# Acts 2.1-4 p.101

John 14.15-21 p.93
8th June 2025

## Harvest at Pentecost

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Last month the Sistine Chapel in Rome was the setting for the election of a new Pope.

It's a difficult place to visit without falling over. At least that’s how I remember it, because what all of us tourist wanted to see was the ceiling, and that’s quite tough without bumping into the person in front of you, because the guides are constantly telling you to keep moving.

Michelangelo was brought to Rome in 1505 by Pope Julius II with a commission to build his tomb. Actually, he never finished it because he kept on being interrupted. And one of his most famous interruptions was the four years he spent on his back painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel between 1508 and 1512.

He chose the book of Genesis as his inspiration and the central panel, perhaps the most famous of all the 300 figures on the ceiling, depicts the Creation of Adam. God and Adam’s index fingers almost meet, and it’s became an iconic image.

Of course, like most pieces of art, people have been wondering ever since what it all means and one, much talked about feature is that small gap between the fingers. God doesn’t quite touch Adam’s, in fact there’s a 1.9cm gap between the two, that’s ¾ of an inch in old money!

Maybe Michelangelo wanted us to ask the question; *what fills the gap between God and us?* For, if the painting is about God’s creation of Adam, then maybe God’s life and energy, unseen, yet passing from him to Adam, is one way to read the painting.

Pentecost Sunday, Whit Sunday, asks us the same question really: *what, or who, fills the gap between us and God?* A Sunday when we celebrate the touch of God upon our lives when the presence of love transforms those early disciples for the better.

In the chaotic story, full of noise and colour we’ll hear in a moment, we encounter that narrative when, as it were, God’s finger touches a divided world, and brings to it not grey uniformity but a vibrant diversity that is, ironically, no longer divisive but wonderfully unifying and exciting.

The life giving touch of God is our theme for Pentecost Sunday.

THE SERMON

Our church is situated next to a gym and a few years ago I was intrigued by the most optimistic of posters outside it appealing for new members. It read: *Join today and be transformed in three months.* I gave it 5 seconds thought and then said *Nah, in my case that’s too big a miracle to ask for.*

Transformation is front and centre in today’s story. Pre-Pentecost it’s almost like the Resurrection didn’t happen. The disciples lack energy and hope, and without that any new movement is doomed to fail. The confidence just wasn’t there. They needed an Advocate. Someone to stand alongside them to enable and enliven them with both strength and comfort. Of course, we name that Advocate, that Strengthener and that Comforter, the Holy Spirit. God at work within us and through us. The Spirit of Jesus enabling the mission of Jesus and the love and hope of Jesus to continue in the disciples of Jesus. Pentecost is a moment of transformation.

It was neither a new festival nor, indeed, a Christian one. Pentecost was, and is, a Jewish festival. It was, in essence, a Harvest Festival celebrating the arrival of the Wheat Harvest. It was seven weeks on from Passover and that gave it a secondary name of *The Festival of Weeks.* The Jews call it Shavuot (Shav-oo-oat), and when that name appeared in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, it became Pentecost – Pente meaning 50, as this was a festival to be celebrated 50 days after Passover.

Shavuot was a big deal during the time of the first and second temple in Jerusalem because it was one of three annual feasts when worshippers travelled in pilgrimage to worship there. As this was a Harvest Festival people brought their first fruits of harvest, whether they were grapes, pomegranates, olives or wheat in a bowl, transported on a cart from their village in procession. As they entered the city scripture would be read and then in the temple the priests would accept these offerings of first fruits.

It was a festival of thanksgiving. A time to sing about the goodness of the earth and the provision yet again of God the Creator.

Can we just linger there a moment and make a connection between the Jewish and Christian festivals that are both called Pentecost?

The Spirit of God so often calls to us in Creation. In these early days of summer, we see colour. Autumn will bring Harvest abundance. Winter sees the stillness of hibernation and rest and spring bursts forth with new life. We understand why Dorothy Gurney wrote: *We are closer to God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.*Even the ancient myth story of Creation itself has The Spirit brooding over the waters and breathing life into human beings. The breath, the *ruarch,* of God.

On this Pentecost Sunday we worship God, whose Spirit, is to be found all around us in the earthly things of life. In the stuff of matter, the movement of atoms, the changing seasons and the physical life in which we all live and move and have our being.

Whilst on holiday recently we visited a church in Malta from a very different tradition to ours. We don’t have statues, yet they had many. I sat in a pew and wondered why? And I think I sensed for the first time really, that for my fellow Christians in this tradition, there is a love of celebrating God in people, in the sheer joy and physicality of people. God isn’t just an idea, but God is the love that motivated a saint, inspired an apostle or characterised the life of national hero. So why not have these statues that remind worshippers today of the way The Holy Spirit was manifest in the lives of others years ago.

Pentecost, a festival that brings together the spiritual and the physical.

Part of the joy of our humanity is how close wonder and worship are. As we take time to stop and wonder at the beauty of creation, the depth of the human spirit, the unending power of love, we worship and sense the Holy Spirit of God breathing upon our world and Pentecost becomes a lived reality. A blending of heaven and earth.

 God the Spirit at work in the Harvest. God the Spirit at work in the worship of those making their way to the Temple with their first fruits. God at work in the ministry of Jesus’ disciples, now anointed with power from on high to speak and live for their Lord.

Yet the Temple, where all these first fruits were so faithfully offered up over so many Pentecosts came to dramatic end in AD70 when all but the Wailing Wall was destroyed by Israel’s occupying power, the Romans.

And, since then, in Judaism, this feast has developed a new emphasis. Today our Jewish friends observe Pentecost more as a Celebration of the Torah. They think of Moses on Mount Sinai, fifty days on from the first Passover in Egypt, receiving God’s Law.

Yet, this is the thing. A modern day understanding of a Jewish Pentecost isn’t one of commemorating something that’s simply historical. That might make it remote, dry and dusty, only a history lesson. Rather it’s a time when our Jewish cousins celebrate receiving God’s Law, the Torah, God’s Word, now! And that makes it a Spirit filled celebration. God, still active, still breathing a word of love, wisdom, light and peace into our world today.

I think we Christians and Jews hold a prayer in common here, that all of us might be attentive and listen out for God’s word in the here and now. It’s the prayer before the sermon and it’s the reason for the silence following. The prayer is *Come, Holy Spirit Come…* It’s a longing for the breath of God to fill our building with love seven days a week, our lives with service and our prayers with hope.

Pentecost – a Jewish festival adopted by us Christians. Yet in both traditions today it’s a celebration of the life of God the Holy Spirit, alive in both creation and in scripture.

May that life be our constant inspiration on this and every day. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 2nd June 2025*