

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Numbers 11:24-30

NRSV

The people of Israel have left Sinai, and are out in the desert. People on the fringe of the community are complaining to Moses about the diet: manna may be God-given, but it gets monotonous; they remember fondly the meat, fish and vegetables they enjoyed in Egypt (v. 6). They want meat to eat. The rebellion spreads amongst the clans (v. 10). Moses gently chides God for making him the foster-father (“as a nurse carries a sucking child”, v. 12) of these burdensome people. He asks: “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?” (v. 13) I can’t do it alone; the burden is too heavy (v. 14). I would rather die than continue in this misery. God answers: delegate! “Gather ... seventy of the elders” (v. 16). God will take “some of the spirit that is on ... [Moses] and put it on them” (v. 17). They will share the burden, thus sharing authority under God.

When Moses has told the people of his conversation with God, that God will provide sufficient meat for all, he gathers the “seventy” (v. 24) around the Tent of Meeting, the place of worship at the edge of the camp. Now God intervenes in human affairs. (The “cloud”, v. 25, symbolizes his presence.) When God’s spirit comes upon the “seventy” (a number, indicating perfection and completion), they enter a trance-like state; they prophesy. But then they are silent. Then two men, “Eldad and ... Medad” (v. 26, possibly meaning *beloved of God*), genuine people of Israel (“registered”), not invited to the Tent, prophesy. Joshua seeks to have them stopped, because they have not received authority, but Moses asks Joshua whether he thinks the activities of other prophets will diminish his charisma (“Are you jealous for my sake?”, v. 29). Moses implies that their prophecy is genuine. In the following verses, we learn that the “meat” (v. 13) is quail, diverted from their normal migration path by an unusual west wind.

Psalms 104:24-34,35b

NRSV

This psalm is a hymn of praise to God, as creator. Earlier verses have praised him for creating the heavens and the earth, for overcoming chaos, for continuing to care for the earth and all who live in it. God’s marvellous “works” (v. 24) are everywhere, all made in his wisdom. To Israelites, “the sea” (v. 25) was almost chaotic, beyond controlling, but God is so great that even “Leviathan” (v. 26), the mythical sea monster, is his harmless, sportive creature. All living things depend on God at all times, for their “food” (v. 27) and their very “breath” (v. 29, life); without it, they die. Lack of God’s presence causes terror. His creative agent is his “spirit” (v. 30). Creation is *continuous*, continually renewed. The “glory of the Lord” (v. 31) is the magnificence of the created world, his visible manifestation. His power is evident too in earthquakes and volcanoes (v. 32). The psalmist vows to praise God throughout his life. Praise be to God!

The day of Pentecost has come; it is now fifty days since Easter. The way Luke puts it shows that Pentecost is a milestone in the story of salvation: recall Luke 2:6, “the time came for her to deliver her child ...” and Luke 9:51, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up ...” These too are milestones, and the language is similar. Other translations have *was fulfilled* for “had come” (v. 1) – the coming of the Holy Spirit is *fulfilment*. Look at the manner in which the Holy Spirit comes: the sound is “like the rush of a violent wind” (v. 2); and then, “divided tongues, as of fire” (v. 3). Luke attempts to describe the event in human terms, but it is never possible to explain a divine mystery: all we can do is say what it is like. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the gift inaugurating the final stage of the salvation story (or history, chronology); this era leads up to the end of time. His arrival is in fulfilment of Christ’s promise, recorded in 1:8 (“... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ...”).

Acts is about mission, about speaking, proclaiming, the good news to people everywhere, in languages (and language) they can understand; Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit is the driving force behind this work, e.g. in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, we read “the Spirit said to Philip ...” (8:29). They spoke “in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (v. 4). Divided into nations in antiquity, now all humanity is one; now God is in our midst. The Spirit is the launching pad for this mission. The list in vv. 9-10 includes Jews from the whole of the known world. The mission to Gentiles will begin later. “God’s deeds of power” (v. 11), of which all spoke, are explained by Peter in vv. 14-36, based on a quotation from the book of Joel (vv. 17-18): as the end of the era in which we are living approaches, many people will prophesy, and many will “see” things beyond what we call *concrete reality*. And this will happen because God pours out the Holy Spirit. *Prophecy* here is probably *enthusiastically sharing the faith*, “speaking about God’s deeds of power” (v. 11). The “portents” (v. 19, events that foreshadow the end of the era) are expressed in terms of *primitive science* but we need to realize that things will happen which make no sense to our rational minds, things we cannot explain.

John 20:19-23

NRSV

Early on Easter Day, Mary Magdalene has discovered that Jesus’ body is missing from the tomb. There is a man standing nearby, whom she assumes is the gardener. When he speaks to her, she recognizes him as Jesus. She has told the disciples: “I have seen the Lord” (v. 18).

Jesus now appears to his disciples in his *resurrection body*: he bears the marks of his crucifixion, yet can pass through doors; he is truly alive. Earlier, he has said “[my] peace I leave with you” (14:27). As he has been sent into the world with the Father’s authority, so he now sends out the disciples (and the Church) to continue his work (v. 21). To early Christians, Jesus’ exaltation, his appearances and the giving of the Holy Spirit are *one event*. Conversion and baptism involve *forgiveness of sins*; those who reject the good news are not forgiven (“retained”, v. 23).