# When we celebrate Pentecost, we are stepping into an ongoing story which stretches back to some of the earliest stories of the Bible – stories which are fundamental to how the first Christians conceptualised their faith, and which form the interweaving narrative God has spun across the millennia of salvation history.

## The Timing Tells a Story

We can absolutely approach Pentecost simply as the festival when God gives the Holy Spirit to the disciples. That is a really important event, and the opportunity to delve deeper into the background and theology of Pentecost does not take away from the power and impact which the telling of the story can achieve. God acted with power to bless and enliven God’s disciples, but the more we can understand the background of what happens at Pentecost in the broader context of salvation history, the more profound the theological impact of Pentecost for our lives here and now will be.

The celebration of Easter happens at Passover.

This seems like an obvious thing, but it is key to grasp not only for the understanding of salvation but also for the way that we approach Pentecost. Jesus died at Passover. I may well be in the process of teaching spiritual leaders to suck biblical eggs here – but to summarise, to understand Pentecost we must understand Easter and to understand Easter we must understand the Exodus and Passover.

Jesus could have chosen to die at another time of the year. Jesus could have chosen to die at the Feast of the Atonement. From the perspective which sees Easter as the way God deals with sin, we may think this would have made far more sense. Except, of course, the scapegoat sacrifice made at this feast – the way which the Torah specifies for dealing with the sin of the *whole community* – is the only sacrifice where the animal is not killed. After the sins are placed on the scapegoat it is spiritually unclean and so not fit to be sacrificed to God. Instead, it is driven away.

Jesus chooses instead to die at Passover, when the maximum number of people are going to be in Jerusalem, and so that means he is implicitly tying his death into the story of Passover. His death is like the Passover lamb, redeeming his people from slavery, allowing them to be set free and to find the Promised Land. This is the way that Jesus wants us to see his death and resurrection – in terms of being redeemed from slavery, and (when looking at John’s Gospel) through the lens of new creation. Jesus is re-enacting in himself the foundational story of Israel, the story when God’s allegiance to one family is continued so that God makes the whole Hebrew people his chosen nation to be priests to the entire world so the nations will come to know God.

Then at Mount Sinai God gives the Hebrew people the Law. The Law was to demonstrate and outline how to be God’s priestly people to the world and (as we see in **Romans 7**) was to draw out and highlight sin. This is the festival of Shavuot, also called Pentecost, seven weeks after Passover.

## The Gift of God’s Presence

Shavuot is not a one-sided festival. It does not only remember when God gave the Law, it is also about how the Hebrew people accepted the Law and in so doing entered into covenant relationship with God and became the Jewish people. The Law became the way in which the Jewish people could understand the covenant and through which they were told how to live out that covenant. The study and presence of Torah became central to who the Jewish people were and how they related to God.

This is why the practice of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot,* an all-night study session of the Torah, takes place at Pentecost. In some Jewish communities such as the Sephardic community they will also read a symbolic marriage contract between God and the Jewish people. They will also study the book of Ruth where Ruth enters the community of Israel and accepts the Law through marriage.

The centrality of Torah for the establishment of community was not only for community between people but also the presence of God with God’s people. We can see this in some rabbinic material such as:

‘When two sit together and words of Torah pass between them, the Divine Presence rests between them.’ **(Mishnah Avot 3:3)**

‘When three eat at one table and speak the words of Torah there, it is as though they have eaten from the table of God.’ **(Mishnah Avot 3:4)**

‘Whenever ten are gathered for prayer, there the Shekinah rests.’ **(Talmud Sanhedrin 39)** (The ‘Shekinah’ refers to God’s presence made manifest in a glorious way.)

Rabbi Chalafta ben Dosa (~100 AD) used to say:

‘If ten men sit together and occupy themselves with the Torah, the Divine Presence rests among them, as it is written **(Psalm 82:1):** “God has taken his place in the divine council.” And from where do we learn that this applies even to five? Because it is written **(Amos 9:6**): “And founds his vault upon the earth.” And how do we learn that this applies even to three? Because it is written **(Psalm 82:1):** “In the midst of the gods he holds judgement.” And from where can it be shown that the same applies even to two? Because it is written **(Malachi 3:16):** “Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened.” And from where even of one? Because it is written **(Exodus 20:24):** “In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.”’ **(Mishnah, Avot 3:4-7)**

These passages should remind you of **Matthew 18:20** where Jesus said, ‘Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.’

This is not just about cheering up those of us with small congregations. This is about the way that Jesus is making clear that he is the Lord, he is God. When people gather, it is Jesus who gathers with them. But the method of how this happens changes – or at least, the form that it takes changes.

## The Church’s Birthday

At the second Pentecost, God gives the Holy Spirit to the disciples who accept him and act in his power as seen in the second half of **Acts 2** where the disciples form close communities centred on eating and worshipping together and serving the less fortunate. The giving of the Holy Spirit is the mark of the new covenant made by Christ through his Easter sacrifice. As the disciples accept the gift of the Holy Spirit, they are bound up into the people of God just as Ruth was when she accepted the Law.

Pentecost is the inauguration of the Church just as the giving of the Law was the inauguration of the Jewish nation, because it is the way by which God unites God’s self with God’s people, and it is the way in which the covenant is known and worked out. The work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying God’s people transforms God’s disciples through the renewing of their mind **(Romans 12)** so that they know how to follow God, just as the Law was given so that the Jewish nation would know how to follow God.

Pentecost is the launch of God’s new humanity in the Church. Pentecost is the sign and seal of the new covenant in Christ. Pentecost is the way in which, when disciples gather together, Christ is there with them. Pentecost is the way that everything changes for ever.