

Which Festival?

Many of you will have heard me ask, from the pulpit, the question - "Which Festival is your favourite?"

Is it Christmas, or Easter or Pentecost?

I think there is only one occasion when I actually asked a congregation for a response - usually it is left as a question to be considered individually.

I will declare a preference! - My favourite Festival has to be the one we celebrate this week, Pentecost.

I will try to explain why.

Christmas is a great Festival, celebrating as it does that moment when God took human form and came to dwell with us. The heavenly host dramatically revealed the event to the shepherds in the Bethlehem fields and they hurried up to the town from the fields down in the valley where they had been tending their sheep - anxious to find the new born baby in the manger, inside the stable. In another account (Matthew) we read how Magi came from the East, following the star and expecting the new "king" to be found in a palace. They are redirected from Herod's palace to Bethlehem after a search of the scriptures by the priests and teachers of the law.

We make a great deal of the celebration of this Festival. It is a family time, also a time of ever increasing shut-down of work places, offices and much trade. (After our current experiences, future Christmas shut-downs will probably seem to be short and insignificant!)

Christmas, an important event is rightly celebrated but I want to ask a question.

If nothing had followed the events of the first Christmas what would have been the outcome? Mary and Joseph would have returned to Nazareth with their baby and there Jesus would have been brought up, an ordinary chap, probably joining Joseph in working wood. Would we be worshipping today if the story was "just Christmas"?

Move on to Easter. The first thing we can say is that without Christmas there can be no Easter. If Jesus had not been born there could be no Palm Sunday, Holy Week, trial and crucifixion. There could be no Resurrection celebration on Easter Sunday.

When we look at the New Testament story we see that much of Jesus Ministry is heading to those final events in Jerusalem. In Matthew's Gospel we have that moment (chapter 16) where Simon Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Matthew continues in verse 21 to say *"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life".* (NIV)

It is part of a Plan - God's Plan.

God has taken human form in Jesus at Christmas, spends 3 years or so in active ministry culminating in His Death and Resurrection at Easter. The events of Easter are of course central to our faith as it is through the death of Jesus, the shedding of His blood on the cross that we find our salvation.

Another question!

If, again, nothing further had happened after Easter Sunday what would have been the outcome?

Would the Christian Church as we know it exist today? The Gospel writers give little insight into what happened between Easter Sunday, Ascension Day and Pentecost.

We know from John's Gospel that on Easter Sunday itself the disciples were locked away in the upper room *"for fear of the Jews"*. (KJV)

The final 12 verses of Mark, moving forward from the Resurrection - with Jesus commissioning His disciples, do not appear in the earliest Gospel texts. They appear to be early additions.

Luke concludes his Gospel with The Ascension after which the disciples are found continually in the temple, praising God.

At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records Jesus giving an instruction to his disciples - *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit."* (NIV v. 4-5)

(v.8) *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you"*

Luke appears to give a second account of the Ascension but both have Bethany / the Mount of Olives in common as the location. In Acts they return to Jerusalem - back to the upper room. Was there still a fear of the Jews?

We come to Pentecost - the promised power has arrived, they pile out of the upper room (?) praising God in all the languages of the visitors to Jerusalem who have come to celebrate the Jewish Festival of Pentecost. What a transformation - read again the Sermon that Peter preached that morning. It is powerful, confrontational but full of promise for those who accept what Peter is saying and place their belief in Jesus. We read that about 3000 did believe and accepted Jesus on that day.

So, Pentecost is my favourite - not for any single event of that day, but as the culmination and completion of God's Plan. The Lord has come into the world in the form of His Son who has taught and healed for a number of years.

As foretold in the Old Testament He must die but will rise again, revealing Himself to His disciples and promising them the "Advocate", the Holy Spirit who will bring power into their lives - power to continue the work God plans.

I was once challenged to read "Acts" as you would read a novel. I commend that challenge to you - if you accept it and read "Acts" in that way you will see why J.B.Phillips gave the title "THE YOUNG CHURCH IN ACTION" to his translation of The Acts of the Apostles.

The Young Church in Action was the Holy Spirit in Action within the Early Church - the Plan that God made for His people.

That Holy Spirit is still in action today if we are prepared to go as "He" directs and leads.

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