

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Counting the Days of Salvation

Jewish thinkers used to delight in the ancient game of *gematria*, whereby every Hebrew letter also possessed a numerical value; by adding up the letter-values of someone's name, you could create a number, and mess about with its secret significance. I'm told the numerical value of the words *Nero Caesar*, for instance, is 666, and this is the "number of the Beast" in the mystic visions of the Apocalypse. In contrast, the 3 Hebrew letters for *David* add up to 14, and if you examine the first verses of Matthew you will see him playing with 3 sets of 14 generations. David appears at slot 14, and is mentioned 3 times in the surrounding sentences. Because David is a king, the secret meaning of the *gematria* is that the genealogy of Jesus is also royal.

### Seven

For the Bible, ten and seven both signify *perfection*. There are seven days, and the one that completes them is the Sabbath; because the week keeps repeating, seven lends itself to multiplying, and so we get figures like 49 (7x7), and phrases like *seven weeks of years* (49 years). There is another habit, of adding 1 to the perfect number, to make *perfection plus 1*; thus *seven days* symbolises the whole of earthly history: *the eighth day* symbolises *eternity* (which is why baptisteries, and the first Church of the Holy Sepulchre, were made with eight sides). *49 plus 1* makes 50, which means *Jubilee*, or a Sabbath of Sabbaths. You can see why Jesus tells Peter to forgive his brother, not seven times, but seventy times seven times (*perfection cubed*); it is *gematria* for the saying, *You must be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect*.

### Paschaltide

Eastertide runs for fifty days after the Triduum: so we are responsible for making sure that there are fifty days of feast. The Canaanites - whose country the Jews took over - also had this period of time between the Spring Harvest offering of the first sheaf of barley, and the offering, fifty days later, of two loaves of leavened bread: this marked the final day of the barley harvest. During this time the new grain was fermented to provide new yeast, as a sign of the new year of fruitfulness, new life. Each of the fifty days between was marked by a blessing (*s'firoh*) which *counts* the fifty days. Thus the Jews found their festal passage from Passover (the old barley harvest) to

*Pentecost*, which began as a feast for the beginning of the wheat harvest. Of course, when these agricultural feasts, belonging to the pagan farmers of the Promised Land, were adopted by the incoming Jews (who were nomads, not farmers) they changed their themes. Passover replaced the barley day, and the wheat day became the feast of Sinai, Ten Commandments Day. In the hands of us Christians, the feasts change yet again: Passover becomes Easter, and the Sinai feast becomes Pentecost - the feast of the indwelling Spirit of God. (If you read the Exodus account of the Passover - Ex 12:39 - you will find a shamelessly invented Jewish excuse for eating unleavened bread at Passover, which was really the Canaanite's ritual for starting a new year.)

### When The Days Were Fulfilled...

The theme of fulfilment is greatly enriched by meditation on these historical shifts. The way Christians celebrate Passover changes its whole character; yet Easter is truly a *fulfilment* of what the Jewish feast celebrated. The liberation of slaves is not completed by their Exodus from Egypt, but by the Exodus of Jesus from the tomb. The giving of the Law on Sinai was not *fulfilled* until it received the seal of the Spirit, who makes it possible for us to fulfil the Law. So it is right to say with Paul: *Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed: let us keep the feast then, with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth!* Fulfilment means experiencing the ultimate satisfaction of all promises and hopes, in a single moment of completion and joy. In a perfect world, every process would reach fulfilment in this way. In a history made up of nothing but feasts, we would lay the foundations for a perfect world: training ourselves for fulfilment by the careful tending of hope, by trying to hope for the future God wants to create for us. The art of living well is to hope for what is going to happen. The Holy Spirit makes us sure that what is going to happen in the end is worth hoping-for, is the glory of God. In this feast we bind our hopes precisely to a future that is divine.  
*Fr Philip*