

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 7:10-16

NRSV

Assyria, under Tiglath-pileser III, is intent on expanding westwards. The kings of "Aram" (vv. 1, 2, 5, 8, Syria) and of Israel (also called "Ephraim") have formed a coalition to resist the advances of their common enemy. They have tried to convince "Ahaz" (v. 1), king of Judah and of the "house of David" (v. 2) to join the alliance; he has refused. Now they seek to put a puppet king on Judah's throne. God has commanded Isaiah to "meet Ahaz" (v. 3) as he inspects the water supply vital to Jerusalem's defence. Isaiah tells him: "take heed ... do not fear ... these two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (v. 4) who have "plotted evil against you" (v. 5). "If you do not stand firm in faith" (v. 9, trust in God) but rely on human counsel, you will be defeated.

God now speaks again to Ahaz: ask any "sign" (v. 11), any confirmation of my promise delivered by Isaiah – any at all in all creation. ("Sheol" was the subterranean abode of the dead.). But it seems that Ahaz has already made up his mind (v. 12) so, through Isaiah, God gives to the "house of David" (v. 13) not a "sign" (v. 11) to convince Ahaz, but one which speaks to future generations. God will keep the promise he made to David (through Nathan): "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me" (2 Samuel 7:16). "The young woman" (v. 14, most likely Ahaz's wife) is pregnant; David's line will continue; she will name her son "Immanuel" (meaning *God with us*). (This son was Hezekiah.) In a devastated land (paying heavy tribute to Assyria), where only basic food is available ("curds and honey", v. 15), he will develop moral discrimination – unlike recent kings, who were deemed wicked, ungodly people. By this time, Assyria will have conquered both Syria and Israel (v. 16).

Psalm 80:1-7,17-19

NRSV

This is a prayer for deliverance from Israel's enemies, calling on God to "shine forth" (smile), be favourably disposed towards his people. God was seen as enthroned invisibly on the "cherubim", the half-human, half-animal winged creatures on the Ark. From the mention of three northern tribes in v. 2 we can guess that this psalm was written shortly before the conquest of the northern kingdom in 721 BC. Vv. 3, 7 and 19 are a refrain: please take us back, God, into the covenant relationship with you! The nation's current plight is seen as due to God's anger (v. 4). Vv. 5 and 6 tell of the present evils besetting the nation; in contrast, vv. 8-11 recall God's gracious hand in the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. Why, asks v. 12, have you made Israel vulnerable? Please Lord, look after us! Vv. 17-19 seek deliverance: may you be with our king, "the one at your right hand", so we will never desert you (v. 18). Give us strength ("life") to seek favours from you. Be with us, "that we may be saved" (v. 19).

Romans 1:1-7

NRSV

Paul introduces himself to his readers: (1) as "servant" (literally *slave*) of Christ, one under more than the usual obligation Christians have to Jesus; (2) as an "apostle", one sent with a special mission of divine origin; and (3) as "set apart" to spread God's good news. (Paul does not reserve the title *apostle* for the Twelve.) This news of eternal life with God was "promised beforehand" (v. 2): it has been part of God's plan since before creation. God made known his promise "through his prophets" (principally Isaiah and Jeremiah) in books held to have authority. (When Paul wrote, both Testaments were yet to be defined.) The "gospel" (good news, v. 3) is about one very close to God, "his Son", here identified in two ways: (1) physically ("flesh"): of David's line, so meeting the Old Testament prerequisites for messiahship; and (2) spiritually ("spirit ...", v. 4): definitively stated by God to be the "Christ" (Messiah) in resurrecting him.

It is through Christ that Paul ("we", v. 5) has received "grace" (God's freely given gift of love) and "apostleship" (authority to teach and proclaim the good news) – with the objective of bringing people (especially non-Jews) to faith in God and thus making it possible for them to place themselves under God's authority ("obedience of faith"). Paul sees the Christians at "Rome" (v. 7) as "called to be saints": literally *called holy ones*, belonging to God and consecrated to his service. (The same Greek words are found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation Paul would have used, to describe the Israelite community. We, he suggests, are in continuity with them. In v. 1, he sees himself as in being in continuity with Moses, Joshua and Abraham – all called *servants of God* in the Old Testament.) Finally, he wishes the Roman community both God's "grace" (v. 7) and his "peace", the Jewish notion of a right relationship with God – partnership in reconciliation of all to him, eternal well-being, and wholeness of life.

Matthew 1:18-25

NRSV

Matthew has told us of Jesus' descent from David. He is the anointed ("Messiah") king God has promised. Joseph's and Mary's families ("engaged") have signed a marriage contract but Joseph has not yet *taken her* (v. 20) into his house. If Mosaic law on sexual relations was fully observed then, Joseph could have brought charges against her, and she could have been stoned to death ("public disgrace", v. 19) for *adultery* (then including pre-marital sex). Joseph, while observant of the Law ("righteous"), is compassionate: he "planned to dismiss [divorce] her quietly". God had intervened in the birth of some he has chosen – Isaac, Jacob and Samuel – but never before has he replaced the whole male role. Even so, the messenger from God points out Joseph's role: Jesus is legally descended from David through him. In Aramaic and Hebrew, "Jesus" (v. 21) and "he will save" sound similar. Matthew is keen to show that Jesus fulfills God's promise made through Isaiah (v. 22). In v. 23, the Greek word translated "virgin", *parthenos*, is rendered as *unmarried daughter* in Acts 21:9. Perhaps *maiden* is a better translation; it has the same range of meanings as *parthenos*. Through Jesus "God is with us" (v. 23) but Joseph names him Jesus, not Immanuel.