

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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Numbers 21:4-9

NRSV

The people of Israel are now in the desert in the Sinai peninsula, probably near its northeastern edge (southwest of the Dead Sea.) During their journey from Egypt to Palestine, the Bible tells us of eight rebellions: six of the people against their leaders and God, and two of their leaders against God. In today's reading, the people rebel against Moses and God. The people are "impatient" (v. 4) or *short-tempered* because Moses has refused to engage Edom in battle and, (after being attacked) Israel, with God's help, has won a military victory over the local Canaanites. In criticizing "this miserable food" (v. 5), i.e. manna, they are resenting what God gives them freely. So God sends "poisonous" (v. 6, or *fiery*) "serpents" – fiery possibly because the bites become inflamed before the victims die. The people do repent, and ask Moses to intercede for them ("pray to the LORD", v. 7). God replies that he will heal through a symbol, a bronze snake on a pole. Those who believe in God will be healed. The rebellion stories tell of a lack of trust in God – which led to all those of the generation that left Egypt (including Moses) dying before Israel entered the Promised Land – a punishment for lack of faith, and an example for later generations.

These stories also tell, very frankly, of the issues of human leadership: its qualifications, manifestations and limitations. Moses really has to struggle to be an effective leader. The bronze serpent was preserved and worshipped until, because it had become a symbol of worship separate from the worship of God, it was smashed to bits during the reign of King Hezekiah, in the late 700s BC (see 2 Kings 18:4).

Psalms 107:1-3,17-22

NRSV

The psalmist exhorts a community to "give thanks to the Lord", but when was the psalm written? The community is "redeemed" (v. 2) from some unknown foe; God has "gathered" (v. 3) its members from diverse lands. Israelites were "gathered" as they returned from exile, but not from the "west". So what is the occasion? We don't know. Vv. 17-18 recall the story from Numbers read today. In the ancient world, people thought that sinfulness led to sickness. The people turn towards God in their distress; he hears them, heals them, and restores them to life (v. 20). The setting of these verses is probably the Temple, where they are to "offer thanksgiving sacrifices" (v. 22); they are to proclaim God's power joyfully.

Ephesians 2:1-10

NRSV

Paul has written of the recipients of this letter, of how they reacted to hearing the good news: they believed, and "were marked with the seal of the ... Holy Spirit" (1:13) in baptism. He has heard of their faith and of their love for fellow Chris-

tians. May they receive "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" (1:17) as they come to understand God more and more, coming to know the hope and the inheritance that are theirs through their calling, and the greatness of God's power available to believers of all cultures.

Now he speaks of the time before their conversion, a time when, encumbered by sin, they were "dead" (2:1) spiritually. It was thought that the "air" (2:2) was the domain of demons, so the "ruler of the power of the air" is the devil; they were subservient to him. He still holds sway over the "disobedient", those who have rejected the call to faith. (By implication, Christians are no longer his slaves.) "All of us" (2:3), both Jews and Gentiles, once lived self-centred lives, apart from God's redemptive power. We were "children", descendants of Adam – in danger of God's "wrath" against those who sin (as they still are). (Colossians 3:6 says "the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient".) We were in a state apart from God's love for humankind in Christ. But, says 2:4, even then, when we were spiritually "dead", God loved us greatly, so greatly that he brought us life *together*, raised us *together* and enthroned us *together* – "with Christ" (2:5). (In the Greek, each of these verbs begins with *syn*, as in *synergy*.) Christians have been given a new status, a new life, and new freedom, in order that, by living in this way, we may be channels through whom God shows his gifts to us to the world. We are saved by God's freely given inestimable gift of love ("grace", 2:7). Our salvation is already happening through the medium of our "faith" (2:8), but even "this" (salvation) is a gift from God, rather than a result of our efforts ("works", 2:9). God's plan has always included making Christians what we are: "created in Christ ... for good works" (2:10): being saved, we do "good works".

John 3:14-21

NRSV

Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, has come to Jesus, (because he has recognized that Jesus is "from God", v. 2), to ask: "How can anyone be born [again] after having grown old?" (v. 4) Jesus has answered: to be part of God's plan launched through him, one needs to be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be baptised into Christ (v. 5). God's Spirit works in ways that humans cannot fully understand; Jesus is the only source of knowledge about heaven: he has been there. Nicodemus fails to understand even what Jesus tells him in earthly terms, by analogy. Jesus continues with an analogy (v. 14). Moses' bronze serpent preserved from death those who (through this symbol) trusted in God. In a similar way, thanks to God's great gift of "his only Son" (v. 16, "the Son of Man", v. 14), whoever believes in Christ will have "eternal life" (v. 15), participation in God's life, life in the age to come. Jesus took on human form to save all who will listen (however sinful), not to condemn anyone, but those who willfully refuse to believe are, through the act of rejecting him, condemning themselves (v. 18). When Christ came, there are those who preferred "darkness" (v. 19), "evil": they avoided the light, the truth, lest their wickedness be exposed. But there are others who "do what is true" (v. 21): they seek out truth, i.e. God, and act accordingly as they follow his ways. Others see their example.