

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 40:1-11

NRSV

This is the beginning of the part of Isaiah written from exile in Babylon. In vv. 1-2, God speaks. Because “comfort” and “speak” are in the plural (in Hebrew), he speaks to a group, probably of angels, but possibly of prophets: i.e. *may you comfort ...*. Literally, they are to speak “tenderly” (to the heart, the seat of reasoning), to “Jerusalem”; but the city is in ruins, so (this passage being a vision) their audience is an idealized kingdom of his people. Tell them, he says, that their time of sorrow is over, that they have “served” their punishment for waywardness, that the Exile is about to end. Use of the word “double” (v. 2) assures that their purification from sin is finished, that difficult times are truly ended. So a new era is dawning, inaugurated by God’s Word.

In vv. 3-5, a heavenly voice (or the prophet) announces, in language reminiscent of the pomp of royal pageantry in Babylon, “prepare the way of the Lord”. (Christianity was later known as *The Way*, God’s manner of life.) God is coming; he is about to lead a new Exodus (note “wilderness”, “desert”) to a blessed land. Seeing this marvellous display of God’s presence is independent of our tendency to sin, and thus is only dependent on God’s grace and power. (The words translated “all people” mean, literally, *all flesh*.) Then “a voice” (v. 6) from heaven commands the prophet to “Cry out!”, but he asks: what should I tell them? For they are like *flowers* and “grass”: they fade and wither when God acts. (The word translated “breath” (v. 7) also means *spirit*, as in Genesis 1:2, where the wind of God sweeps over the primeval waters.) People are fickle, but God’s “word” (v. 8) endures.

Even so (v. 9), the prophet (on behalf of Jerusalem) is told to tell the “good tidings”, the good news, boldly, to tell all people “Here is your God!”. Jerusalem (“Zion”) and Judah are to be the centre for God’s activity on earth. He comes, says v. 10, as a king (“with might”, “rules”) who really cares: he brings redemption, restoration (“reward”, “recompense”). Finally, v. 11 likens him to a shepherd: one who *gathers* the weak (“the lambs”), makes people one with him, and compassionately leads. (In the ancient world, a shepherd led, rather than drove, his sheep, to protect them from lurking predators.)

Psalms 85:1-2,8-13

NRSV

Vv. 1-2 tell of God’s restoration of Israel, probably in releasing them from Exile. But times are tough: vv. 4-7 are a prayer that God may again show favour – in the present difficulties: please, God, “restore us again”; give us life and “salvation”. The people returned to a ravaged land. In vv. 8-13 the psalmist hears God speaking: he will impart blessings upon the faithful. They will receive “peace”, *shalom*, godliness, well-being, including “salvation” which is “at hand”. In this process, God’s presence and power will be apparent. V. 10 says that four of God’s attrib-

utes, his gifts to humankind, will come together. Then v. 11: human “faithfulness”, adherence to God, the ultimate truth, will be reciprocated by him. He will give prosperity, materially and spiritually. Crops will improve (v. 12) and the people’s godliness “will make a path” (v. 13) for his coming.

2 Peter 3:8-15a

NRSV

Aware that he will soon die, the author leaves his fellow Christians with a testimony of what being Christian demands: how to live up to *The Way*, so that they may be among the godly when Christ comes again. It was tempting to deny that Christ would come again because early Christians expected the world to end within their lifetimes.

The delay, he argues in v. 8, is only in human terms, for God does not measure time as we do. God wishes all people to be found worthy at the Last Day; he does not want any to “perish” (v. 9) for ungodliness; so he is waiting patiently for all to repent of their waywardness. The End will come “like a thief” (v. 10), i.e. suddenly, unexpectedly. The images of the end-times in v. 10b are drawn from popular Jewish and Greek (Stoic) philosophy of the day. (Annihilation of all things by fire was a Stoic belief.) A “loud noise” heralds the Day; the conduct of all people will be made known then. So, he asks rhetorically in vv. 11-12, given that the End will come, what should our conduct be as we wait for the End and hasten it (through bringing people to Christ)? But, says v. 13, for us Christians annihilation is not the End, for (per Isaiah 66:22), we look forward to “new heavens and a new earth”, inhabited by the godly. In v. 14, he answers: we should work at being “at peace”, at being ethically and spiritually perfect, prepared for Christ’s (“him”) coming at the End. We should see the apparent delay in his coming as an opportunity for repentance, for attainment of salvation.

Mark 1:1-8

NRSV

Mark begins his telling of the “good news” with quotations from the Old Testament. God had promised the Israelites a “messenger” (v. 2) to lead them. The prophet Malachi understood this promise as pointing to the end-times, to one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. To him, the “messenger” would be Elijah. While v. 3 originally spoke of return from exile, by Jesus’ time it was seen as an expression of God’s comfort and salvation. To us, John the Baptist comes to prepare for, and announce, Jesus’ coming. Tradition says that John baptised near Jericho, in an arid region. People came to him in large numbers, repenting (changing their mind sets), “confessing their sins” (v. 5), resolving to sin no more, and dipping themselves in the River. John dressed like a hermit or prophet (v. 6). (In Palestine, some species of locusts were eaten.) John is so unworthy, compared to “the one who ... is coming” (v. 7), that he cannot untie his “sandals”, a task normally performed by a slave. His baptism is a sign of purification, of turning to God, of accepting God’s forgiveness and judgement; Jesus’ baptism re-establishes a spiritual link between God and humans.