

PENTECOST: FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

Eastern Christians have always had a special relationship to the Bible. After all, it was they – and their ancestors – who wrote it, under God's inspiration. No wonder, then, that they have preserved an approach to the Holy Scripture that is uniquely their own. The Christian East especially finds the Old Testament teeming with images that prefigure or foreshadow persons, places and events that will come to fulfillment in the New Testament. This approach is called *typology*. An excellent example is the story of Pentecost as narrated by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles.

THE MYSTERY FORESHADOWED

To understand the meaning of Pentecost, one must first turn to the Old Testament. How does it prefigure the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the world? Among the Jewish forebears of Christianity, Pentecost (from the Greek word "fiftieth") was the feast day that occurred fifty days after Passover, which recalled the deliverance of God's people by the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb and the crossing of the Red Sea. Pentecost commemorated the giving of the Law by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. At the same time it was a festival of the first-fruits. The very first crops that grew were sacrificed to God as a sign of hope in the harvest to come.

In typically Eastern fashion, St. Luke weaves his narrative of the Christian Pentecost with the themes that foreshadow it in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the New Testament, the sacrificial victim is the Spotless Lamb of God, Christ Himself, Who rises from the dead and

delivers mankind from the bondage of sin in the waters of Baptism. Fifty days later, the descent of the Holy Spirit marks the giving of the New Law, the New Covenant sealed by God Himself. Even the first-fruits figure in the narrative of the Acts. The three thousand who were converted by St. Peter's first sermon are a pledge of the harvest of believers to come.

Other Old Testament types or figures also appear in Luke. The sound of a wind recalls the Spirit blowing over the water at creation in Genesis. The tongues bring to mind God's creative Word, calling the earth and all its creatures into existence. Fire is also a frequent sign of God's presence, as it was in the Unburned Bush and the Pillar of Fire. And so fiery tongues appear on Pentecost, signifying that nothing other than God's own power is being communicated. Even the sermon of the Apostles, understood by the crowd of various nations and races, was prefigured in the Old Testament. The pride of Babel has been reversed by the humility of Christ, Who sends His Spirit as a pledge of eternal life.

These themes alone would suffice for a rich theology of Pentecost, but the Eastern soul loves to transcend the historical dimensions of reality and scale the heights of mystical communion with God Himself. Christians of the East see Pentecost primarily as the final self-revelation of God to man: the Trinity made known.

Even at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, man beheld the mystery of three Persons in one God:

At Your baptism in the Jordan, O Lord,
the worship of the Trinity ' was revealed
For the Father's voice bore witness to
You by calling You His Beloved Son. And

the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the truth of His Word.

(Troparion of the Theophany)

But at Pentecost the faithful bask in the noon-day light of the fullness of revelation:

Come, all you nations of the world: let us adore God in three holy Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Three in One. From all eternity, the Father begets the Son, equal to Him in eternity and majesty, equal also to the Holy Spirit glorified with the Son in the Father – Three Persons, and yet a single Power and Essence and Godhead. In deep adoration, let us cry out to God: "Holy is God who made all things through the Son with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit! Holy the Mighty One through Whom the Father was revealed to us and the Holy Spirit came to this world! Holy the Immortal One, the Spirit, the Counselor, who proceeds from the Father and reposes in the Son! All-holy Trinity, Glory to You!"

(Doxastikon, "Kneeling" Vespers)

Since the Father and the Son have already been amply revealed in Scripture, the Eastern Church focuses on the Holy Spirit as the protagonist of this day's mystery.

O Hidden and Incomprehensible God, Everlasting and Infinite. You are known in a single essence and are adorned by Three Holy Persons. You exist in three proper characteristics in knowable and reasonable natures, yet You are one God, known in Three Holy Persons, a Perfect

Trinity, made up of Three Perfect Beings, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. O God the Father, You deigned to create man in Your image, but through his evil will he went astray to the worship of demons. You sent Your Son, the Word, from Your inscrutable depths. He became a man, and without change, communicated with us plainly and explained the mystery of God to us. He made us understand what could not be understood. He also taught us about the Three Divine Lights which ineffably come forth from You: True Spirit, Comforting Spirit, Wise Spirit. Spirit, Lover of mankind, Spirit, Foundation of prophets, Spirit, Wisdom of apostles, Spirit, Guide of teachers.

(Maronite prayer)

Nor are the other Old Testament “figures” ignored by the Eastern Christian celebration of Pentecost. Witness this transformation of the Babel theme:

When the Most High came down and confused the tongues, He divided the nations; but when He distributed the tongues of fire, He called all men to unity. Wherefore we glorify the Holy Spirit with one accord.

(Kontakion of Pentecost)

The symbolism of the first-fruits is seen in turn in the Byzantine-Slav practice of wearing green vestments and festooning churches with fresh greenery on the feast of Pentecost. For the Eastern Christian, the color which calls to mind the life of the newly-awakened earth also represents the life-giving Spirit: the One whom the Anaphora of St. Basil calls “the

First-fruits of eternal good, the life-giving Power, the Fountain of Sanctification.”

CHRISMATION: OUR PERSONAL PENTECOST

It is impossible to think of Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit without mentioning the Mystery of Chrismation. In the Old Testament, the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb and the crossing of the Red Sea brought the Chosen People to Mount Sinai, where God revealed His Law. In the New Testament, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God and the pouring of the waters of Baptism bring God's people to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit imparts His gifts and writes the New Law upon the hearts of all.

Just as the Old Testament Pentecost was intimately connected with Passover, Chrismation is so intimately linked with Baptism that it is never separated from it and the Eucharist. Thus, in the East, Baptism and Chrismation are always conferred at the same time.

Finally, let us contemplate the icon of Pentecost with the crowned figure in the center foreground. It is Kosmos – the World destined to be restored in Christ through the transfiguring energy of the Holy Spirit in the Church, an image personalized for us in the words the beloved St. Seraphim of Sarov: “Acquire the Spirit of Peace, and a thousand around you will be saved!”

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