

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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2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33

NRSV

Absalom, one of David's sons, has taken the law into his own hands: when his half-brother Amnon raped his full-sister Tamar and David did nothing about it, he has had Amnon killed. After time in exile, through Joab's mediation, Absalom has returned to David's court, but David's refusal to see him for two years had led him to hate his father and to plan a coup d'état. Capitalizing on resentment to the growth of David's empire, court and bureaucracy, and David's inability to accept changing social patterns and values, Absalom has marched on Jerusalem. David has fled the city, but has escaped across the Jordan with his standing army. David begins a military comeback. He divides his army into three groups, one third under each of "Joab and Abishai and Ittai" (v. 5). He has been advised to stay away from involvement in Absalom's fate.

Now David orders his commanders to "deal gently" with Absalom: despite his rebellion, David still loves him, and wishes his life saved. Absalom's militia ("men of Israel", v. 7) are no match for David's forces in the "forest of Ephraim" (v. 6), terrain more familiar to David's experienced troops. ("Twenty thousand", v. 7, is an exaggeration.) V. 9 says that Absalom was caught by the "head"; however, because 14:26 tells of Absalom's abundant hair, tradition says he was caught by the hair. In vv. 10-14, a man tells Joab of the event, but wisely leaves the politically charged decision of whether to kill Absalom to his commander. Joab (v. 14) or his "armour-bearers" (v. 15) kill Absalom.

Absalom is buried in a "pit in the forest" (v. 17): a very different tomb from the "pillar" (v. 18) near Jerusalem he had prepared for himself. "Ahimaaz" (v. 19) seeks to carry the news to David, but Joab restrains him; instead, he sends a Sudanese or Ethiopian slave ("a Cushite", v. 21). But Ahimaaz persuades Joab he should go to David too. Ahimaaz arrives first (v. 28) but lacks the courage to tell the bad news, and only tells the good. "The Cushite" (v. 31) tells the whole story, but implicitly (v. 32). David is heart-broken (v. 33). In the following verses, David weakens his position by mourning the loss rather than honouring the victors. Joab speaks for the demoralized troops and for national security; he convinces David to hold a ceremony. David rebuilds the kingdom.

Psalm 130

NRSV

This is a prayer for deliverance from personal trouble, but it ends with a message to all people. The "depths" are the chaotic waters, separation from God – as in Jonah's prayer from the stomach of the great fish (Jonah 2:2). May God be attentive to my pleas. If God were to record all our misdeeds, how could anyone face him? (v. 3) God forgives, so he shall be "revered" (v. 4). He is merciful by nature, so I eagerly await his help, his "word" (v. 5), a prophecy from him. I wait as do watch-

men guarding a town from enemy attack (v. 6). Perhaps (v. 7) the psalmist has now received a prophecy of salvation which he tells to all Israel: wait in hope for God; he offers unfailing "love", freedom from grievous sin.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

NRSV

The author seems to be addressing new converts: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self ... to be renewed ... and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God ..." (4:22-24). He now says what conduct is expected of them, as "members of one another" (4:25), of one body, the Church. Do not harbour anger, for prolonged anger gives the devil a point-of-entry (4:26-27). If you lived by stealing (4:28), go beyond restitution: actively care for the poor. Speak to others in a way that emphasizes their goodness, and builds the community (4:29). An offence against a fellow member of the Church is an offense against the Spirit, who is working with him or her: do not cause the Spirit to be grieved, distressed (4:30). Cast aside all vices which are disruptive to the life of the Christian community; rather love "one another" (4:32), expressing generously the same forgiving that Christ first showed you. In the way you forgive and are loving, do it as God does ("be imitators", 5:1): Christ loves us even to giving up himself to death for us. Old Testament priests made "offering and sacrifice to God" (5:2); now Christ is priest/mediator. We share in that priesthood, his sacrifice of love.

John 6:35,41-51

NRSV

Jesus has miraculously fed a large crowd, "about five thousand in all" (v. 10). But the crowd has misunderstood the food he offers; they have seen it as "bread from heaven" (v. 31) like the manna God gave their ancestors in the wilderness.

Now Jesus says that he is both the "bread of life" (v. 35) and the *water of life* (as "hungry" and "thirsty" show). His is sustenance for all time, and beyond, for those who come to him and believe in him. He says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven" (v. 41): that a human claims to be divine offends strict Jewish monotheism and is the cause of complaint, murmuring among the people. (Manna was God's response to the murmuring of their ancestors in the wilderness.) They ask (v. 42): how can one who has human parents have come from heaven? Rather than answer the question, Jesus tells them (v. 44): only those whom God *draws*, calls, can believe in ("come to") him; those who are called (and respond) will be raised, brought into full union with God, at the end of time. If you had heard and learnt the prophetic books of the scriptures, you would believe in me (v. 45). The way people are "taught by God" is through me, for I have "seen the Father" (v. 46). One who believes has "eternal life" (v. 47) beyond the end of the era. "Manna" (v. 49) was from heaven, but the bread I offer is more: it is "living" (v. 51): this is what "never be hungry ... [nor] thirsty" (v. 35) means. It (or I) offer life "forever" (v. 51). The bread of the Eucharist is "my flesh".