

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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Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9

NRSV

In the Hebrew Bible, life simply ended with death (or at best, the dead merely existed in an indeterminate state, separated from God), but during the first century BC, some Jewish thinkers developed the notion of after-life. Wisdom is in the Apocrypha or in the Old Testament: the Church has used it since the earliest times, but the Jewish authorities rejected it. It is quoted in the New Testament. The thinking is that, at the Last Judgement, the just (or righteous) will join God and the angels in heaven, but the unjust (or wicked) will be punished. 2:23-24 says: "... God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it".

But the "righteous" (v. 1) are protected by God, and after death, they will not suffer. To the wicked ("foolish", v. 2), they seem to have simply ceased to exist, to have been annihilated, but they are actually "at peace" (v. 3), with God and the angelic court. It may appear that they have been punished, but their certain hope in life and in death is to live for ever. Then v. 5: the hardship they have suffered in life is really *discipline*, a process of testing by God and being found acceptable to him, and a preparation for receiving "great good" from him. God's testing (v. 6) is like refining gold: when the ore is heated, the metal coalesces and the slag separates: a process of purification. Isaiah 53, a *Servant Song* (which we believe tells of Christ) speaks of a "lamb that is led to the slaughter ... there was no deceit in his mouth" and his life is "an offering for sin". This is the sense in which those who have died are a "sacrificial burnt offering" (v. 6). At the Last Judgement ("In the time of their visitation", v. 7) those who have died will triumph (shining and "sparks" are images of triumph.) V. 8a summarizes Daniel 7:18-27; in the context of Wisdom, it simply means that the just will rule over the wicked (although many Jews took Daniel as saying that, in the Messianic age, Israel, the just, would rule all other nations.) In the age to come, "the faithful" (v. 9), "those who trust" in God, will understand ultimate "truth", i.e. God, and will dwell in a loving relationship with him, because of his freely-given gift of love ("grace") to, and forgiveness of ("mercy") those he chooses.

Psalm 24

NRSV

This psalm is based on a Canaanite myth which tells of the divine conquest of the unruly forces of chaos. The psalmist has transformed it into a hymn of praise to God, the victorious creator, followed by a liturgy on entering the Temple. In question-and-answer form, it was probably sung antiphonally, as the Ark was borne to the Temple. Vv. 1-2 acknowledge God as creator. V. 3 asks: who will be admitted to the Temple? Vv. 4-6 give the answer: those who are pure, do not wor-

ship false gods, and do not harm others with false oaths. They will be blessed by God, with prosperity. In vv. 7-10, the pilgrims identify God in terms traditionally associated with the Ark: he is "King of glory", the "Lord of hosts" (v. 10), the war hero of Israel (v. 8b). The "doors" (v. 9) are those between the outer court and the sanctuary of the Temple. Perhaps a priest asks: "Who is the King of glory?" (v. 8) from within, and the people answer from the court. (The "heads", v. 7, are the lintels of the doors.) God dwells in the sanctuary.

Revelation 21:1-6a

NRSV

This book is "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1) made known through John. It is prophecy which reveals secrets of heaven and earth. Our reading is from John's record of his vision of the end-times. He has told of the destruction of the old city, Babylon (code name for Rome) and of the old heaven and earth (20:11); the ungodly have been driven off to punishment (20:15). Only the godly, a remnant, remain. Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22 predict that all creation will be renewed, freed from imperfections and transformed by the glory of God. Now John sees the new creation. The "sea" (21:1), a symbol of turbulence, unrest and chaos, is no more. He sees "the new Jerusalem" (21:2), probably not made with bricks and mortar, "holy", of divine origin, beautiful and lovely as a "bride". (Marriage is a symbol of the intimate union between the exalted Christ and the godly remnant. Some see the city as the church, set apart for God's use in the world.) John hears "a loud voice" (21:3) interpreting 21:2: God again comes to "dwell" (be present spiritually) with "his peoples". Sorrow, death and pain – characteristics that made the old earth appear to be enslaved to sin – will disappear (21:4). God, "seated on the throne", speaks in 21:5-6: he will do everything described in vv. 1-4; he is sovereign over all that happens in human history. ("Alpha" and "Omega" are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, so God encompasses all.) God will give the gift of eternal life ("water", 21:6b) to all who seek him.

John 11:32-44

NRSV

Lazarus, Mary's brother, has died. Martha has told Jesus that he would not have died had Jesus been present, but that the Father will grant whatever Jesus asks. Jesus has said to her: "Your brother will rise again" (v. 23), which she takes to refer to the general resurrection Jews expected at the end of time. Jesus has answered: "I am the resurrection and the life" (v. 25); even though a believer dies physically, he or she will live on as a person. She has added: "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (v. 27).

Now Mary repeats her earlier assertion (v. 32). Jesus is stirred with indignation, probably at the sorrow death brings. He weeps because he is touched by the pain of those he loves and shares that pain in some real way. Martha tries to restrain Jesus from viewing the decomposing corpse of his friend (v. 39). Jesus says to her: *did I not tell you that if you believed you would see God's power to end death?* God, Father and Son, bring Lazarus back to physical life. Jesus verbalizes his thanks to the Father as he tells the unbelieving "crowd" (v. 42) that he is sent by the Father. On Jesus' command, Lazarus emerges, still wrapped in burial cloths.