaps demands qualification. The theophany recorded in Acts (the 'mighty wind', and the 'tongues as of fire') not only bears a general resemblance, in terms of imagery, to many Old Testament theophanies, but it

¹ Deut 16, 9; Exod 23, 16; 34, 22; Lev 23, 15–16; Num 28, 26.

² Schillebeeckx, E., O.P., 'Ascension and Pentecost', *Worship* (1961), p 343.

³ De Vaux, R., *op. cit.*, p 495. Cf Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 343: 'This interpretation (in terms of the promulgation of the law) has no foundation in scripture'.

seems quite particularly to recall the events at Mount Sinai.¹ Moreover, the 'little Pentecost'² when the descent of the Spirit was accompanied by the shaking of the 'place in which they were gathered', is strongly reminiscent of the quaking of the mountain round which were gathered the old people of God on the occasion of the promulgation of the old covenant.³

If we are correct⁴ in seeing in this imagery an awareness on Luke's part of a tradition that was beginning to develop in Judaism, then the interpretation of Pentecost in terms of the giving of the 'new law'⁵ which appears in St Augustine,⁶ and continues through to St Thomas⁷ is not entirely devoid of biblical foundation.

Be that as it may, the dominant understanding of the feast at the time of our Lord was certainly in terms of its character as the harvest festival of the first-fruits, marking the end of the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The consciousness of the early Christian community was dominated by the joy and wonder of the present situation in which they found themselves; that of a people 'no longer strangers and sojourners . . . (but) a dwelling place of God in the Spirit'.⁸ It is true that they had a keen sense of expectancy as they awaited the 'coming of our Lord Jesus',⁹ it is true that they were aware of the fact that the situation in which they found themselves drew all its power and significance from a past event: the death and resurrection of Christ. But, in contrast to the Jewish people, whose chief preoccupation had been the wonderful works of God in the past, and the distant fulfilment of his promises in the future, the early Church was above all aware of the here-and-now presence of the risen Lord in the Spirit.

They were keenly conscious of the fact that the resurrection of Christ, the Lord of history, marked the beginning of the end of history: that they were living in the 'last time'. It is this that explains the fact that, when they assembled for worship, they were celebrating their incorporation into the paschal mystery here and now, rather than remembering past events in the history of salvation.¹⁰

¹ Cf Exod 19, 16-20.

² Acts 4, 31.

³ Cf Exod 19, 18.

⁴ For a similar interpretation, cf de Surgy, in *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique* (Paris, 1962), col 797.

⁵ Cf Jer 31, 33; Exod 36, 27.

⁶ Cf Daniélou, J., S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (London, 1960), p 331.

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, Ia. IIae. 103. 3. ad 4.

⁸ Eph 2, 19-22.

⁹ 1 Thess 3, 13.

¹⁰ *Il s'agissait donc pour eux non de commémorer, comme les juifs, les événements de l'histoire de salut, mais de vivre 'l'aujourd'hui' du Mystère Pascal*, Cabié, 'La Cinquantaine Pascale', *La Maison-Dieu* 83 (1965), p 136.

All this is only a question of emphasis, but it had important consequences for the content of their worship. The first christians knew only a weekly celebration of the paschal mystery: the Lord's day. In the third century an annual feast did begin to appear, but it was an annual celebration of the whole paschal mystery. As the jews had known an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem lasting fifty days, so the annual Great Sunday¹ lasted fifty days, from Easter to Pentecost. As each Sunday was the 'eighth day', the celebration of the completion of history, the beginning of the eschatological rest, so the fifty-day feast (seven times seven plus one) was the 'eighth day' par excellence. In christian terminology, therefore, Pentecost came to mean the whole period of paschal festivity and, as such, it was principally a celebration of the resurrection.²

But, just as the day of Pentecost was, for late judaism, a day of special celebration because it marked the end of the annual pilgrimage, so the last day of the christian Pentecost acquired a particular solemnity. When the Fathers of the Church looked for the special significance of this fiftieth day, they looked, not unnaturally, to its jewish antecedents: 'We say that it is the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord which is signified by the feast of the first-fruits'.³ The jewish harvest festival, then, is 'baptized' in christian tradition, but as the end of the annual celebration of the resurrection of Christ, 'the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep'.⁴

During the fourth century, however, the fortieth day after Easter began to be celebrated in some places as a feast of the glorification (ascension) of Christ. This seems to have been due, in the first place, not to the chronology of Acts, but to the fact that, in the jewish calendar used in these parts of the Church, this day was the fiftieth day of the passover celebrations.⁵ This is borne out by the fact that, in other parts of the Church, the last day of the Pentecost was now being celebrated as a feast of the Ascension.⁶

¹ St Athanasius, PG 26, 1366.

² 'The whole of Pentecost calls to our mind the resurrection', St Basil the Great, PG 32, 192.

³ Cyril of Alexandria, PG 68, 1093, quoted by Daniélou, who comments: 'For Cyril the content of the feast of Pentecost is the resurrection . . . Cyril distinguishes Easter from Pentecost not by its content, which is the same, but by the aspect under which it is considered' (*op. cit.*, pp 322-324). Cf other references to Cyril, Origen, Eusebius and Maximus of Turin in Daniélou, *op. cit.*, and Cabié, *art. cit.*

⁴ 1 Cor 15, 20.

⁵ Cf Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 346, 4.

⁶ Cf references to Eusebius and Maximus of Turin given in Jounel, 'Le Temps Pascal. II: La Tradition de l'Eglise', *La Maison Dieu* 67 (1961), p 168.

Not surprisingly, the coming together of these two-traditions influenced the whole attitude towards the annual celebration of the paschal mystery. The unity of this celebration began to be lost, and St Luke's chronology in Acts governed the gradual appearance of a feast of the Ascension on the fortieth day after Easter, and a feast of the outpouring of the Spirit on the fiftieth day. Within a century the dissolution of the Great Sunday was complete. The fifty days of paschal joy had shrunk to seven (Easter week). The preoccupation with chronology led to the introduction of fasting (hitherto strictly forbidden in paschaltide) between the fortieth and fiftieth days (the time of the Lord's 'absence'). Pentecost (now a day, not a period) acquired a vigil (in imitation of the vigil of Easter) and when, towards the end of the sixth century, Pentecost itself acquired an 'extension' (an octave), the process of fragmentation was complete.

If we are going to be able to evaluate this development, and to decide to what extent it represents a positive advance, and to what extent the loss of something valuable, we must now return to the New Testament and outline the theology of the sending of the Spirit in the context of the mystery of Easter.

The Spirit of Easter

The principal doctrinal development of the Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy was the re-establishment, at the centre of christian life and worship, of the paschal mystery.¹ The event that redeemed the world is the redemptive incarnation of the Word of God. But that event is only complete in his establishment in glory at his Father's side. In the days of his flesh, Jesus was still at some 'distance' from his Father. Although he personally knew no sin, he became part of an alienated humanity, mankind isolated by sin from the glory of God: 'for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin'.² The culmination of the incarnation is the conquering of death and sin, the 'closing of the gap' between God and man, in the passage of Christ through death to glory. Only in the ascension is the incarnation complete, because only then is the humanity of Christ filled with the Spirit of God.

¹ Cf arts. 5, 6, 10, 47, 81. Among the many excellent works on the paschal mystery that have appeared in recent years, mention should be made of an outstanding collection of essays in liturgical theology in *La Maison-Dieu* 67-68 (1961).

² 2 Cor 5, 21.

But this establishment of Christ in glory only brings about our redemption in so far as it makes possible our incorporation into the risen Christ. The purpose of the paschal mystery, as the realization of God's glory in the humanity of Christ himself, is to establish him as source of the Spirit to bring about the same process of recreation, renewal, divinization in us,¹ the members of Christ. In the days of his flesh, Jesus could arouse a response in his hearers which was already supernatural because it was the free response of man to the freely given Word of God. But the dwelling of God amongst his people is only complete when he dwells amongst them, not as a man among men, but as the very principle of their thinking and their loving: when he dwells in them through the gift of the Spirit.² In the days of his flesh Jesus promised the Spirit, but 'as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified'.³

Our redemption, as a reality transforming us personally, is dependent on the glorification of the Son of Man. Only when one of us (our head) who, like us, was 'far from God', has become fully with God (Emmanuel), can he bring us close (redeem us, recreate us) in the Spirit. That is why 'without the resurrection and its consequent glorification, in which the Father establishes Christ in his humanity as a principle of the Holy Spirit, we would not be redeemed'.⁴

Now we see why it is that the sending of the Spirit is essentially a part of the easter event.⁵ 'Included in the resurrection, as the eternally-enduring saving status of Christ, there is also the ascension, his establishment as Lord, and the sending of the Spirit which is Christ's exercise of actual lordship. Essentially, all this together forms the one and only enduring mystery of salvation: the very person of the glorified man Jesus as the reality of salvation'.⁶

There is, however, one important difference between the sending of the Spirit and the other parts of the easter event. Whereas the death, resurrection and glorification of Christ took place once and for all, the sending of the Spirit is continuous activity, from Easter Sunday until the consummation of the kingdom at the end of time.

¹ The eastern Church, in particular, has never been frightened of thus describing our transformation by grace: clearly the term needs using with discretion.

² 'When we cry, Abba! Father! it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God', Rom 8, 15-16.

³ Jn 7, 39.

⁴ Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 352.

⁵ '... the actual christian Pentecost is therefore an Easter event' (Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 341).

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 347. Cf Eph 1-2; Phil. 2, 5-11.

If, therefore, by Pentecost, one means the sending of the Spirit by the risen Christ, it is true that 'Pentecost is the eternally continuing actuation or application of this mystery in and through the holy Spirit who now realizes and perfects in us that which was consummated in Christ'.¹

This aspect of the pentecostal mystery, as a continuing reality, is clear from the innumerable occasions in the letters of St Paul, and in the prayers of the liturgy, in which we pray for the 'coming' of the holy Spirit. It is also clear from the number of occasions, other than the day of Pentecost itself, on which the 'descent of the holy Spirit' is recounted in Acts.² Moreover, it should not be overlooked that St John, whose theology shows such a strong sense of the unity of the paschal mystery, records the first 'sending of the Spirit' as taking place on Easter day itself.³ We can, therefore, agree that '... there is something arbitrary in the promotion of the fiftieth day after Easter to the feast of Pentecost as the sending forth of the holy Spirit. This is obviously a case of thematic presentation (based on historical fact), and in the present instance also in connection with the Jewish Pentecost'.⁴

We are now in a position to examine more closely St Luke's account, in the second chapter of Acts, of that outstanding 'descent of the Spirit' that took place on the feast of Pentecost and to discover, in more detail, the significance of this event for our understanding of the paschal mystery in the life of the Church. This will inevitably involve a certain amount of repetition, as we have already touched on some of the relevant ideas.

The eschatological outpouring of the Spirit

Throughout the Old Testament, the image of the breath of God (spirit, wind) had been a primary image for describing the creative activity of God,⁵ his inspiration of those who were to bring his word to his people,⁶ his sovereign guidance of the Messiah,⁷ his gathering of the messianic people. It is this last point on which Luke concentrates: the creation of the messianic people of God in the power of the Spirit is a sign of the 'last days'.⁸ The Church, the community called by God, is a community in which each member

¹ Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 348.

² Cf Jn 20, 21-23.

³ Gen 1, 2; Ps 104, 30.

⁴ Num 11, 25; 1 Sam 10, 6; Ezek 2, 2; Zech 7, 12.

⁵ Acts 2, 17; cf Joel 2, 28-29; Isai 32, 15-18; Ezek 37.

⁶ Cf e.g. Acts 4, 31; 8, 15-17; 10, 44; 19, 6.

⁷ Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 342.

⁸ Isai 11, 2.

has been renewed by the Spirit. The covenant finds its fulfilment here, for the law, which structured the community, has now become an interior reality in the hearts of God's faithful people.¹ The people thus created and united by the Spirit are a joyful brotherhood who meet together to hear the teaching of the apostles and to break bread.²

A community of witness

As the witnesses to God in the Old Testament had been inspired by the Spirit, so Jesus had promised that the apostolic community's witness would be grounded in, and assured by, the gift of the Spirit.³ It is important to insist that all office in the Church is a gift of the Spirit,⁴ and that the Spirit is not bound by the confines of office.⁵ Apart from the fact that some of the more startling charismatic gifts are no longer common, the characteristics that Luke notes of the new people of God remain the essential features of the Church. 'Certainly, there is a difference between the suddenness of the renewing change in the apostles, from the way they were before Pentecost to the way they were afterwards, and the change in our own christian lives which are renewed by the Spirit only silently, unobservedly and gradually. But still, the difference is also due, partly, to our own lack of sprightly faith in the power of the Spirit'.⁶

A universal community

So far as Luke's account of the miracle of tongues is concerned, it seems probable that, as so often in the bible, two originally independent accounts of the incident have been merged. The first⁷ would see the gift of tongues as ecstatic (and therefore unintelligible) 'speaking with tongues', the sign of men completely taken over by the Spirit.⁸ The second⁹ would see in the fact that the new community speaks in the accents of all men a sign that the destruction of human community through sin¹⁰ has been healed. Both ideas are important if we are to capture the full significance of Peter's sermon, but the second, in particular, stresses the universality of the new community in the Spirit.

¹ Jer 31, 33; Ezek 36, 24-28. In regard to these texts, cf remarks above (p 185) about the later rabbinic interpretation of the Jewish Pentecost as a covenant-feast.

² Acts 2, 42-47.

³ Acts 2, 4; cf 1, 8; Mt 10, 17-20; Jn 15, 26-27.

⁴ Eph 4, 11-13; 1 Cor, 12; cf *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

⁵ Cf Jn 3, 5-8.

⁶ Schillebeeckx, *art. cit.*, p 357.

⁷ Acts 2, 4, 12ff.

⁸ Cf 1 Cor 14, 1-25.

⁹ Acts 2, 5-11.

¹⁰ Gen 11, 1-9.

The fulfilment of the paschal mystery

The theme of the second part of Peter's sermon is that this eschatological outpouring of the Spirit can only be understood in relation to the glorification of Jesus Christ.¹ We have already discussed this aspect of the mystery of Pentecost in sufficient detail.

The paschal mystery, the achievement of the covenant-relationship of mutual life, knowledge and love between God and his people, realized in the person of Christ at Easter, is made a permanent dimension of human history 'in these last times' through the continual sending of the Spirit. There now exists a community, drawn from 'every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues'² whose members have been called by God to new life 'through water and the Spirit', whose functionaries have been sent by Christ in the Spirit to continue the apostolic ministry, whose duty it is to witness to the resurrection of Jesus 'to the end of the earth',³ whose role in history is that of 'sacrament of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race',⁴ whose principle of life is the Spirit of Easter, who, 'by the power of the gospel . . . gives the Church youth and continual renewal, and brings her safe to the consummation of union with her bridegroom. For the Spirit and the bride say to the Lord Jesus: Come'.⁵

We said earlier that the principal doctrinal achievement of the Constitution on the Liturgy was the re-establishment, at the centre of christian life and worship, of the paschal mystery. Another, almost equally important point of doctrinal emphasis is the stress on the manifold presence of the risen Christ in the priestly people.⁶ But to say 'presence of the risen Christ' is to say 'grace', or 'presence in the Spirit'. If we combine these two factors, we see that the constitution is expressing the rediscovery in the Church of the perspective that dominated the early christian consciousness; a perspective that we described earlier as a vivid awareness of our incorporation here-and-now into the paschal mystery.

This recovery of a balance in our christian thinking will be accompanied by a reform of the liturgical calendar, so that we can experience again the joy of the Great Sunday, the fifty-day celebration of the resurrection that is sealed by the feast of Pentecost.⁷

¹ Acts 2, 32-36.

² Apoc 7, 9.

³ Acts 1, 8.

⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4; cf Apoc 22, 17.

⁶ Cf *ibid.*, 7.

⁷ It seems very probable that, as a first step, the octave of Pentecost will be removed in the near future. Cf *Notitiae*, 6, p 151.

There is no question here of archeologism. We shall not lose the detailed understanding, acquired over the centuries, of the elements of the paschal mystery. But the contemplation of these elements, the death of the Lord, his resurrection, glorification, and the sending of the Spirit must not distract us from a clearer vision of the whole. The celebration of the liturgy is never a simple matter of keeping an anniversary; it is always our joyful encounter, in the Spirit, across the sacramental signs, with the risen Lord of history, through whom we give to God, the almighty Father, in the unity of the holy Spirit, all honour and glory.¹

¹ Cf the end of the canon of the mass.