

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 43:18-25

NRSV

God has begun to speak through the prophet: “the Lord, your Redeemer” (v. 14) will free you Israelites from exile in Babylon. He is your “Creator” (v. 15); while other nations have earthly kings, God is “your King”. He has freed you from bondage in Egypt, made a way through the Reed Sea for you, and demolished the Pharaoh’s pursuing army (vv. 16-17).

But do not dwell on my past accomplishments on your behalf; rather look to the “new thing” (v. 19), the new start which is beginning now. As during the Exodus, I “will make a way in the wilderness” (v. 19), protect you (from “wild animals”, v. 20, of the desert), and nourish you – you who are my “chosen”, whom I gave a distinct identity and ability (“formed for myself”, v. 21), so that you may respond accordingly, by praising me.

But you ignored me and saw no point in following my ways (“weary”, v. 22). (“Jacob” means *Israel*.) In exile, you are unable to offer Temple sacrifices to me, so I do not expect it. (An incense based on “frankincense”, v. 23, was the only one permitted at the altar in the Temple.) But you are in debt to me for your waywardness (“sins”, “iniquities”, v. 24). But hear the *new deal*: I will, in my own interests, absolve you of all your sins (v. 25). Then vv. 27-28: I have destroyed your nation because “your first ancestor” (Adam or Jacob) and unworthy prophets and priests strayed from my ways.

Psalms 41

NRSV

Vv.1-3 are a *wise saying*: God protects the downtrodden, even to helping them when they are ill. In ancient times, ill health was thought to be caused by straying from God’s ways (v. 4). The psalmist is ill; indeed, his foes wonder whether he will die. Lacking a notion of life after death, he thinks he will cease to exist when he dies (“perish”, v. 5). (It appears that he has no sons to continue his line.)

When his foes visit him, they make platitudes (“utter empty words”, v. 6) but they secretly wish him gone. They think the netherworld (“deadly thing”, v. 8) has him in its grasp, that he lies on his deathbed. Even a close friend, whom he has helped, has turned against him (v. 9). (Jesus quotes this verse referring to Judas Iscariot.) In v. 10 the psalmist prays for God’s mercy: may he be made well again so he may retaliate (“repay”) against his foes. Even though they think he “will not rise again” (v. 8), please God, “raise me up” (v. 10).

Later, having recovered, he knows that God favours him; God is always with him (perhaps in the Temple). V. 13 has been tacked on to the psalm; it actually marks the end of Book 1 (of 5) of Psalms.

2 Corinthians 1:18-22

NRSV

Paul planned to visit the church at Corinth again, but has not been able to. This has led to a lack of mutual confidence between him and the Christians there. He is eager to restore good relations. He has written: “we have behaved ... with frankness and godly sincerity ... – all the more toward you” (v. 12). He hopes that at the Second Coming the Corinthian Christians will “boast” (v. 14) of his value before God, as will he will of their value. Then v. 17: was he promising visits to them without intending to keep his promise? Was he planning visits “according to ordinary human standards”, telling people what they wanted to hear? If they wished an affirmative answer, was he saying “‘Yes, yes’”, and if a negative one, “‘No, no’”? Was he intending to deceive, saying *yes* and *no* in the same breath?

Now he says that God, absolutely “faithful” (v. 18) would never have commissioned him were he not completely trustworthy; that he has not indulged in double-talk. Jesus never wavered from complete commitment: “in him it was always ‘Yes’” (v. 19). God has made many “promises” (v. 20): to bring a saviour, eternal life, oneness with him. Through Jesus he has kept all of them, i.e. affirmed them. Paul and his companions respond affirmatively. (“‘Amen’”, Hebrew for *so be it*, here is like *yes*.) As for the integrity of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, it is God who has established it and ensures it, having made them one with Christ, made them Christians (“anointed”, v. 21 – *chriein* in Greek) through marking them as his (“seal”, v. 22) in baptism and giving them the “Spirit” – as surety that he will complete the establishment of his Kingdom (“first installment”). (Slaves were marked as belonging to their master.)

Mark 2:1-12

NRSV

After teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum with a new kind of authority and healing people with physical and mental ailments, Jesus has left town, lest he be thought to be a mere wonder-worker. Now he returns to Capernaum; word gets out that he is back, probably at Peter’s house. He tells the many who come to see him about “the word” (v. 2), God’s purposes to be fulfilled through him.

The roof of a Palestinian house could be reached via steps outside. A roof, which was flat, was made of sticks covered with hardened mud. (One might wonder what Peter thought of a hole in his roof!) In Judaism, certain sins could be forgiven by God if the sinner was sorry for what he had done, acknowledged the deed, and was resolute in not doing it again, but here Jesus forgives because of the faith of the mat-bearers (and possibly that of the paralytic) (v. 5).

Jesus perceives what the scribes are thinking: only God can forgive sins; Jesus is not God, so he must be a blasphemer (vv. 6-8). It is “easier” (v. 9) to say that sins are forgiven because no human can tell whether they are or not; only God knows. But only God can heal and he would not use a blasphemer as his agent in healing. If Jesus heals, he is from God; if he does not, he blasphemes. So Jesus shows them that he does indeed have “authority ... to forgive sins” (v. 10): he heals the paralytic by word alone (vv. 11-12). He is from God.