

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 1:1-11

NRSV

Luke begins his second book by summarizing “the first” (the gospel). “Theophilus”, to whom the gospel is written, may be a person (whose name means *lover of God*) or any reader who loves God. Jesus had chosen “the apostles” (v. 2) from a larger group of followers; in Luke 24 he instructs them. The “many convincing proofs” (v. 3) of his resurrection include his appearances on the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem. “Forty days” may be just a considerable period of time, or it may, with “not many days from now” (v. 5), point to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The word translated “staying” (v. 4) can also mean *eating*; in Luke 24, Jesus eats with the disciples. John the Baptist predicted that the Messiah would baptise “with the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). An angel has told Mary that “the Lord God will give to him [Jesus] the throne of his ancestor David” so it is not surprising that those present expect political Israel to be restored (v. 6). But Jesus’ answer shows the restoration to be of a different nature (v. 7). When it will be (“the times”) and by what steps (“periods”) he does not say. From the Day of Pentecost on, the apostles will be his representatives, spreading the good news universally (v. 8). Luke describes the ascension physically (like Elijah’s) but includes a divine element, the “two men in white robes”, (v. 10), God’s messengers. Some of the disciples were from “Galilee” (v. 11). The time of the Church will end with Jesus returning as he departed.

Psalm 47

NRSV

This psalm is a hymn celebrating God’s enthronement as king of all nations. It probably dates from the days of David or of Solomon. Vv. 1-4 summon all people everywhere to praise the God of Israel as king. The Israelites gradually changed from recognizing a number of gods, of whom one was chief (“Most High”), to one God. Israel’s “heritage” (or inheritance) is the Promised Land. “Jacob” (v. 4) is Israel. The Hebrew in v. 5 suggests that this psalm was written to accompany a religious ceremony connected with the Ark of the covenant; it dramatized God’s kingship. “His holy throne” (v. 8) recalls Isaiah’s commissioning in Isaiah 6:1. V. 9a, as translated here tells of all rulers gathering as the people of Israel’s God (our God). *Gather to* is another possible translation, so it may tell of vassal rulers coming to Jerusalem to pay tribute. Either the “shields” in v. 9b are the rulers, or this half verse speaks of peace, i.e. destruction of weapons, as 46:9 says of God: “He makes wars to cease to the end of the earth ... he burns the shields with fire”.

Ephesians 1:15-23

NRSV

Paul has written of the Father’s wisdom and insight in making known to us his will, his plan for completion of the restoration of the faithful to oneness with him,

as told by Jesus (vv. 8, 9). God’s plan embraces both Jews and Gentiles, bringing them together in one Christian community. That this is happening he sees as evidence of God’s ability to break down diverse barriers, and to bring the world to unity in Christ.

And so, in vv. 15-16, he is delighted to hear of the successful missionary activity by people he does not know at first hand. Their “faith” (commitment to Christ) and fraternal love (love of “all the saints”, Christians both Jewish and Gentile) go hand in hand: faith involves appreciating God’s great love for humanity demonstrated in the Father’s giving of the Son. That “your” (v. 15) refers to new Christians is indicated by “as you come to know him” in v. 17: Paul prays that these (relatively) new converts may receive “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” as each progressively come to understand God more and more. It is not just *digested knowledge* (“wisdom”) that they will receive, but also “revelation”, what God will show of himself and his ways, his manifest character, his greatness, “glory”, and the fruit of interaction of knowledge with experience. The objective (v. 18) is that, illuminated by innermost conviction (“with the eyes of your heart”), they may attain a maturer knowledge of God in three ways: (1) in spiritual growth (“hope”) being those whom God has called; (2) the “glorious inheritance” Gentile Christians now share with their Jewish brethren; and (3) experience of the tremendous power of God as he works in their lives. Paul’s experience speaks here: God showed him mercy when he was a persecutor of Christians. Then v. 20: this power that they now experience is what the Father used in raising Christ and having him share in the divine glory. Christ has also conquered all alien spiritual powers (“far above all rule ...”, v. 21) and pagan gods (“every name that is named”). God has made “all things” (v. 22) subject to humanity; the Father has given Christ to the church as ruler over all things spiritual. The church is one in Christ and thus is able to share in Christ’s exaltation, Christ being the complete embodiment of God, who is in the process of filling (making good) all things. It is through the church that God pervades the world with his goodness.

Luke 24:44-53

NRSV

After his resurrection, Jesus has appeared to two followers on the road to Emmaus, to Peter, and to those gathered in Jerusalem. When they have thought that they were seeing a ghost, he has invited them to touch his wounds and eats in their presence. Jesus has told his disciples how he is the one to whom the whole of the Old Testament points; he now does so for the last time. (The third part of the Scriptures, the Writings, begins with “the psalms”.) He gives them understanding as to how this is so, interpreting verses from Hosea, Isaiah, Psalms and other books. He charges the disciples (and other followers) with preaching the good news to all people, “beginning from Jerusalem” (v. 47). They are “witnesses” (v. 48); they have seen Scripture fulfilled. The Holy Spirit will be with them, as God promised through the prophet Joel (v. 49). Jesus *leads them out* (v. 50), as Moses led the people of Israel out of captivity. Here the ascension occurs in a worship setting. Luke ends as it began: “in the temple” (v. 53). Jesus’ ministry on earth has ended; the era of the Church and its mission on his behalf is about to begin.