

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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Isaiah 35:1-10

NRSV

In this oracle of restoration, the prophet promises: (1) restoration of the land to fertility, (2) the end of human suffering and infirmity, (3) restoration of hope and justice, and (4) the joyful return of the exiles from captivity. The prophet has predicted the destruction of the nations, particularly of Edom, and the devastation of their lands. (Edom was thought to have aided the Babylonians in capturing Jerusalem.) The other lands will be laid waste, rendered unproductive and given over to wild beasts (in Chapter 34). Now, in contrast, exiled Israel will be restored. The “desert shall ... blossom” (v. 1), the fertility of “Lebanon” (v. 2), “Carmel and Sharon”, which has been taken from them (33:9) will be given to Israel as a sign of God’s favour and glory. The land which had once been given over to wild beasts (“jackals”, v. 7, “lion”, v. 9) will once again be cultivated, and barren land will bloom.

Not only the land will be restored, but human life will also be transformed, with the end of infirmity (“make firm ... feeble knees”, v. 3, “blind”, “deaf”, “lame”, “speechless”, vv. 4-6), and with the restoration of justice (“vengeance” and “recompense” v. 4) and hope. “Waters” (v. 6) and “streams” will make the land fertile again. Finally, the exiles, those taken captive to Babylon, will return on a “Holy Way” (v. 8), a “highway” in safety (v. 9) to “Zion” (v. 10), the holy city, and once again will worship God in the Temple. All of these will be signs that God’s rule is restored and that his favour rests on his people.

Luke 1:46b-55

NRSV

Mary is visiting Elizabeth and Zechariah. God’s messenger, Gabriel, has told her that she will bear Jesus, “the Son of God” (v. 35), successor to David and founder of an eternal kingdom. With God, “nothing will be impossible” (v. 37) – it was possible for Sarah to bear a child. Mary now thanks God in a poem known as the *Magnificat*, the first word of its Latin translation. Speaking today, she might begin: *From the depth of my heart, I declare the Lord’s greatness and rejoice in God my Saviour.* “Servant” (v. 48) can also be rendered *slave* or *handmaid*: in v. 38, she has acknowledged that she is a “servant of the Lord”, i.e. obedient to him in all things. She will be hailed by people of every age (“generations”, v. 48) in the new era of salvation launched by her son. Why? Because of the seemingly impossible “things” (v. 49) God has done for her. Then a reminder (v. 50): God is compassionate to all who hold him in awe throughout time. Vv. 51-53 universalize her experience, to reflect how God deals with all humanity. While the verbs are in the past tense in English, the Greek tense has the sense of: (1) how God customarily acts – as he always has and will continue to do – and (2) what he is starting to do in the conception of Jesus. The “proud” (v. 51), the arrogant, are ali-

enated from God by their very “thoughts”; he reverses fortunes, raising up those in need (“lowly”, v. 52, “hungry”, v. 53) and rejecting the rich, those who think they don’t need God. Vv. 54-55 sum up the *Magnificat*: in his compassion, God has fulfilled and continues to fulfill his promises to the patriarchs.

James 5:7-10

NRSV

Early Christians expected the return of Jesus, the *second coming*, almost immediately. This was connected with expectations about the Kingdom of God. The apparent delay of this event caused some difficulties and even some disputes among the faithful. James warns his readers not to be impatient (vv. 8-9), lest this impatience lead to grumbling and division within the church (v. 9), which will bring judgement. For with the second coming of Christ comes also the judgement of God. The second coming is a *two-edged sword*: its arrival is both of comfort and of warning to Christians! Instead, James tells his readers that they are to be patient in suffering like the prophets (v. 10). They are to bide their time like the farmer who plants his crop in the knowledge that the rains will come in their own time (v. 7). So it is with the Kingdom. It is on its way, it is “near”, (v. 8) but will come in its own time. Our impatience will not hasten its coming, but we can expect it with the confidence of faith.

Matthew 11:2-11

NRSV

John the Baptist has been arrested and imprisoned. Discouraged and in doubt, he sends messengers to ask Jesus: “Are you the one ...?” (v. 3) But Jesus does not simply say *yes*. Instead, he points John (and the crowd) to the signs of the Kingdom (v. 5). Echoing Isaiah, he points out that the blind, the deaf, the lame and the lepers are being healed and good news is given to the poor. Anyone can claim to be a herald of the kingdom, but only in the presence of the Messiah will the true signs of the Kingdom be evident. These are not mere claims, but incontrovertible proof. Yet apparently there are some who take offense at Jesus (v. 6). Perhaps even John himself has been disappointed because his expectations of the Messiah do not seem to be fulfilled by Jesus, e.g. he does not “wear soft robes” (v. 8). Perhaps this has given rise to doubts. Jesus refers to the signs of the Kingdom in Isaiah.

Now Jesus validates John’s ministry as a true prophet (by quoting a prophecy from Malachi, v. 10), going on even to identify John as Elijah, returned (v. 14). (Jews understood the time of the prophets to have ended, but took Malachi’s words to mean that Elijah would come again.) Jesus criticizes the people who went out to see John the Baptist in the wilderness with a variety of incorrect expectations. What they actually saw was greater than they could have imagined. Yet even John, as great as he was, only pointed the way to an even greater reality (v. 11). Up to and including John the Baptist was the time of prophetic promise; now this promise is starting to be fulfilled (v. 13). When we are disappointed, or our expectations of God’s Kingdom are dashed, perhaps it is because we are not looking for the signs of the coming of the Kingdom that are all around us.

