

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

www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/

© Chris Haslam

Acts 1:6-14

NRSV

Acts is addressed to “Theophilus” (v. 1, *lover of God*) as is Luke. Jesus has risen from death; in Luke 24:42-43, he has eaten “broiled fish” in the presence of the disciples. In Luke 24:44-53, Jesus has told them that (1) “you are witnesses to these things”: that he died and rose to life again; and (2) he is sending upon them “what my Father promised”. He has implied that this gift will come to them in Jerusalem (as Acts 1:4 says clearly). He has led them to Bethany (near Jerusalem) and “was carried up into heaven”; then they “returned to Jerusalem”.

Acts backtracks: vv. 3-5 say that Jesus “presented himself alive ... during forty days”; “not many days from now” they will receive the Holy Spirit – at Pentecost, the fiftieth day since Easter. Together in Jerusalem, the disciples ask: what will happen in this new era?: *either*: when will you restore independence to Israel? *or* is the end of time at hand? Jesus answers (v. 7): (1) only God knows the steps towards the end “times” and the opportune moments (“periods”); (2) the gift, the “Holy Spirit” (v. 8) will give you “power” to spread the good news; (3) not only in Israel but “to the ends of the earth”. Vv. 9-10 tell of Jesus’ ascension, a clearly *visible* event set in a *historical* context. (Note the five words about *seeing*.) The “cloud” in Elijah’s ascension and in Jesus’ is a sign of God’s presence. But the event goes beyond the physical; it needs interpretation by “two men ...”, messengers from God: Jesus’ return will be a divine intervention in human affairs. Bethany and the Mount of Olives (“Olivet”, v. 12) are adjacent and close to Jerusalem. The eleven disciples possibly return to the site of the Last Supper, “the room upstairs” (v. 13). The band devoted to Jesus now includes “certain women” (v. 14) and Jesus’ brothers. (“Judas”, v. 13, is not Iscariot.) They meet for liturgical prayer on a regular basis, probably following Temple practices.

Psalms 68:1-10,32-35

NRSV

Difficult to interpret, this psalm seems to have accompanied a liturgy (drama) in the Temple depicting the movement of the Israelites from before “Sinai” (v. 8) to Jerusalem (where God dwells, v. 17). It consists of *snippets*, each a few verses long, commemorating God’s championship of Israel. V. 1 echoes Moses’ words whenever the Ark was moved (see Numbers 10:35). “As wax melts ...” (v. 2) is the language of God’s presence. In Canaanite culture, the storm god, Baal, “rides upon the clouds” (v. 4); here God does so (see also v. 33). He is saviour of the needy and persecutor of the ungodly (vv. 5-6). Judges 5:4-5 also associates earthquakes and deluges with Sinai; water was (and is) valuable in Palestine (vv. 8-10). God’s “voice” (v. 33) is probably thunder, a sign of his “power” (vv. 34, 35). May all people everywhere (“kingdoms of the earth”, v. 32) praise God! To the early church, this psalm foretold the ascension of Christ.

1 Peter 4:12-14;5:6-11

NRSV

In the final verses of the letter, the author exhorts his readers (who are being persecuted at least to the extent of being made to feel inferior) to accept their “ordeal” as something to be expected and as testing their mettle. Christ is not just an example of suffering-for-doing-good; they are to rejoice that in suffering they actually share in his sufferings. This is preparation for union with him when he comes again (“when his glory is revealed”, 4:13). They are indeed fortunate (“blessed”, 4:14) that the Spirit, the source of oneness with God (“glory”) is with them. For a Christian, to suffer for doing good is not a “disgrace” (4:16). Their suffering is in fact the start of end-time judgement. How much worse off will be those who do not “obey” (4:17) Christ’s message! So entrust yourselves to God.

In the conclusion, the author addresses fellow “elders” (5:1) as one who shares in the certain hope of Christ’s return. He exhorts the leaders to: (1) care for the faithful, (2) oversee them in doctrine and discipline, (3) treat them as equals, and (4) be examples to them. All the faithful must make effort to “humble yourselves” (5:6) before God, who is always the great deliverer and to whom you owe obedience (“mighty hand”), so that in God’s time (“due time”) you will be brought into full union with him. Trust in God (5:7). Remain “alert” (5:8) for evil is always trying to divert you from God’s ways! Others also suffer as you do (5:9b). Your suffering will be brief; then God who has called you to eternal life will give you strength and the status due to you (“establish”, 5:10).

John 17:1-11

NRSV

Jesus has just ended his instructions to his disciples; he has concluded with “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” Now he prays to the Father. He summarizes the significance of his life. The time appointed by God for his departure (crucifixion, resurrection and ascension) has come. *Glory* can be defined as *divine heavenly splendour* where *heaven* is the state of ultimate good and love existing outside of time. In v. 1, the Father giving this splendour to the Son adds to the Father’s splendour because of the “authority” (v. 2) given to the Son over humans, especially “to give eternal life” to us. V. 3 explains that “eternal life” is knowing the Father and the Son intimately. Vv. 4-5 state how the Son adds to the splendour of the Father (by completing his assigned task) and how the Father adds to the Son’s splendour: by restoring him to the Father’s “presence”, to heaven – a state he enjoyed before God’s creative act. V. 6 expands on “the work” (v. 4) the Son has done: to make the Father’s character and person (“name”, v. 6) known to those chosen by the Father. These elect are the mutual possession of Father and Son; these have been faithful to God’s “word”, his command. Vv. 7-8 expand on keeping the Father’s word: the disciples know that: (1) the Father is the source of all that the Son has been given; (2) Jesus is from (out of) the Father; and (3) the Father sent him into the world. Looking forward to the time after his departure, Jesus asks the Father to “protect” (v. 11) the disciples from evil influences in the alien “world”, that they may have a unity modelled on that of the Father and the Son.