

# The Feast of Pentecost

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

## Introduction

Pentecost is here — that feast of visitation.

Pentecost — or Shavuot in Hebrew — is a Jewish festival that was initially a celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest, but later became a celebration for the reception of the Law on Mount Sinai. For this year, the feast began on the evening of the 16th of May, finishing on the evening of the 18th of May. The Christian celebration of Pentecost is on Sunday the 23rd of May this year, and is a marking of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The festival — in both Judaism and Christianity — is an invitation into a joyous understanding of the radical nature of God's love. This concept of God's *love* can sound distant or weighty or even abstract. So, by way of preparation for this week, I invite you to think of someone whose love has changed your life; perhaps a child, perhaps a friend, perhaps a neighbour, perhaps a spouse or partner. Let the recollection of that love sit with you, and let the particularity of that love guide your heart in these reflections.

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## Text

**John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15**

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, she will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to the one who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send her to you. And when she comes, she will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness

and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth; for she will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever she hears, and she will declare to you the things that are to come. She will glorify me, because she will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that she will take what is mine and declare it to you.

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## Comment

The Jewish festival of Shavuot is one that was initially a thanksgiving for the first fruits of the wheat harvest but later became associated with the remembrance of the Law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Interestingly, the readings for this important festival also include the entire reading of the Book of Ruth. It is as if to say that the cosmic drama of Sinai — Moses ascending; the people below; the thunder; the lightning; the tablets of stone; the veil needed to shield Moses' face, the giving of the Torah to Moses — must be understood, and interpreted, through the lens of the quotidian drama of Bethlehem: two widowed women who've fled famine come to the town; one of them a returned exile, the other a Moabite.

Law — or, to be more precise, *Torah* — is an invitation to hold the realisation that the way I speak to the person who has arrived looking for refuge is in direct relation to the way I understand the divine precept of lovingkindness.

So, before we even think of Jesus' promises at the Last Supper, and the events of the Book of Acts, it is important to recollect the extraordinary nature of this feast. It is a great leveller. It is a way of saying *the face of God is the face of your neighbour; the voice of God is the voice of your neighbour; the language of God is the language of your neighbour, yes, even the neighbour you despise.*

Jesus promises that the Spirit of Truth will come (for the purposes of this week's text I used *She* to refer to the Spirit throughout, because in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, Spirit is always feminine, and in a tradition so populated with masculine terms when speaking of God, it always feels important to render the accuracy of *She* here). And when the Spirit does come, she comes among a city populated with visitors for the feast of Shavuot/Pentecost. The disciples are in one place, and a great wind — perhaps a violent wind — fills the entire house; and tongues of fire rest on each one of them. Here we have elements, air and fire, in the shape of a tongue, resting on each one of the gathered disciples. The cosmopolitan nature of the city of Jerusalem is described “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem”, and the disciples are filled with a capacity to speak in other languages.

This extraordinary text recalls the Tower of Babylon, where people felt they should ascend to God, and instead God scattered them with tongues that separated. Instead, now, we see a City where people have the capacity to speak to each other, in a way that leads to amazement, wonder, connection and bravery. The disciples who were afraid are now no longer afraid, and *language* is the thing that helps them connect. And, perhaps, deeper than language, they are enlivened by a spirit in the heart that lends them the courage to speak in ways that create connection and understanding; connection and understanding in a situation where neither were to be expected. The certain way for fear to continue is to let fear continue. Here, in

this feast, we see that most unusual thing: courage, and the creativity that emerges from the place of the heart.

This, then is the Spirit of Truth that the disciples were promised by Jesus. This is not a propositional truth, the kind that will win you arguments of apologetics. Rather this is the kind of truth that is an echo of love. The kind of truth that builds encounter between people separated by language, disposition and perspective. This is the kind of truth that leads to — and, indeed, *is* — love.

This extraordinary festival — in both the Jewish and Christian calendars — is one that invites large concepts like Law and Truth to be viewed through the lens of *What brings us together?* In the Jewish liturgy we hear that the occasion of a person coming to claim their right of belonging among a community that might not welcome her is an interpretive lens for Law; and in the Christian liturgy we hear of people who are enclosed in a room of fear suddenly having the language to speak to and understand their neighbour.

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## Response

In weeks when we are hearing the most awful news about deaths in Gaza, about rockets fired on Israel, about deaths, about comparisons of the numbers of deaths, about sectarian beatings, about escalating violence, and about disproportionate armaments, it is often overwhelming to know where to turn, who to agitate, and how to be involved for the sake of peace. Peace — however it comes — will be hard-won, but will also involve extraordinary people having the capacity to understand each other in ways that were previously deemed impossible.

In a festival that marks how the Divine Law must be understood through the lens of how a displaced person from a despised nation is treated; in a festival that marks how a Spirit of Truth can lead people who do not understand each other to understand each other; in a festival that marks the wonder of how Truth can lead communities of opposition into a sense of shared wonder, we recognise how powerful such festivals can be. And we — people who presumably have different readings of politics — are invited to think of the brutal questions that warmaking brings: what are we willing to tolerate in the name of being right?

Our prayer is that all those in positions of decision can recognise that too much wrong is tolerated, and that disproportionate aggressions must cease in order for that demanding thing — Peace — to be pursued.

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## Prayer

Spirit of Truth,  
Law that comes from the holy mountain,  
and in the tongue of a foreigner who  
makes her home among us,  
we are so often divided.

On this feast of Pentecost,  
we pray for all those who are separated  
by division, hostility, aggression, threat  
and grief.

Unite us all, we pray, surprise us by how  
even our grief can be the ground on which  
commitments to peace can flourish.

In the places of power, of disproportionate power,  
let that strange gift called understanding  
grow:  
understanding that leads to a change of heart,  
understanding that leads to a commitment  
to the other, in the hope that the other, too,  
will flourish in this strange truth  
that can grow where it is least expected.

We ask this because we know we need it,  
every life, every friendship, every enmity is  
lost without it.

Amen.