Pentecost: Historical Account or Current Reality?

Traditionally when we as Christians read the passage from Acts which describes the coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples we associate this with the term Pentecost. Frequently we think the day was named for this coming of the empowering presence of the Spirit. The Spirit’s presence was announced with a loud noise, rushing wind and tongues of fire. This coming sent the disciples into the streets of the city of Jerusalem to fulfill the commission Christ had given them—to spread the good news. This we see as the beginnings of the Christian church—our starting place in the history of the world. We like finite points that can be used to anchor important events in our understanding of how things happen—we live in chronological time. History is important to us. So we celebrate Pentecost as a historical happening. But is that all that Pentecost represents? Many times we fail to realize that the opening statement of Acts 2 which says “When the day of Pentecost had come…does not refer to the event we commemorate on this day. Instead it refers to a far older event in the life of the Hebrew people. The reason there were so many devout Jews in Jerusalem on this day was because they were there to celebrate the Pentecost festival of their faith. Pentecost was one of the three festival days when devout Jews made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem—and it was called Pentecost in Greek because it referred to fifty days after the Passover festival. Pentecost is the Greek term for Shavuot, the festival where the faithful celebrate the giving of the law to Moses by God at Mount Sinai; an event occurring fifty days into their journey after leaving Egypt. Our gospel reading from John this morning is from the farewell discourse which Jesus gave on the last night he spent with the disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. It also talks about the future coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises the disciples that when he goes away he will send to them the *Paraclete* from the Father. The *Paraclete* will be the Spirit of truth and will testify on Jesus’ behalf as will the disciples. In the English translations *Paraclete* is translated in several ways; as Advocate or Intercessor; as Helper or Counselor; even as Comforter. Jesus gives the disciples to understand that the Spirit will guide them in the truth about sin and righteousness and judgment. Often we focus on the descriptive names English translators give for *Paraclete* and ignore what actually happens when the Holy Spirit arrives at Pentecost. We are right to celebrate the presence of God’s own agent in our midst—the very Spirit of the resurrected Jesus—now on earth to accompany us with signs of wonder and power. Just as God intervened in the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt and brought them to Mount Sinai to claim them. God sent his Son to intervene in the fate of humankind. At Sinai they were given the law to guide them. The people however were unable to be obedient to God’s commandments, so Jesus came to intervene on our behalf. But the coming of God’s anointed one did not happen as Hebrew traditions expected. We need to consider that and the other many ways in which God’s actions are not what we as human beings expect them to be. God’s Messiah—God’s own agent achieves victory through crucifixion; God’s strength is mediated through suffering; new life is pledged and provided through death. The crucified and resurrected God we find in Jesus is a God of paradox, so we should expect no less from the Holy Spirit which is sent to guide us. There are two paradoxes present in the Pentecost story. One paradox is that the Holy Spirit does not come to solve the disciples’ problems, but to create them. If not for the coming of the Holy Spirit the disciples would probably have gone back to their previous occupations. They might have lived rather unremarkable lives. Once the Spirit comes, that return to normalcy is not an option. Instead they will be compelled to go throughout the ancient world to proclaim the unlikely message that God has redeemed the world through an itinerant preacher from the backwaters of Palestine who was executed for treason and blasphemy. Truly when we think of the Holy Spirit’s coming it resembled more the story found in Ezekiel than it does the descriptive words we use for *Paraclete*. Ezekiel was a priestly prophet to the Israelites in exile in Babylon. In our passage this morning he is taken by the Spirit of God to a valley full of dried bones. In fact, we are told that he is set down in the middle of this valley where there were many bones lying there, and that the bones were very dry. Once I would have said that I could not get a good visual image of that scene. When I was young I found the skull of a cow that had died and although it had been buried had somehow resurfaced. It was extremely dry and was in fact brittle. To that image, I now have added pictures taken of mass graves which have been found in various places throughout the world; examples of the efforts by one group to eliminate another. Not a pleasant sight, and not one which has any hint that life could be found in that place. Yet this is the sight which is presented to Ezekiel, along with the question: “Mortal, can these bones live?” In this passage, the dry bones represent the people who have become separated from God. In the past, Ezekiel’s answer: “O God, you know.” has seemed to be his acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God. Yet, as a friend pointed out to me, if you change the inflection of the reading it could be Ezekiel pointing out that these bones are beyond having any sign of life—“O God, you realize that these bones have no life?” But the vision continues with the Lord giving commands to Ezekiel which he obeys. Ezekiel prophesied as commanded: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” The bones came together and took on the appearance of life, but until the breath of the Lord entered them, they remained dead. The passage ends with a separate call for breath to come into them and when it does our passage ends with this statement in verse 14: “I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.” When the Spirit came to the disciples it came with force and power—it transformed a group of uneducated men into powerful speakers and followers who turned the world upside down. When we think of the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives, what is our expectation? Do we seek the Spirit described as Comforter or Intercessor who will solve our problems? Or do we open ourselves to the *Paraclete* which comes and transforms us and takes us into new understandings of God and our faith? Is Pentecost for us a historical account or a current reality? In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.