

Comments

The Day of Pentecost

May 19, 2024

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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Acts 2:1-21

NRSV

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 *had been fulfilled* for “had come” – 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. 9-11 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.

Psalm 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” are everywhere, all made in his wisdom. To Israelites, the sea 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 (v. 30). 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!

Romans 8:22-27

NRSV

Paul has written that living the Christian life involves suffering, but that this is minuscule compared to the certain hope of future glory. In his view, all people and all of nature (“creation”, v. 19) await the resolution of the present “bondage to decay” (v. 21), to continual sinful acts; we await the “revealing of the children of God” (v. 19). All of nature awaits rebirth, like a mother-to-be, sharing in stress, anxiety and pain. We Christians also experience this, as we await full union with God (“adoption”, v. 23), although we already have the first benefits of the Holy Spirit. (The “first fruits” of the harvest, offered to God, portended the full harvest; “our bodies” are our *selves*.) For, he says, Christ, in freeing us from sin, in saving us, gave us this hope (v. 24). We do not know (see) the full extent of what God will give us – and we must wait patiently (v. 25). In vv. 26-27, Paul gives an example of how the Spirit helps us: we are limited in our knowledge of how to pray, but the Spirit ensures the efficacy of our prayers. The Spirit, in helping us, does so in accord with God’s plan, so God knows both our very beings and the Spirit.

John 15:26-27;16:4b-15

NRSV

After the Last Supper, Jesus continues to tell the disciples about the mission they are to undertake. The “Advocate” is the Holy Spirit; he is the “spirit of truth” (15:26, 16:13), and will be sent to the disciples, the Church, by Christ “from the Father”. The Church too is to witness, to work with the Holy Spirit, by living the life that Christ made possible, continuing Christ’s work in the world (15:27). Why does Jesus say: “yet none of you asks me ...”? (16:5) They have asked the question earlier (13:36, 14:5). Perhaps he is saying: preoccupied with “sorrow” (16:6), you are missing the main point: the coming of the Spirit. Then 16:7: by leaving them, Jesus is able to send the Spirit. One thing the Spirit will do is to show “the world” (16:8, possibly Jews) that they are wrong on three counts: (1) their idea of sin is incorrect (16:9); (2) the *righteous* who condemned Jesus are wrong: he is God’s agent (16:10); and (3) he has defeated sin (16:11). For example, to heal on the Sabbath is not sinful.

Then 16:12-13: the Spirit will tell them things Jesus has not. In his guidance, he will speak what comes to him from God (as Jesus has spoken what the Father has told him.) The Spirit will prophesy about events “to come”. The Spirit will reveal the essential nature of God, and show Christ’s essential nature and power (“glorify”, 16:14). Whether the word comes from the Father, the Son, or the Spirit it is the same.