

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 *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.

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.

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!

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

NRSV

Early in this letter, Paul has noted that the Christians at Corinth “are not lacking in any spiritual gift” (1:7); even so, they appear to have written to him “concerning spiritual gifts” (v. 1): it seems that there are questions in the community. One gift is inspired speech. The tests for whether one speaks under the influence of the Holy Spirit are: (1) that one accepts Christ’s authority and pledges obedience to him, “Jesus is Lord” (v. 3) and (2) that one does not *curse* Jesus (even under duress). Speech that fails these tests is influenced by other (*pagan*, v. 2) spirits.

“Gifts” (v. 4) is widely defined, and includes “services” (v. 5, *ministries*) and “activities” (v. 6, *operations*). Note the suggestion of the Trinity: “same Spirit ... same Lord ... same God” (vv. 4-6), and note also: (1) the Spirit himself is a gift of the Father; (2) Christ was sent to serve or minister; and (3) the Father is the source of all being and “activities”. With a common origin, all gifts are shown through the Holy Spirit, not for personal edification but “for the common good” (v. 7), for building up the Church. While the gifts in vv. 8-10 can be grouped, the precise meanings are uncertain: (1) “wisdom ... knowledge ... faith”; (2) “healing ... working of miracles ... prophecy”; (3) “discernment ... tongues ... interpretation”. “Wisdom” and “knowledge” seem to be the ability to instruct; “faith” seems to be exceptionally deep faith – that God can do anything. “Discernment” is the ability to tell whether gifts genuinely come from God. “Tongues” may be unintelligible speech which needs “interpretation”. Each of us receives a gift (perhaps not one listed); God chooses, not us. Finally, likening the Church to a “body” (v. 12), Christ’s body, Paul says that: (1) our God-given gifts contribute to the Church as a whole; (2) baptism is through the “Spirit” (v. 13); and (3) regardless of ethnic origin or social status, we are all empowered by the Holy Spirit.

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).