

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 11:1-18

NRSV

Peter has been in the coastal area northwest of Jerusalem, an area where there are already believers of Jewish origin. Up the coast, in Caesarea Maritima, Cornelius (an officer in the Roman army, a Gentile) has seen a vision in which a messenger from God has told him to send for Peter (10:1-6). As Peter has approached the town, he too has seen a vision: of “the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered” (10:11). In the sheet are “all kinds” (10:12) of animals. A voice has said: “Get up, Peter; kill and eat” (10:13), meaning *eat of animals forbidden by Jewish law*. At Cornelius’ house, he has told the assembled company (both Jews and Gentiles): “You ... know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone ... [ritually] unclean” (10:28). He has summed up the good news, telling them that “God shows no partiality” (10:34). The Holy Spirit has come on *all who hear the word* (10:44) and many, including Gentiles, have been baptized.

Word of this event has reached Judea, where there are believers of Jewish origin (“circumcised believers”, v. 2), who ask why he has broken Jewish law by visiting and eating with Gentiles. In vv. 5-15, Peter explains: not chronologically but from the viewpoint of God’s plan of salvation. (The word translated “brothers”, v. 12, denotes close kinship, in the Christian community.) Just as the Holy Spirit came on the apostles at Pentecost (“at the beginning”, v. 15) so it “fell upon them”, Cornelius’ household. In a post-resurrection appearance, Jesus predicted Pentecost (v. 16). Peter defends his actions: God gave them the “same gift” (v. 17) when they believed as he gave us when we came to faith. Peter’s critics accept this explanation; God is working in a new way; even Gentiles who turn to God will receive eternal “life” (v. 18).

Psalm 148

NRSV

The psalter ends with five hallelujah (“Praise the LORD”) psalms, of which this is one. In vv. 1-6 the psalmist invites the heavens to praise God, then in vv. 7-12 he bids all on the earth to do so. Even inanimate objects (e.g. “sun and moon”, v. 3) are to praise him. Ancient cosmology held that the sun, moon and stars travelled on concentric hemispheres above the earth, and above them was God’s storehouse of “waters above the heavens” (v. 4), the source of rain and snow. God commanded that the heavens be created (v. 5). The movement of the celestial bodies are per an everlasting law (v. 6). The heavens shall praise him for creating them and making their existence permanent. In vv. 7-12, the list of created *things* proceeds from the lowest forms (“sea monsters”) to the highest, humans. The “wind” (v. 8, Hebrew: *ruah*) does God’s will; *ruah* also means *spirit*. In v. 11, “all peoples” are invited to praise the Lord.

This book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1) made known through John. It is prophecy which reveals secrets of heaven and earth. Our reading is from John’s record of his vision of the end-times. He has told of the destruction of the old city, Babylon (code name for Rome) and of the old heaven and earth (20:11); the ungodly have been driven off to punishment (20:15). Only the godly, a remnant, remain. Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22 predict that all creation will be renewed, freed from imperfections and transformed by the glory of God.

Now John sees the new creation. The “sea” (21:1), a symbol of turbulence, unrest and chaos, is no more. He sees “the new Jerusalem” (21:2), probably not made with bricks and mortar, “holy”, of divine origin, beautiful and lovely as a “bride”. (Marriage is a symbol of the intimate union between the exalted Christ and the godly remnant. Some see the city as the church, set apart for God’s use in the world.) John hears “a loud voice” (21:3) interpreting 21:2: God again comes to “dwell” (be present spiritually) with “his peoples”. Sorrow, death and pain – characteristics that made the old earth appear to be enslaved to sin – will disappear (21:4). God, “seated on the throne”, speaks in 21:5-6: he will do everything described in 21:1-4; he is sovereign over all that happens in human history. (“Alpha” and “Omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, so God encompasses all.) God will give the gift of eternal life (“water”, 21:6b) to all who seek him.

John 13:31-35

NRSV

Jesus is preparing his followers for his departure. After the Last Supper, he has washed the feet of his disciples, a symbol of servanthood. Peter has misunderstood Jesus’ action; Jesus has told him that to share in Christ requires that Jesus be his servant as well as his master. Peter will understand “later” (v. 7): when Jesus is on the cross. Jesus has said, “you are clean, though not all of you” (v. 10). Then, generalizing, he says that, per his example, each Christian is to be a servant to every other (v. 14). Jesus has predicted his betrayal (vv. 18, 21); he has shown Peter and the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (v. 23) who this will be. Judas (“he”, v. 31) has gone out into the “night” (v. 30) – a symbol of the dark deed he is about to commit.

The glorification (revelation of the essence of) the “Son of Man” (v. 31), the ideal human, Jesus, is already in progress; the Father is already being revealed in him. The Father has been revealed (“glorified”, v. 32) in Jesus, so Jesus is a way of seeing God now (“at once”). In John and 1 John, Jesus calls his faithful followers “little children” (v. 33). Jesus tells them that his time on earth with them is very soon to end. They cannot join him in heaven now, but he “will come again and will take you to myself” (14:3). Judaism required one to *love one’s neighbour as oneself* (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus’ commandment is “new” (v. 34) in that, in his self-offering, he is model of, motive for, and cause for, loving one another. Mutual love will show who follows Christ.