

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 28:10-19a

NRSV

Isaac has dispatched Jacob to find a wife for himself in “Haran”. He, like Isaac, is expected to marry one of his own clan, but unlike Isaac, is sent on the journey himself. On the way, Jacob stops for the night at Bethel (meaning *house of God*) and dreams. (Travellers slept on the ground using hard pillows!) The word translated “place” (v. 11) implies that the place is sacred. The scene is reminiscent of a ziggurat, on which there was a stairway (“ladder”, v. 12) to the top, where the deity was believed to live. The Tower of Babel (meaning *gateway to a god*) was probably a ziggurat. The angels “ascending and descending” suggest contact with God. God speaks, identifying himself as God of the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, i.e. not just a local god of that place alone, as was common in the region. The promises in vv. 13-14 are those made to Abraham, but the one in v. 15 is specially for Jacob: God will watch over (“keep”) him wherever he is; God is present everywhere, not just here.

In v. 17, Jacob is awe-struck (“afraid”) and says that the place is awe-inspiring (“awesome”). This, he says, is the “house of God” (hence *Bethel*) and the “gate of heaven”. Next morning, Jacob sets up his stone pillow to mark the presence of a deity, as was the local custom. He consecrates it with “oil” (v. 18).

Psalms 139:1-12,23-24

NRSV

First this psalm praises God for his personal knowledge of the author. God has come to know him through searching him out. He knows him completely, all the way from his *sitting down* (v. 2) to his *rising up*. God, says v. 2, is present everywhere. The psalmist is astonished at God’s involvement with him, including knowing all that he says and does (v. 4). Wherever he is, God is there (v. 7). Even were he to be taken up to heaven (v. 8, as Elijah was), God is there; God is also present in the *nether world* (v. 7). God will lead him and support him even if he tries a speedy escape (“wings”, v. 9) or lives in the sea. Finally, in vv. 23-24, the psalmist pleads for God’s justice and for his guidance towards righteousness, being in unison with God. Please God, if I deviate from your ways, set me straight.

Romans 8:12-25

NRSV

Paul has told us how Christian experience is dominated by life in the Spirit rather than by the desires of the flesh, or self-centeredness. Christians are still subject to suffering, to bearing crosses and affliction, but not to eternal condemnation. Not being condemned, we have hope.

Now he says that we are under an obligation (“debtors”) to God: to live in the way of the Spirit. Living this way, we look forward to eternal life (v. 13) at the end of time rather than the finality of physical death. We are “children of God” (v. 14).

When baptised, we do not lose freedom (“slavery”, v. 15) but are adopted by him. As his children, we are “heirs” (v. 17) with hope for the future – unlike slaves who fear their master (v. 15). (In the Old Testament, the land of Israel is God’s inheritance for his people.) In calling him as Dad or “Father”, we express the close relationship we have with him; our hearts are motivated by the Spirit. (Slaves did not inherit.) Being “with Christ” (v. 17), by sharing in his suffering, we will be able to attain union with him in heaven (“glorified”).

Now Paul relates this to the present situation. His suffering and/or that of his readers is minuscule compared to the splendour (glory”, v. 18) we will enjoy at the end of time. To Paul, everyone and everything created (“creation”, v. 20) has helplessly compounded sin through the ages (“subjected to futility”). All hope for resolution of the present chaotic state of the world (“bondage to decay”, v. 21), to attaining the “glory” which awaits us. The world, the material “creation” (v. 23), was in expectation, but also in pain (“labour pains”, v. 22) until the arrival of Christ. We Christians have a painful experience too – we do suffer, as we wait for the age to come (the “redemption of our bodies”, v. 23), we who are guided by the Holy Spirit (“have the first fruits”). The hope we have is very real: one doesn’t *hope* for what is visible now, but rather for what one can’t see but expects to happen. We wait in patience, and endure.

Matthew 13:24-30,36-43

NRSV

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to ...” Jesus continues to tell parables, memorable stories with a deep meaning, to teach the crowd how what we do now will affect what happens to us at the end of time, at the “end of the age” (v. 39). Agricultural stories appeal to his rural listeners. The first parable focussed on where the seed landed. All the seed was good, but only some fell on fertile ground; however, here some of the seed sown there is good (wheat) and some is bad (weeds, tares, or darnel – a weed that looks like wheat.) The “enemy” (whose identity we learn later) sows the bad seed secretly (“while everybody was asleep”, v. 25.) Both the good and the bad seed grow together. At harvest time the roots of the weeds have intertwined with those of the wheat (v. 29). The occurrence of *gather* three times in vv. 28-30 is a clue that Jesus speaks of the community.

Jesus offers two interpretations of the parable to his disciples. In vv. 37-39, he states what each of the figures and events in the story stands for. The kingdom begins now when Jesus (“the Son of Man”) sows the seed, drawing people to him, but the Devil seeks to subvert his efforts. The “harvest” is when Christ comes again, at the end of the age. The second interpretation is in vv. 40-43a. At the end of the age, he says, the evil will be separated out, judged and destroyed (“burned up”, v. 40). The lots of the “evildoers” (v. 41) will be a miserable one (“gnashing of teeth”, v. 42). The “righteous” (v. 43), those who are faithful to God, will be gathered together, rewarded and brought into God’s presence. Finally v. 43b: the gospel is open to all who will listen!