

Views from the pews: an etymologist's view.

Why we name our festivals the way we do

Part of an interest in languages, is an interest in the origin and history of words. Today's name, Pentecost, prompted me to think not only about why it is called this, but also about a number of our other festivals with perhaps odd and unusual names.

Pentecost is a Greek word meaning 'fiftieth', and counting inclusively (both Easter Day itself and today), Pentecost is indeed the fiftieth day after Easter. This is however not why it is named this way. Pentecost was a Jewish feast, also called the Festival of Weeks, and was celebrated 50 days after Passover. It was because it was an important festival that so many people were in Jerusalem from all over the known world, and were thus able to hear the apostles preach after their inspiration by the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is also called Whitsunday, from 'White Sunday', though modern practice makes red the liturgical colour to represent the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Easter itself is an interesting and originally pagan word, related to 'east', but probably an Old English pre-Christian spring goddess. Lent is also a word originally designating the season of spring, which became specialised to mean the season of preparation for Easter; in the Northern Hemisphere, this of course always occurs squarely in spring.

The Sunday after Easter is sometimes called Low Sunday. This is apparently because it is the last day of what is called the Octave of Easter. Major feasts in general don't occur just on one day, but extend for eight days (again counting inclusively) of celebration. Low Sunday is thus a sort of 'low' point after the 'high' of celebrating Easter, not just on Easter Day, but for a whole week. Indeed, the season of Easter does not end until today, 50 days or a week of weeks.

The last one to mention here is Maundy Thursday, the Thursday before Easter. This is the day when we remember above all the Last

Supper and Jesus' arrest. One of the significant parts of the Last Supper is the 'New Commandment' to love one another that Jesus enjoins on His disciples. Maundy is derived from Latin 'mandatum' a command, making this New Commandment the name of the whole day.

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