

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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Exodus 20:1-17

NRSV

The giving of the Ten Commandments marks the starting point of Israel as a self-defining community. They form a covenant between God and Israel but, unlike God's agreements with Noah and Abraham, here both parties have a stake in it, and either can break it. (In the earlier covenants, God acts and promises but the recipients passively receive – although they do have obligations.)

Having arrived at Mount Sinai, the Israelites clean themselves physically and ritually, but it is Moses and Aaron who ascend the mountain. God speaks to all, to the whole community. But why does God enter into the agreement? In 19:3-6, Moses is told that he has seen what God did to the Egyptians, and how he has lovingly protected Israel, that “you shall be for me a ... holy nation.” They are to have “no other gods before [or beside] me” (v. 3). In the ancient Near East, people commonly encountered gods in sculpted images, but the Israelites are not to do this (v. 4), because God is different: he demands loyalty to him alone (v. 5); he punishes for a long time those who intentionally “reject” him, but rewards with compassion those who love him and follow his ways. Those who use God's name for a false or evil purpose (e.g. for casting spells, doing magic) will not be *acquitted* (v. 7) or *held harmless*. Each week, time is to be reserved for praying to, and worshipping, God. The Israelites must honour older people; doing so will contribute to their own longevity. Then vv. 13-17: life, marriage and property are sacred. Testifying falsely against another (or even spreading innuendos) is prohibited. Even coveting, *desiring greatly*, the possessions of others is prohibited.

Psalms 19

NRSV

To the Israelites, the “firmament” was a giant inverted pudding bowl over the earth, beyond which was a hierarchy of “heavens”. God's glory is told “day” (v. 2) and “night”, yet silently (v. 3a), to all people. He has created the sun as his agent (v. 5); it rises early in the morning, as does the “bridegroom” from his night's rest, traverses from one edge of the heavens to the other, making God's presence known with its “heat” (v. 6). Vv. 7-9 present the wonders of the law, as an expression of God's will for Israel. Here we find synonyms for the Law, characteristics of it, and its benefits for humankind, e.g. it *makes* “wise the simple”, those immature in understanding and judgement. It warns the psalmist (“servant”, v. 11). If he accidentally break it (“hidden faults”, v. 12), may God forgive him. May God protect him from those who intentionally go against God's ways (“the insolent”, v. 13), lest he be influenced into sinning intentionally (“great transgression”). May his words and his thoughts be acceptable to God, who restores him to godliness (v. 14).

Having heard that there are “quarrels” (v. 11) among Christians at Corinth, Paul has urged them to be “united in ... mind and ... purpose.” (v. 10) Some claim allegiance to him, others to Apollos, to Cephas, or to Christ. He is thankful that he baptised very few there, because “no one can say that you were baptised in my name” (v. 15), for Christ sent him to Corinth to “proclaim the gospel ...” (v. 17).

Divisions within the Church should be avoided, but between believers and others they are legitimate. Now v. 18: the message of the cross makes sense to the faithful: to us, it is the revelation of God's power, but to others, it is nonsense (“foolishness”, vv. 18, 21). In v. 19, Paul recalls a verse from Isaiah referring to events that occurred when Assyria was threatening Judah. The king's counsellor (a “wise” man, one versed in popular philosophy) advised alliance with Egypt, but Isaiah told the king to do nothing but trust in the Lord: God would save Israel and bring to nothing the “wisdom of the wise” and the “discernment” (intelligence) “of the discerning”. From other sources, we know that there were many “wise” citizens of Corinth, each of whom had their own solutions to the world's problems. The Greek philosopher and the Jewish scribe count as nothing before God, Paul says: God's wisdom is different: you can't “know” (v. 21) it in a philosophical way. Knowing God is an experiential matter in which one renders him homage and obeys his will. Jews and Greeks seek knowledge in their cultural ways (v. 22), but we proclaim something different: to those Jews and “Greeks” (v. 24, non-Jews) who are called, the cross makes much sense: he is God's power working in the world; he shows us God's intentions for humankind. God's ways are not human ways (v. 25).

John 2:13-22

NRSV

Perhaps John contrasts “the Passover of the Jews” with the sacrifice of our “pascal lamb, Christ” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus, as did many Jews, goes “up to Jerusalem” for the feast. In the forecourt of the Temple, he finds merchants selling animals and birds for sacrifices, and money changers exchanging coins bearing idolatrous images for coins used to pay the temple tax. Jesus throws both traders and animals out of the temple precincts, insisting that commercial activities (especially shady ones) have no place here (v. 16). (V. 19 may show that Jesus also speaks against the regulation of the Jewish sacrificial system by the religious authorities: it oppressed most people and enriched the traders and money changers.) Note that Jesus claims that God is his *Father* and sees the Temple as worthy of respect. The disciples recall Psalm 69:9 – here a prophecy that Jesus' “zeal” (v. 17) will lead to his death. The religious leaders (“Jews”, v. 18) ask Jesus what authority he has for his (violent) action; his reply (v. 19) is puzzling and perhaps evasive, challenging them to replace temple worship with belief in him. Lacking faith, they take it literally (and misunderstand), but John tells us that Jesus is saying that, by his resurrection (“three days”) he will become a new *spiritual temple*, replacing the Temple. The disciples only understand this after the first Easter. It helps them to believe in Jesus and his message of good news.