

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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Deuteronomy 18:15-20

NRSV

This book claims to be Moses' final words to the Israelites, as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. He has told them that they are not to indulge in magic as the Canaanites do; it is to end such "abhorrent practices" (v. 9) that God, through the Israelites, is driving out the native people. God demands complete loyalty (v. 13); he does not permit occult practices (v. 14). Now recall the Israelites' request after God gave Moses the Ten Commandments at Sinai ("Horeb", v. 16): while they have learnt that "God may speak to someone [i.e. to Moses] and still live" (5:24), they have feared that too much direct contact with God may lead to their deaths: that "this great fire will consume us" (5:25). God has agreed to Moses being a prophet, a channel of communication between him and his people.

Now God, through Moses, promises: to help them remain loyal, he will "raise up a prophet [or line of prophets] like me [Moses] from among" (v. 15) them. God will speak through him, and he will repeat God's words to the Israelites (v. 18). Anyone failing to heed God's commands will be held "accountable" (v. 19), i.e. God will condemn them. God will also deal with false prophets: any prophet who falsely claims to speak in God's name, or speaks contrary to God's will, will die (v. 18). If what a prophet predicts does not happen, he is not God's messenger (v. 22). In later Judaism, v. 18 was seen as referring to a future prophetic figure from heaven. Recall that, after Jesus feeds the five thousand, the people say "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14).

Psalms 111

NRSV

This is a hymn of praise to God for his great deeds, especially for making and keeping his covenant with Israel. The psalmist is a wise person, for whom holding the Lord in awe is the beginning of knowing him (v. 10a) and for whom wisdom comes from increasing knowledge of God. He speaks from his innermost being, his "whole heart" (v. 1), in the select group ("company of the upright") and in "the congregation". He praises God for his "works" (v. 2) or "deeds" (v. 4). V. 4b is from Exodus 34:6, part of God's proclamation after he replaced the stones bearing the Commandments – a symbol of renewal of the covenant. He nourishes those who hold him in awe. His works include the gift of Palestine (v. 6b), his interventions in the world (v. 6a) and his commandments. What he does lasts forever (v. 8a). His deeds show him to be "holy and awesome" (v. 9). Living by his commandments is the start of understanding of him.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

NRSV

In 7:1, Paul says: "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote ..." In today's reading, he continues to answer the Christians at Corinth, with advice. Much

of the meat sold in markets was left over from pagan festivals. Some members of the community had scruples about eating such meat, but others considered such scruples to be irrelevant, even to the point of showing contempt towards these "weak believers" (v. 11). Such an attitude seems to have been disrupting the community. Paul is on the side of liberalism, but not at all costs.

The quotes are from the *strong*, those smart people who have thought through the theology. In v. 1, Paul warns against being headstrong with knowledge: knowledge can be dangerous; what really matters is "love": it builds the community. Real knowledge of God (v. 2), the "necessary knowledge", is realizing that being known by God, in love, is what really counts. Smart people know that the Greco-Roman gods don't exist (v. 4), that only God exists, so sacrificing to gods is meaningless, and should not concern us. In speaking about God as the source and destination of all that is, we should not forget Christ's role as mediator in creation (v. 6). *The weak*, he says, have not yet matured in their thinking as Christians: they have not yet shed their cultural attachments to idols; they feel that eating sacrificial meat is disloyal to Christ.

Then vv. 8-9: in arguing that what one eats is irrelevant, the *strong* should be careful that their libertarian attitude does not impede the progress of "the weak" towards God. Then v. 10-11: if they see *strong* people joining in festive meals (often held in temples) where such meat is served, might they be tempted back into idolatry? So in joining in such meals you weaken the faith of fellow Christians: this offends Christ. Finally v. 13: in spite of his liberalism, if eating this meat might cause anyone to falter in the Way of God, he will abstain from all meat.

Mark 1:21-28

NRSV

Mark has just told us about the calling of Peter ("Simon", v. 16), Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee. Our passage tells us of the recognition of Jesus' authority, both in word and deed. He and his disciples go to Capernaum, a prosperous town on the Sea of Galilee. A synagogue was where Jews met to gain a fuller understanding of their tradition through study and worship. (At the time, it was probably not a building set apart for study and worship.) Anyone with sufficient knowledge could teach. The "scribes" (v. 22) were specialists in the interpretation and application of Mosaic law to daily life. They frequently quoted scripture and tradition, but Jesus (on this occasion) does not: he speaks directly, confident of his "authority", of his very essence. The Greek word is like the one in the Nicene Creed which is translated as *being* or *substance*.

The "man with an unclean spirit" (v. 23) was, in our terms, *possessed*: he was under the influence of evil forces. In Jewish terms, he was under Satan's direction, separated from God. The devil, speaking through this man (v. 24), asks what Jesus is doing meddling in the domain of evil; he recognizes who Jesus is and that his coming spells the end of the devil's power. He understands the significance of the coming Kingdom. Wonder-workers of the day healed using ritual or magic, but Jesus exorcises simply through verbal command (v. 25), so clearly he is divine. V. 27, on the lips of the crowd, acknowledges Jesus' "authority" in word and deed.