

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 Plain of Sharon, extending from the Mediterranean coast to the Carmel range of mountains, was then covered with dense oak forest, as was much of Lebanon.) 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. (The little evidence we have indicates that the exiles did not suffer in exile, so vv. 4-6 are not meant literally.) 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.

Psalms 146:5-10

NRSV

This psalm echoes the theme of restoration from Isaiah, focussing especially on God's justice. Along with Psalms 147-150, this is a *Hallelujah* Psalm, a series of hymns of praise which close out the Psalter. Each hymn includes a call to worship, a statement of the purpose for praising God, and a renewed summons to praise. These Psalms all begin and end with the word *Hallelujah* (in the NRSV, translated as "Praise the LORD").

In contrast to human rulers, who ultimately disappoint (vv. 3-4), God's reign is just. Those who trust in God, the creator (v. 6) and of everlasting fidelity to humans, are "happy" (v. 5) and have "hope". ("Jacob" means Israel.) Vv. 7-9 tell of God's justice in his care and action on behalf of defenceless members of society, including the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, the weak or humiliated ("bowed down"), strangers, orphans and widows. When these are

cared for, it is a sign of God's just reign, and he is to be praised. Hallelujah!

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). (In Palestine, there are two rainy times of the year: October-November, "early" and April-May, "late".) 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. John is "more than a prophet" (v. 9) for he heralds the dawn of the final era of history and announces the coming of the Kingdom. 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 Kingdom that are all around us.