

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 40:21-31

NRSV

Vv. 1-11 (read during Advent) tell of the glorious procession back to Jerusalem, but vv. 12-31 speak to a people who are tempted to desert their faith in God. Here God (through his prophet) speaks directly to his people. Can anyone measure the extent of God's domain in human terms? (v. 12). So how can you think you can tell God what to do? Surely he decides what is just; surely he is the source of all "knowledge" (v. 14) and "understanding". All nations are "like a drop from a bucket" (v. 15) compared to him. Finely crafted as the idols worshipped by other nations are, they cannot be compared to him (vv. 18-20).

Are you not aware – you and your ancestors back to creation itself – that it is God who controls the earth? (v. 21) He is enthroned on high ("above the circle", v. 22, the horizon); to him humans appear to be "like grasshoppers". ("Heavens" and "tent" – the vault of heaven – are reminders of the ancient world view: there God lived in the highest of the heavens, all of them above the stars.) Dynasties come and go, at his behest (vv. 23-24). God is "the Holy One" (v. 25); he created the stars ("these", v. 26) effortlessly – by simply naming them. Why, O my people ("Jacob", v. 27, "Israel") do you think that God does not see how you live ("way") and ignores your rights? Surely you know that God is from, and for, ever. Unlike you, he does not "grow weary" (v. 28); in fact, he helps doubters and "strengthens the powerless" (v. 29). "Those who wait for the LORD" (v. 31), confident that he will care for his people, will be rewarded. He will restore them.

Psalms 147:1-11,20c

NRSV

This hymn is an invitation to praise God for his universal power and providential care. He is to be praised for rebuilding Jerusalem and gathering the people, especially the "outcasts" (v. 2, exiles), the distressed ("brokenhearted", v. 3) and the "downtrodden" (v. 6). There is no limit to his wisdom (v. 5b). He is creator of the universe (v. 4); he provides the winter rain (v. 8); through it comes "food" (v. 9) for "animals", including "young ravens". While we may delight in "strength" (v. 10) and "speed", he "takes pleasure" (v. 11) in those who hold him in awe and who, knowing of his loving covenant with Israel ("steadfast love", v. 11), look forward to better times. He guards Jerusalem (v. 13), blesses children even from the womb, and gives prosperity and peace (v. 14). He is active in natural phenomena: he sends "snow" (v. 16), "frost" and "hail" (v. 17) as punishment, but he forgives by melting them (v. 18). Only with Israel does he have a relationship based on the Law (v. 20)

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

NRSV

Paul has written that, whatever others may think, he is an apostle for he has seen

the risen Christ and he has brought many to him, especially at Corinth. So he, as are other apostles, is entitled "to be accompanied by a believing wife" (v. 5) and to be supported financially by the Church. However, lest asserting this "right" to be paid put an "obstacle" (v. 12) to faith in the way of coming to Christ, he will not insist on this right. Nothing must get in the way of "boasting" (v. 15, telling), the good news.

But proclaiming (boasting) the gospel is an obligation placed on him, so he has no grounds for bragging about his performance. He does not proclaim the good news of his own will, but rather as one *commissioned* to do so by God; however that he does so "free of charge" (v. 18), without being paid, is his choice (of his own will), so he is due a "reward" (v. 17). This reward is: (1) freedom from constraints which others would place on him ("free with respect to all", v. 19), and (2) being an even more effective emissary of Christ, bringing even more people to him. He has brought people to Christ by *becoming as one* (v. 20) religiously with them: he has behaved in a way not to give offense to prospects for conversion, in order to establish communications with them, respecting their customs. He has voluntarily restricted the freedom he has in Christ, making himself "a slave to all" (v. 19). With those who are "weak" (v. 22), those who easily lose faith when apparent *obstacles* appear (e.g. eating meat left over from pagan rites) he has avoided doing what would upset them (e.g. he has refrained from eating such meat). He has accepted self-control and self-denial the more effectively to spread the good news (v. 23). He can only share in Christ's gifts if he carries out God's commission.

Mark 1:29-39

NRSV

Mark has begun to tell us of a day, a sabbath, early in Jesus' ministry spent at Capernaum. In the synagogue, Jesus has taught "as one having authority" (v. 22) beyond knowledge of the scriptures; he has healed a man possessed by evil – simply by commanding the evil force to leave him.

Now, with the four disciples he has called so far, he heals the mother of Peter's wife. That she serves them shows that she is completely and immediately cured (v. 31). Note that Jesus "took her by the hand": no respected religious leader would do so, especially not on the Sabbath. Was she so seriously ill that Jesus could not wait a few hours to heal her until the Sabbath ended, thus avoiding controversy as to whether this healing could be done on the Sabbath? Mark doesn't tell us of any.

Then, after the Sabbath, at the start of the next Jewish day ("that evening", v. 32), many who are in like condition to the man in the synagogue (mentally ill) and to Peter's mother-in-law (physically ill) are brought to him. Many gather around the doorway ("door", v. 33) of the house to see his miracles. The evil forces recognize his power over them but he intends to show himself as God's agent later, so he does not "permit the demons to speak" (v. 34). Jesus then withdraws to be alone to commune with God (v. 35). Perhaps Peter and the others see him as missing an opportunity to heal, but Jesus insists that his mission extends beyond Capernaum (v. 38). He travels throughout the region, proclaiming the good news to Jews who meet for worship and study, and overcoming evil forces in people (v. 39).