

# Fifty Days

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 also royal.

## Seven

For the Bible, ten and seven 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 Jews also had this period of time between the Passover 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. Each of the fifty days between was marked by a blessing (*s'firah*) which *counts* the fifty days. Thus the Jews found their way to *Pentecost*, which began as a feast for the beginning of the wheat harvest. Of course, when these agricultural feasts -probably belonging to the pagan farmers of the Promised Land were adopted by the incoming Jews (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 Christians, the feasts change yet again: Passover becomes Easter, and the Sinai feast becomes Pentecost -the feast of the indwelling Spirit of God.

## When The Days Were Fulfilled...

The theme of fulfilment is greatly enriched by meditation on these historical shifts. The way in which Christians celebrate Passover changes its whole character; yet Easter is truly seen as 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 was not *fulfilled* until it received the seal of the Spirit, who makes it possible for us to keep 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 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 world made up of feasts, we 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. In each feast we bind our hopes more exactly to the future that is divine.  
*Fr Philip*