

PFINGSTEN / PENTECOST

The Ox and Pentecost

It is a marvellous scene, as it is described in the Gospels of the New Testament. A roaring and tongues of fire fill the air – and the disciples of Jesus congregating in the room of the Last Supper can understand and suddenly speak “with new tongues”. For Christians, this day, on which according to their beliefs God sent down His Holy Spirit, has become a major day of celebration in their religion – namely Pentecost or Whitsun.

The feastday takes its name from the figure 50. “Pentekoste” forms the root of the word; it comes from Ancient Greek and means “the fiftieth”. When this scene was taking place in Jerusalem, just seven Sundays, i.e. 50 days, had passed since Easter.

From henceforth, the disciples of Jesus set out into the world to preach the new Gospel. Pentecost may thus also be regarded as celebrating the foundation of the Church.

Admittedly, the feast of Pentecost does not only have a purely Christian background. A long time previously, in Old Testament times, Pentecost had the character of Thanksgiving/Harvest Festival or the Feast of Weeks. And in late Judaism, it was the day commemorating the foundation of the Israelite people in the Sinai – fifty days after the exodus from under the Egyptian yoke. Pentecostal celebrations in the Christian sense are not documented before the 3rd Century.

Once Christianity had established itself, Pentecost hereabouts was still accompanied for a long time by what were more like heathen customs; there was no great longing to do away with them. And for this reason, they were simply added on to the new rites.

Not very much has remained of Pentecostal customs outside of liturgical celebrations in church. Precisely in our age of growing rationalism, many traditions have been lost. These were generally associated with rituals for a new beginning or fertility rites. The approaching warm season of the year was welcomed in, and prayers offered up for a good harvest.

Nevertheless, some vestiges of old practices have been retained to our day. For

A Christian celebration and heathen customs



Colorfully dressed Pfingstochse

Pfingsten ist neben Weihnachten und Ostern das dritte Hauptfest des Kirchenjahres. Der Name kommt vom griechischen „pentekoste“ – der fünfzigste Tag (nach Ostern). Im jüdischen Kalender entspricht Pfingsten das sieben Wochen nach Passah gefeierte „Fest der (Weizen-)Ernte“. Während dieses Festes ereignete sich nach dem Bericht der Apostelgeschichte das Pfingstwunder – die Ausgießung des Heiligen Geistes über die Jünger Jesu. Da Petrus die erste Gemeinde gründete, gilt Pfingsten auch als Gründungsfest der Kirche. Im Mittelalter entwickelte sich ein eigenes Brauchtum mit Flur-Umritten und den zum Pfingst-Schlachten geschmückten Pfingstochsen.

example, there's still the “Pfingstochsen” (Pentecostal Ox). This can either be a person dressed up to the nines, or the last one to crawl out of bed at Pentecost. Originally, however, the Pfingstochse was the last colorfully dressed animal in the herd when it was driven out onto the fresh green meadows in Springtime. Another variant of the custom of the Pfingstochse, however, ended up with the animal at the slaughterhouse. In this case, the butcher first led the ox, which was also colorfully dressed, through the village by the nose, so as to put those destined to participate in the coming banquet in a good mood in advance.

There was also an association with feasting when the young people in a village set off on a procession to collect eggs, dripping, flour or quite simply money for a banquet. Those who were generous were repaid with poems of thanks, misers were ridiculed in verse.

Other Pentecostal customs concentrate on the never-ending topic of man and woman. In a number of regions, the lady of one's dreams is still presented with a maypole on the chimney stack of her house or in front of her window. Sometimes, even, those ladies not having any admirers were only left a straw doll or an empty baby carriage as a spiteful gesture, instead of the fresh green foliage. But the lords of creation have become somewhat more tactful since. And the ladies can gain their revenge elsewhere in “Burschengreifen” (Catch Yourself a Guy). Previously, things were also more sportly in the rides taken out into the fields, which frequently turned into races. Shepherds also ran races, and the last one to reach the meadow was greeted by many a coarse nickname.

The game of ring riding was also more associated with sport, and in earlier times this also took place at Pentecost. Shooting competitions and tournaments still do exist round Pentecost time, but the close link between celebration and local custom is gradually being lost. Celebrations will soon only be held whenever there happens to be an occasion.