

A Reflection for the Solemnity of Pentecost from Fr Allan

Instead of a homily this week I have decided to share this abridged reflection that Archbishop George has sent. It has been written by someone called Eleanor Parker who is an historian. She muses on the Feast of Pentecost at various times called “Whitsun”.

This coming Sunday is Whitsun, the feast commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit to Christ’s disciples, fifty days after Easter. Wait, is that right? Wasn’t Easter Sunday more than seven weeks ago? If you have any real sense of what ‘seven weeks’ actually means in this strange season, when days and weeks are all alike and the usual landmarks of time have gone astray, you’re doing better than me.

Anyway, from the Middle Ages until the first half of the 20th Century, Whitsun and the week that followed was the chief summer holiday of the year in Britain. It was a time for all kinds of communal merry-making - the season for feasts and fairs, dancing and drinking, school and church processions and generally having a good time.

Though its roots lie in the Christian feast of Pentecost most of the festivities historically associated with Whitsun bear little direct relation to that event. More significant was the fact that the feast always falls in May or June - usually a promising time for outdoor events because of the hope of good weather.

In the early medieval church Pentecost was a common date for baptisms. The English name (Whitsun) was first recorded in the eleventh century and until the past few decades was more widely used than Pentecost. Most likely this name came from “White Sunday” referring to the garments worn by the newly baptised. However, folklore has also claimed a link to the “wit” or the “wisdom” that descended on the apostles and Our Lady in the upper room.

Records from the Middle Ages testify to the holiday spirit of Whitsun. It was a time of communal entertainment, dancing, plays and games. These had the useful function of fundraising for the local parish church. It was a festival for kings and for ordinary people. In the North of England in the 19th and early 20th Centuries mills and factories were closed and the workers were given holidays. Churches and Sunday schools would come together for Whit Walks and processions.

And then in 1971 it was decided that the Spring Bank Holiday should be a fixed rather than a moveable feast and would always fall on the last Monday in May. The holiday lost its centuries-long link to Whitsun; as a result even the name is now increasingly forgotten.

Eleanor Parker says that it is hard not to be sad at this particular time. Happy holiday crowds - crowds of any description are out of the question. This could be for a long time to come. Many people do not feel much like celebrating and all forms of outdoor leisure are filled with tension.

(Fr Allan says, “As the Church we have been saddened because we have not been able to celebrate fully our most holy feasts and seasons - Lent, Holy Week, the Triduum, Easter Sunday, Eastertide, Ascension and now Pentecost. These are amongst the most important times of the Church’s calendar and it saddens us because they seem to have been taken away

from us. These are feasts that give us hope and encouragement. They affirm us in our faith. We might feel that our faith is weakened because we feel that we are unable to give them the worthiness that is their due.)

Eleanor Parker says again that these feasts give a structure to the passage of time. Most religions recognise the importance of marking time and celebrating rites of passage. (In our parishes of All Hallows and St Dyfrig's we should have celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation with our young parishioners two weeks ago. Last weekend we would have celebrated Holy Communion with our young children). Over the past few months we have been stripped of all that. We have had to keep these feasts at home or online. Perhaps most painfully of all have been the restrictions with regards to funerals and the rites of grieving. (Fr Allan: I have told all the families of those who have died during this period that there will be the opportunity to celebrate a mass "In Memoriam" when we are able to do so). But all these are anchors and without them we drift.

It's hard to assess the cumulative effect of all those missed rituals.

The history of Whitsun is an example of how fundamental the precise observance of time has been for religions where time itself may be sacred. Pentecost means '50th'. It occurs 50 days after Easter. The reason the disciples were in Jerusalem was to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Weeks, seven weeks after Passover. The Christian Pentecost is shaped by the anniversary of that festival, which itself is an anniversary marking the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. St Bede the Venerable said in his sermon on Pentecost that in Old Testament law the fiftieth year was the year of jubilee when "the people were to rest from work, all debts were cancelled and slaves were to go free". He says that "50" represents heaven - the greatest rest of all. He says that in heaven all debts will be cancelled and all our sins will be forgiven. This will be eternity. There will be no time. There will be no need to keep anniversaries or feasts because the celebrations will be uninterrupted, without end.

She ends by saying that perhaps heaven is the only place where unmarked time is a blessing and not a curse.