

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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Genesis 11:1-9

NRSV

In the first creation story, God tells humans to “multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (1:28). They have multiplied, but are yet to spread out across the world. All the people settle in one place (disobeying God’s order): in “the land of Shinar” (v. 2, Mesopotamia). V. 3 explains local building materials (“brick”, “bitumen”) in Hebrew terms (“stone”, “mortar”). The people intend to build one city with a “tower” (v. 4), a *ziggurat*, a man-made mountain, in it. (Ancient peoples worshipped on mountains, as close to the gods as possible.) They decide to imitate God by ensuring that their works endure (“make a name”) and refuse to obey God’s order to disperse across the earth. We find vestiges of pre-Israelite theology: gods were jealous of humans (v. 6), and “us” (v. 7) refers to the royal court of the gods. Divine will clashes with human will, and God, our God, “LORD” (v. 8) wins: he punishes the people by *confusing* their language (v. 9). “Babel”, Babylon, is here traced to the Hebrew word for *confusion*.

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” (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!

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.

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.

John 14:8-17,(25-27)

NRSV

Judas Iscariot has left to do his dastardly deed. Jesus now prepares his disciples for his departure. Belief in God includes belief in him (v. 1). He is *going*, through resurrection and ascension, to the Father, to prepare a place of permanent fellowship for them (vv. 2-3). Philip shows by his question in v. 8 that he still does not understand (“know”, v. 9) Jesus, for Jesus is the revelation of God. The Son is present (“dwells”, v. 10) in the Father, and the Father in the Son; the deeds Jesus has done are the Father’s. A master entrusted his *agent* to act on his behalf in every way. Jesus is the Father’s agent, empowered to act completely for the Father. Jesus says, in essence, if you do not *buy* this *mutual presence*, then trust in me on the basis of what I do: you are seeing the Father’s “works” (vv. 10-11).

The faithful will continue these works. (The ones they do will be “greater”, v. 12, because Jesus has nullified sin.) By asking Jesus in prayer, as his agent (“in my name”, v. 14), God will do whatever the faithful ask. Fidelity to him is both loving and obeying (v. 15). Jesus is their *first advocate*, i.e. helper and counsellor. He will ask the Father to “give you another Advocate” (v. 16), “the Spirit of truth” (v. 17), i.e. the Holy Spirit. That the Spirit exists and what he does is known only to believers, not to “the world”. Philip (and others) may not understand now, but they will, for the Spirit will “teach ... [them] everything” (v. 26) and will help them recall Jesus’ message. What he teaches will be the same as what Jesus has taught. Jesus gives “peace” (v. 27, wholeness, well-being, tranquillity, concord with one another and with God), a permanent gift which will never be revoked.