

# PENTECOST

Pentecost is traditionally one of the three major holy days (“feast days”) of the Christian Year – the other two being Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. Its title, “Pentecost”, simply means “fifty days”, as it occurs fifty days after Easter Sunday. Therefore, like Easter, it is also a “moveable feast”, not set, as is Christmas on a specific date. Another name for Pentecost is “Whitsunday” or “White Sunday” because it is traditionally a day for the baptizing of converts to Christianity who wear white robes. In reality, the color for Pentecost/Whitsunday is red, to symbolize fire and blood – the fiery descent of the Holy Spirit and the blood of martyrs.

The Christian feast of Pentecost is actually built upon the Jewish festival of the Feast of First Fruits (Deut. 16:9), which was also called “Pentecost” because the Feast of First Fruit comes fifty days after Passover! As the Christian Pentecost is one of the Church’s three most important festivals, so the Feast of First Fruits was one of ancient Israel’s three festivals.

The Feast of First Fruits (Deut. 16:9-12; Lev. 23:15-21) was to occur at the harvest of the spring wheat, seven weeks after its planting close to Passover. All were to gather at the Temple to make their offerings out of the abundance of their harvest and to thank God. After the offering was given at the Temple, the family was to gather for a celebratory meal.

But this meal was not for them alone. They were to invite to the meal “your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, the strangers, the orphans and the widows” with whom the family has a relationship in order to share your abundance with them. And why should each family share its abundance with the poor? “Remember that you were a slave in Egypt” (Dt. 16:12a); you were poor and powerless once yourself, so remember those who are now poor or powerless in your midst. Thus, the Feast of First Fruits was not only a religious holiday of thanksgiving, of celebration and of feasting; it was also a vehicle to reverse poverty and powerlessness in the community.

As the Jewish feast of First Fruits celebrated the liberation and empowerment of the nation’s poor, so the Christian feast of Pentecost is designed to celebrate the liberation and empowerment of God’s people through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is popularly called the “Birthday of the Church” (even though the church was birthed at the resurrection of Jesus, and even though its origins lay in the congregation of ancient Israel). It is so called because on this day, the Holy Spirit fell upon the gathered followers of Jesus with “tongues of fire”, and the church was launched into its mission of bringing the good news of liberation and salvation through Jesus to the world (Acts 2:1-21).

Thus, Pentecost occupies a very strategic place in the Christian Year, for it stands between that half of the year that celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ and the second half of the year celebrating the creation and mission of the church. It concludes the church’s celebration of the advent, birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. And it introduces the observance of the “church militant”, as we rehearse and encourage ourselves from June through November of a church deeply engaged in the world, bringing good news in sign, deed and word of God’s work to transform the world into the world as God intended it to be!

## **Pentecost Sunday**

**Acts 2:1-21 or Gen. 11:1-9; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; John 14:8-17, 25-27; Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21**

**Acts 2:1-21** is the account of the anointing of the Holy Spirit falling upon the followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost (Feast of the First Fruits), and thus signaling the birth of the church. The scripture lesson actually covers two portions of that story: the giving of the Spirit to the Christian community (2:1-13), and the introduction of Peter's sermon delivered to the Jews who observed this filling of the Holy Spirit (2:14-21; the entire speech runs through vs. 36).

“When the day of Pentecost had come, the believers were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4).

This great event was both climax and inauguration. It was the climax of Jesus' work among the disciples as they, like him, were filled with the observable power of the Holy Spirit. It was inauguration, because it was the clear indication from God that the mantle had shifted from Jesus to his followers who would each now become a “little Christ” (the real meaning of the word “Christian”) to the world. Thus Pentecost marked the birth of the apostolic mission of the church, bringing Jesus' kingdom of God (the shalom community) to the whole world.

It was particularly auspicious that this filling of the Spirit and consequent commissioning of the church occurred on the Feast of Pentecost. The word “Pentecost” literally means “fifty days” in Greek. Pentecost was the festival that followed fifty days after Israel's celebration of Passover – the birthday of Israel! It was the festival of “First Fruits” (Deut. 16:9-12; Lev. 23:15-21), in which Israel both celebrated the spring harvest (the “first fruits” of that year's crops) and remembered its origins as impoverished slaves in Egypt (Dt. 16:12) by sharing their abundance with the poor and powerless in an intentional reversal of the nation's fortune.

Now, in essence, a new “First Fruits” was being celebrated by a “new Israel”, as the Holy Spirit anointing of Jesus' followers declared that they were now called to carry Jesus' “kingdom of God” not just to Israel, but to all humanity. And that kingdom that they were to carry with them was one both of being chosen and blessed by God and of working to create a new world order where poverty would be eliminated and the powerless given power. These early disciples were the literal “First Fruits” of Jesus' redemptive and liberating work – and would now carry that fruit in their person as they worked for the redemption and liberation of the world!

That new mission would be symbolized in the actions of that day, when the Spirit's anointing of the followers of Jesus would be followed by their proclamation of this liberating news in the languages of all the people gathered in Jerusalem (2:5-13), Peter's sermon that calls upon Israel to embrace Christ and His Kingdom (2:14-36), the enthusiastic response of the people as they embrace the gospel (2:37-41), the creation of a Christian community that is based on the equitable sharing of wealth so that poverty would be eliminated (2:42-47), Peter's healing of a

paralyzed man (3:1-11) and his proclamation of God's new shalom community through Jesus in the very citadel of the vested interest of the Jewish "principalities and powers" (3:12-26).

In order to understand the significance of Luke's inclusion of the Pentecost story in his "Acts of the Apostles", one must recognize that in the Gospel of Luke, the Holy Spirit is confined to the empowerment of Jesus' own ministry. The only exceptions are those which are integral to the inauguration of the salvation history to be wrought through Jesus in the stories surrounding his birth – Mary (1:35), Elizabeth (1:41), John the Baptist (1:15, 17), Zechariah (1:67) and Simeon (2:25-27). Otherwise, Luke is very careful to attribute the filling and empowering of the Holy Spirit as being given exclusively to Jesus.

But now, the transfer takes place. That Spirit who had empowered Jesus was now given to all the followers of Jesus who would now be empowered to continue Jesus' ministry of redemption and liberation upon the earth. And signs are given to make clear that transfer of power. Those signs are "a mighty wind", tongues of fire and speaking in the languages of all those from around the world gathered in Jerusalem. Each gift is significant.

The gift of "a mighty rushing wind" or "violent wind" was, to all Jews, a symbol of the Holy Spirit's presence (Ex. 3:2; 13:21; 24:17; 40:38; I Kings 19:11-13; Ezek. 37:9, 13). In fact, the Hebrew word for "Spirit" is "ruach" or "wind", while the Greek word "pneuma" means both "wind" and "spirit". The gift of "tongues of fire" was a symbol of God's cleansing and judging power (Isa. 6:6-7; Matt. 3:11, 12). And speaking in all the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem (those languages are named in vs. 9-11) was the clear indicator and manifestation of the Spirit's occupation of these disciples of Jesus. In fact, the people observing this phenomenon commented, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans (in other words, these are unlettered, unschooled people from the poorest and most ignorant area of our country)"? How is it that we hear each of us, in our own native language, about God's deeds of power" (2:7—8, 11b)? This was clearly a miracle that only God could perform.

Thus, the wind, the tongues of fire, and clear communication in all the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost<sup>1</sup> are the three signs of the Spirit's indwelling and empowering of Jesus' followers. The Jews, of course, responded in two predictable ways to these manifestations of the Spirit. Some accepted the phenomenon as truly of God and embraced Jesus and His Kingdom (the shalom community) – and their acceptance into this new way of life that impacted their politics, economics and values is recorded in Acts 3. And other Jews rejected the evidence, with the excuse "These followers of Jesus are filled with new wine" (vs. 13).<sup>2</sup> Some believed. And others closed themselves to the message.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this incident is not a manifestation of *glossolalia*, or the speaking in tongues (speaking in a Spirit language). That gift of ecstatic utterance is recorded in the scriptures (e.g., I Cor. 12:10, 28, 30; 14:2, 4-6, 9) but it is not the gift given in this incident. The text is very clear that Jesus' followers were speaking in the primary or heart languages of the people gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the Feast of the First Fruits; the emphasis of the text is not on the gift of tongues, but on the imperative of carrying the gospel to the whole world.

<sup>2</sup> Peter's response to those who accused the Christians of being drunk is significant. He replied, "These are not drunk, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning" (2:16). That is not a statement of early morning sobriety ("it's too early to be drinking so thoroughly"). Rather, part of the liturgy of the Feast of the First Fruits (Pentecost) is that everyone was to fast in both food and drink from the last meal of the previous day until 10:00 in the morning of the next day; only at 10:00 could they take their first drink of wine. So these Christians, who obediently followed the

In the light of this criticism, Peter speaks to the crowd. He quotes from Joel 3:1-5, indicating that this prophet predicted that, in the latter days, there would be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God that would be manifested with wind, tongues of fire and truth-telling. *That* is what you Jews have observed – God coming to his people. So listen, take seriously what you are seeing, do not dismiss it – for it may be the very word of God to you! So hear that word, call upon the name of the Lord, and embrace Jesus and his coming shalom community (manifested in the life and actions of his church, right here and now – 2:42-47). For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21).

Acts 2:1-21 can be used in the Pentecost lectionary either in place of the Old Testament lesson or as the Epistle lesson.

**Genesis 11:1-9** is the story of the Tower of Babel. It is particularly intriguing as the Old Testament lesson for Pentecost Sunday because it contrasts with the story of Pentecost in that in both instances, the movement of God brings about the speaking of a multiplicity of languages. But in the Old Testament lesson, the introduction of many languages was designed to confuse the people “so that they will not understand one another’s speech” and thus be stopped from working together. In the lesson of Acts 2:1-21, the opposite occurs because, filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostles speak in the multiplicity of languages of the earth about the saving work of Jesus Christ, and thus bring meaning and purpose to all those who hear them. Thus, one instance of the multiplying of languages brings confusion while the other multiplication brings clarity.

The story is a classic tale. In it, the people determine, “Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (11:4). All cities in ancient Mesopotamia were built around a ziggurat or “tower” with “its top” reaching toward “the heavens”. That ziggurat was the center of the worship of that city’s god. With its ziggurat constructed in its center, the city would spread out from that core with political and economic centers and homes ranging from palaces to hovels. Finally, the city would be surrounded by a wall so that it was both contained and protected against outside attack.

In this story, God visits this city that these mortals are making. In his angelic council, God declares, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech” (vss. 6-7). God, indeed, does go down and confuses their languages, so that they are “scattered abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city”.

This story of the Tower of Babel can be legitimately interpreted in two distinct ways, but both interpretations are essentially about human *hubris*. The more traditional interpretation is that this

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Law, would not be so gross as to be drunk at 9:00 in the morning on a sacred feast day like Pentecost! There has to be another explanation for their capacity to speak in other languages, Peter is saying – and that explanation is their anointing by the Holy Spirit!

is a story of humanity's effort to take control of its own existence away from God and to invest it in themselves. This interpretation is captured in their self-assured words, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" (vs. 4a). The people plan an assault of heaven by the acts of creating a city (a manmade environment) and assuming responsibility for their own salvation by building a tower that will assault God by taking any worshipper who chooses to climb it to "its top in the heavens". Concentrating the text upon God's words, "This is the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (vs. 6b), God acts to stop the *hubris* or pride of the people by confusing their language, making them unable to work together to complete the tower's construction. Thus, the human effort to both dominate the environment and even to dominate God is stopped by God, as the passion of humans for control and mastery is thwarted.

A second interpretation is that this story is not about human domination but about the drive of humans toward homogeneity rather than the divine intention of human diversity. But that is also an issue of *hubris*. One comes to this interpretation of the story by noting the use of key words in the text. The word "one" is used five times in the story (vss. 1, 3, 6a, 6b, 7) and the word "scattered" three times (vss. 4, 8, 9). It is generally recognized by biblical scholars that the repeated use of key words in a Hebrew story is of particular importance, indicating a major theme of that story. Further, the people themselves give voice to their need to maintain their homogeneity. "Come, let us build ourselves a city; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (vs. 4). Thus, in this statement, the people indicate that their great fear is not that they lack control and mastery, but that they fear that their homogeneity will be disrupted, so that they "shall be scattered" around the world and will be separated from the security of each other.

God's response to the human effort to maintain their homogeneity is expressed in his statement of verses six and seven. First, God states the problem: "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language" (vs. 6a). The problem is that they are united into one significant human force, and that is because they speak one language that unites them. The problem is their homogeneity, according to this text, not their lust for power.

But can God's definition of the problem be interpreted any other way than that the people are concerned with controlling even God, when God says, "This is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (vs. 6b)? Well, in fact, the Hebrew text can legitimately be translated differently. An equally justifiable translation of verses 6-7 could read, "If this is how they have started to act while they are one people with a single language, then nothing that they may presume to do will be out of their reach. Let me, then, go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's talk" (E.A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964], p. 74). In other words, the emphasis can legitimately be placed upon the people setting themselves to a task designed to hold themselves together as a single people – and if they succeed, then "nothing will be out of their reach".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, Genesis 11:6-7 is a good example of how *a priori* beliefs of the translator can influence the translation. Either translation of the Hebrew is equally legitimate; there is no way for biblical scholars today to know the intent of the people writing this passage. Therefore, translators of the NRSV, holding to the domination

God's solution is the same. "Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech" (vs. 7). And the results are still the same. "So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city" (vs. 8). Creating multiple languages instead of a single tongue had its inevitable consequences. No longer able to communicate, the people were scattered seeking homogeneity with those who spoke their same new language while shunning all those speaking other tongues. And the project was abandoned. In the second interpretation, it is stressed that God's intention is diversity, not homogeneity. God desires that humans differ from each other, but rather than perceiving such diversity as being divisive, understanding it as creating a much richer mosaic of human creativity that can be embraced and celebrated and thus become the means to discover the authentic oneness of us all.

So take your pick! Is it the lust for power that drove humans to build the Tower of Babel? Or was it such a commitment to maintaining their homogeneity that they could not allow themselves to discover their capacity for rich diversity? Whether it was a lust for power or a fear of the stranger, the results were the same. Humans sought to control God and their environment, and in considering and acting upon such an objective, demonstrated that they neither understood the worldwide nature and power of God nor their own limitations. Thus, either way, they were guilty of *hubris*.

There is one more intriguing nuance in this story. The story ends with the words, "Therefore, the city is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth" (vs. 9). There is an intriguing Hebrew play on words in this sentence. The name "Babel" is a form of the name "Babylon". The Hebrew word translated "confused" is the word "balal" – pronounced exactly like "Babel" but substituting the "l" sound for the second "b" sound. Therefore, the Hebrew was stated, "The city is called Babel because there the Lord baled the language". Thus, the name "Babel" or "Babylon" came to mean "mixed up" or "confused", so that in English, we refer to the "babel" (or incoherent sounds) of people!

The author of Genesis 11 engaged in this play on words in order to make a statement about Babylon. To the author, the Babylonian nation was a nation of "mixed up" or "confused" people, of "barbarians" whose language seemed to be nothing more than babel. They were an unintelligible people living by standards and values thoroughly foreign from those of Israel and thus seemingly confused. Yet they were committed to world domination and therefore of the domination and even destruction of Israel itself. Therefore, they were a people to be greatly feared.

Thus it was that, in the scriptures, the name "Babylon" or "Babel" became a synonym for the worst evil imaginable. Babylon is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of a city fully given over to Satan. The city is introduced in this Old Testament lesson in humanity's decision to build a Tower of Babel (the Plain of Shinar, mentioned in 11:2 as the location of the city of the

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interpretation of this passage, translate it in a way that seems to support that interpretation, while scholars like Speiser and Theodore Hiebert (*Genesis* in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*), committed to the homogeneity interpretation, translate it in a way that supports their interpretation.

ziggurat, was later the location of Babylon). God confused their languages because the people there built a city “with a tower that reaches to the heavens” in order to be able to “make a name for ourselves” (11:4).

Babylon receives its final attention in Revelation 16 to 18, where it is portrayed as the epitome of evil, a city totally given over to world domination, wealth and pleasure. “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth” (Rev. 17:5) is the city’s epitaph as every detail of it is removed from the face of the earth because of its willing domination by the Evil One.

In between the first and last books of the bible, the city of Babylon is synonymous with all that is dark and evil in a city. Babylon is portrayed in Scripture as a bureaucratic, self-serving, and dehumanized social system with economics geared to benefit its privileged and exploit its poor, with politics of oppression and with a religion that ignores covenant with God and instead deifies power and wealth (e.g., Isa. 14:5-21; Jer. 50:2-17; 51:6-10; Dan. 3:1-7; Rev. 17:1-6; 18:2-19, 24). The army of the Babylonian empire, centered around this city, was destined to destroy God’s nation of Judah, to burn its Temple to the ground, and to take its leaders into exile (Jer. 29:1-14, II Kings 24:1-25:30, II Chronicles 36:1-21; Daniel 1:1-5:31). This is the city to which we are first introduced in our Old Testament lesson for today, a story that is meant to stand in counter distinction to the Acts story, in which the multiplying of languages occurs for the advancement of God’s good news, a multiplying of languages that brings spiritual and social clarity in its wake rather than the confusion begun at the Tower of Babel!

**Psalm 104:24-34, 35b.** Psalm 104 is another of the grand psalms. Whenever I read it, I can hear an Anglican boys choir singing it with pure tones, for that is exactly what this psalm deserves!

The psalm is really a hymn to God as the creator and provider to the whole world. It teems with a love for life and for the whole created order – from the universe and the earth itself to wild animals, birds, the fish of the sea – even whales!

“O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it! These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the ground” (vv. 24-34).

This hymn to God and his creative providence for us all ends on a note of praise to him, and yet with an imprecation against those who refuse to recognize the creative and protective love of God. Thus, it ends on both a triumphant note and yet a disturbing note, creating a tension at its conclusion, a tension which is not resolved.

“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him for I rejoice in the Lord. Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord” (vss. 33-35).

**John 14:8-17, 25-27** begins with the disciple Philip’s statement to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (vs. 8). His use of the first person plural, rather than his saying “Show me the Father and I will be satisfied” is an indication that he likely speaks for the disciples. Jesus’ response to this request is pure exasperation. “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (Vss. 9-10)

What frustration Jesus must have felt at his disciples! They seemed not to get it at all! They had lived with him for close to three years now. They had seen his miracles and healings among the poor. They had watched him confront the religious and political leaders over and over again and call them to accountability. More than that, they had heard his words. Those teachings had been about the world as God intended it to be, the way that the greed and lust for domination by the powerful had corrupted that world, of the work of redemption and liberation that God wanted to do in all humanity – both peasant and powerful, and of the new community that God wanted to build among those who believed in him. But those teachings had also been about his person – his frequent use of “I AM” statements in a way that equated Yahweh with himself, his indication that it was through himself that salvation would come for the world, his previous declarations of his oneness with God in both mission and person (John 5, 7-8, 10). How could Philip and the others still not recognize that to know him was to know God?

Jesus continues in his response to Philip and the rest of the disciple band. “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (vss. 11-12).

Jesus continues his argument that, if one finds it hard to take his words, then take his actions. Look at his ministry. Note what he has done. And let those deeds witness to who he is and, consequently, what is the nature of the relationship between himself and God.

But then Jesus shifts the focus of his words. He moves from talking about the need for his followers to believe in him and his works, to talking about their works. “Those who believe in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father”. What does he mean by that? How could any disciple of Jesus do greater works than the Master himself?

Jesus is not stating here that any individual Christian will do greater miracles than he has done. Rather he is stating that the church’s work, as a community of faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit, will be accumulatively greater than Jesus’ works in either number or territory! Whereas Jesus’ works are limited by time (he could do only so many miracles during his brief three-year ministry) and space (he could do great works primarily in Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee), the

church would be doing Godly works from the time of Jesus' ascension to the "end of the age", and would eventually be doing such works all over the world.

But it is also true that Jesus' disciples will do what, ipso facto, Jesus cannot do. The essential task for the followers of Jesus is not just to do "good works" but to build a people of power – to create and shape and maintain and nurture and build up a community of believers that would carry on the work of Jesus and the building of God's kingdom from generation to generation and throughout the world. That is the one thing Jesus cannot do. That can only be done after Jesus has departed, and only a handful of followers are left behind. That is, ultimately, the "greater work" that the church must do. For the church must build the church – not as an institution or as buildings, but as a community of people knitted together around the same Lord, the same God and committed to the common cause of working for the liberation, redemption and ultimate transformation of the world.

But how will this handful of believers accomplish this great work? The followers of Jesus are so few, so scattered and so defeated – and Rome and the Jewish powers are so large and powerful and dominating. How can the believers be empowered to carry out the "greater work" with which Jesus is leaving them?

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you" (14:16-17).

"I will give you another Advocate – the Spirit of truth." Jesus promises them *another* Advocate, implying that there is an original advocate. That is, there already must be an already existing advocate before there can be "another" advocate. And that first advocate is Jesus himself! He has long assured his disciples in the Gospel of John that he who has been with them in the past, healing them, supporting them, going to battle for them before the Jewish religious and political leaders of Israel (and, later on, against the Roman emperor himself in the person of his envoy, Pilate) will continue to be with them. But Jesus is also saying that God will take even better care of Jesus' community after his death, in that he will give them "another Advocate" who is "the Spirit of truth".

What does Jesus mean by calling the Holy Spirit an "Advocate"? One will note, when looking at a spectrum of translations that a wide assortment of English words are used for the unique word Jesus uses for the Spirit in this text. Besides "advocate", the words "comforter", "counselor", "helper" is also used in various translations. What is precisely the role Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit will play within the Christian community?

The Greek word John has Jesus use in 14:16 is the word "parakletos" (in English, "Paraclete"). But what is a "parakletos"? In the Roman law court, the accused didn't hire a lawyer to present his defense. Rather, he was responsible for defending himself. Thus, in Acts 26:1-23, it is Paul himself who speaks in his own defense before King Agrippa and the governor of the Roman province of Syria, Festus.

But how could an ordinary Roman citizen know enough about the subtleties of Roman law to argue his own case? To do so, he hired a “parakletos” – an expert in Roman law who would literally “stand alongside him” during his trial and whisper into his ear what he needed to know so that he could present his best defense. Later Jewish writers, such as Philo, then picked up this concept of “parakletos” to write about the Temple priest or the Pharisee as being a Jew’s “advocate” before God!

So what Jesus was saying is that God has provided another “parakletos” to come alongside the Christian community and each individual Christian to advise, advocate, instruct and comfort them or him as they or he faithfully sought to carry out the mission to which their original “parakletos”, Jesus, had called them. In other words, this “Spirit of truth” is an extension of Jesus alive and at work in and among Jesus’ community today, enabling Jesus’ people to carry out the “greater work” to which God and Jesus (as one Lord) has called them! That is the “Spirit of truth” whose coming upon the church we celebrate on Pentecost Sunday!

**Romans 8:14-17** has within it a rather creative play on words in the Greek which cannot be easily translated into English. Because we don’t see that play on words when we read it, we don’t catch the depth, beauty or significance of Paul’s argument at that point. Let’s look at that play on words.

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children (actually, “sons” or “huios” in Greek) of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption (Greek, “huiiothesia”). When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Obviously, the play on words is found in the Greek words for “sons” (“huios”) and “adoption” (“huiiothesia”). The concept of adoption in the United States is a legal concept – that is, that one who is not legally a son or daughter of a couple can be legally made a son or daughter. In both Roman and Jewish societies, however, adoption was not just a legal arrangement where by law one became the child of a married couple; it was that they became in reality as well as at law the child of those parents. They became “flesh of their flesh” and “bone of their bone” as much as a man and a woman became one with each other in marriage. This belief was captured in the reality that in the Greek language, the word for adoption is quite literally built off the Greek word for “son”.

The other tender touch in this passage is that Paul uses the Aramaic word “Abba” to describe the one who has been “adopted” by God as a son. The word “Abba” was the word a very small child would call one’s father. It literally means “little father” or “daddy”. God, Paul is saying, is not the overwhelming patriarchal father to his adopted child but is “daddy” to him!

Recognizing this rich heritage both of adoption and of father-love, Paul states that our relationship with God is much the same. We “are led by the Spirit of God” to embrace the

reality that we are “sons of God”, he writes, “for you have received the spirit of ‘son-ness’” so that we now cry “daddy” when we see him or are in pain or need.

Jesus, Paul is declaring, held the greatest trust and intimacy with God, because he was “his only begotten Son” (to borrow from John). But we do too! Because of Jesus, we too are embraced by God as his children and have become “flesh of God’s flesh” and “bone of God’s bone”, so that we have “son-ness” bestowed upon us. The result is that we can embrace God as our daddy, who will be comfort, encourager and advocate for us, and whom we will seek to serve in the mission to which he has called us.

But how do we know this is so? How do we know that we have been chosen by God for adoption? How do we know that we have received “son-ness” and thus have the right to call God our daddy? “When we cry “Daddy” (to God), it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (vss. 15b-17a). We are assured that we are God’s child by the Holy Spirit “bearing witness” to our own inner spirit that we belong to God. The relationship, in other words, just feels right! There is a sense of “shalom”, of peace and well being that comes upon us when we think of God as daddy, for that is a witness borne to us by the Spirit of God herself!

But it doesn’t end there. Paul’s statement ends with a more somber note that keeps what he has written before it from degenerating into “twittering birds” theology. The text ends, “if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (vs. 17b). The Christian life does not begin, continue and end sufficed simply with rejoicing in the “son-ness” we have with God. The final sign of authentic “son-ness” is that, because of our inseparable relationship with God through Christ and witnessed to by the Spirit, we “in fact, will suffer with him”. Being a Christian means paying a price.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who knew what it meant to pay the price for following Christ,<sup>4</sup> poignantly wrote, “God is a God who *bears*. The Son of God bore our flesh, he bore the cross, he bore our sins, thus making atonement for us. In the same way his followers are also called upon to bear, and that is precisely what it means to be a Christian. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die!”<sup>5</sup>

But to be willing to be a Christian who bears, who will be willing to take on the pain of the world and to seek to do something about it means that one will “also be glorified with Christ”. Being children of God reaches its apex in both suffering and being glorified with Christ.

On New Years day of 1945, while awaiting likely execution in the Gestapo prison in Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote this poem, celebrating what it meant to be a son of God!

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<sup>4</sup> Bonhoeffer, who was a German theologian and pastor, became convinced of the evil of the Nazi regime and actively plotted for the assassination of Hitler. When the assassination attempt failed, Bonhoeffer was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, jailed in the worst conditions, acted as the minister to his fellow captives, and was executed on April 9, 1945 in the Flossenburg concentration camp just days before its liberation by the Allies.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (NY: Macmillan, 1963; first published as *Nachfolge*, 1937) pp. 102, 99.

*With every power for good to stay and guide me,  
comforted and inspired beyond all fear,  
I'll live these days with You in thought beside me,  
and pass, with You, into the coming year.*

*The old year still torments our hearts, unhastening;  
the long days of our sorrow still endure.  
Father, grant to the soul thou hast been chastening  
that Thou hast promised – the healing and the cure.*

*Should it be ours to drain the cup of grieving  
even to the dregs of death, at Thy command,  
we will not falter, thankfully receiving,  
all that is given by Thy loving hand.*

*But, should it be Thy will once more to release us  
to life's enjoyment and its good sunshine,  
that we've learned from sorrow shall increase us  
and all our life be dedicate as Thine.*

*While all the powers of Good aid and attend us,  
boldly we'll face the future, be it what may.  
At even, and at morn, God will befriend us,  
and oh, most surely on each new year's day!<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.