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Export date: Fri Oct 30 6:46:19 2026 / +0000 GMT

Christian Perspectives

There is an array of cards on my piano that keeps reminding me I have passed another annual milestone ? my birthday. Isn't it funny how our attitudes towards birthdays changes over the years. As children it seemed an endless wait for them to arrive but as years go by they roll around far too quickly.

Last Sunday we celebrated a birthday in many of our churches, too. It was the 2014th birthday of the institution of the church (give or take a few years for lack of early record keeping). In the churches of the early Reformation, Anglican, Methodist and Lutheran for example, the church worship and teaching is organized around telling the life story of Jesus in each calendar year. Of course, every denomination highlights the Easter cycle from the Sunday of the Palm procession, through Good Friday and on to the Sunday of the Resurrection. Some of our institutional churches then move through the tradition of marking forty days after Jesus' resurrection during which the gospels tell us he appeared a number of times to groups of his disciples. Like Easter, these forty days fall on different dates each year because Easter is known as a ?moveable feast,? unlike Christmas which has a fixed date. At the end of the forty days the Ascension of Jesus is celebrated (Luke 24: 50-53; Acts of the Apostles 1: 6-11). Ten days later churches celebrate the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-4). This does not mean that the events of Easter, Ascension and Pentecost actually happened at exactly those intervals but rather that the church decided at some point in history to organize the teaching and worship in that time frame.

The story of Pentecost is told in just a few sentences but it has had immense implications for the Christian faith. On that day, a group of disciples were gathered together as a community. As all human beings do, they perceived what happened through their senses. They heard the sound of a great wind and saw what looked like flames standing above each of their heads. Those disciples and others who followed them interpreted this phenomenon as the coming of the Holy Spirit of God among them. Later it was recognized as the beginning or birth of the church.

Phenomenal experiences aside, what happened to that group of Jesus' followers was ?change?, a powerful and helpful change. The followers became the leaders, the learners became the teachers. Almost immediately Peter led them out of the gathering and they began to preach to the people. In the elation and joy of their pentecostal experience some who heard them thought they were drunk. They were shocked that these ordinary locals could communicate with people of the different cultures and languages who populated Jerusalem. But many were also won over by their raw honesty and earnest belief. The church began to grow.

Christians are encouraged by their belief that God's Spirit continues to be a driving force in the church, the world and in individual lives but that spirit is not perceived by a vision of fire or the sound of wind as it was on the Day of Pentecost. In his first letter to the early church in Corinth, St. Paul explains that the presence of the Spirit can be seen in what he calls the ?fruits? of the Spirit; that is, in the behaviour of those who are living in the manner that Jesus taught. Those ?fruits of the Spirit? include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and generosity. He is talking about love within the community of Christians and love which greets the world with the compassion of Jesus. Joy is an effervescent expression of the celebration of creation around us and faith in our connection to the eternal holy one; to quote the old hymn, the ?how can I keep from singing? kind of love. Peace is a quietness of spirit resting in the deep confidence of the great providence of God. Julian of Norwich expressed this as ?All will be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.? Patience is that acceptance of those around us, knowing that we are all different. We think differently, act differently and we change and grow best when our companion is a patient one. Kindness is those simple acts, words and gestures that convey respect to those we encounter regularly and only occasionally. It is whatever behaviour shows we are letting go of the need to be first, or at the centre or the boss. Generosity can be shown in the way in which people willingly give of their time to listen, their abilities to help and their material resources to make a better life for others.

God's Spirit operates throughout our world today. Look for the evidence, for the fruit of the Spirit visible in people. Too often we allow the Spirit's voice to be drowned out by the din of war, the drone of the rhetoric of commerce, its image tarnished by the way in which our media highlights evil acts rather than the good. Let us celebrate the birthday of the church by looking for and emphasizing the good work of the Spirit to bring hope and joy to the world. Rev.

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