

Last Sunday after Pentecost: the Reign of Christ

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 23:1-7

NRSV

The books of Samuel end with six appendices: some stories which fit earlier chronologically, and some poems. Our reading, “the last words of David”, is such a poem. An “oracle” is a prophecy. David’s family origins are stated: he is “son of Jesse”. He is also “the anointed of the God”. Translations of v. 1 vary: he is either favoured by Israel’s God (“the Strong One”), or “the favourite of the songs of Israel” or even (Revised English Bible) “the singer of Israel’s psalms”. God, David says, speaks to his people through him (v. 2). He has ruled justly, holding God in awe (“fear”, v. 3). V. 4 is paradoxical (how can it rain when the sky is cloudless and the sun shines?), and recalls the paradoxes of David’s life.

V. 5 recalls Nathan’s prophecy to him in 7:11ff: God will make of David a “house”, a *dynasty*. The covenant God made with David is said to be “everlasting” (v. 5), but historically his heirs ceased to rule the land when the Babylonians invaded in 586 BC. Even so, for the just (the godly) there is hope of security and prosperity, with God’s help. Vv. 6-7 tell of the fate of David’s enemies: he will seed a great line, but the “godless” will be like thorns: they are useless and will be “thrown away”. The godly should keep their distance from them, lest the good become corrupted. The fate of the ungodly is to be “entirely consumed in fire”, to be annihilated.

Psalm 132:1-12,(13-18)

NRSV

These are the words of a liturgy commemorating God’s choice of Zion and the dynasty of David. Vv. 8-10 are quoted in 2 Chronicles as used at the dedication of the Temple, so this psalm may well have been used at the annual celebration of the dedication. Vv. 1-5 ask God to remember David’s diligence in finding a proper “place” (v. 5) for God’s sanctuary. Vv. 6-10 may have accompanied a dramatic ceremony reenacting David’s finding the Ark (“it”, v. 6) at Kiriath-Jearim (“Jaar”). (“Ephrathah” is Bethlehem, David’s city.) God’s “footstool” (v. 7) is the Ark. It was borne joyfully in procession to Jerusalem, preceded by godly “priests” (v. 9). V. 10 asks God to continue to favour the current king (“your anointed one”), remembering David’s actions. While vv. 1-10 centre on David, vv. 11ff focus on God. He has vowed to David that a descendant of his will, if his heirs keep their side of the pact, rule “forevermore” (v. 12). David chose Jerusalem; so did God (v. 13). “Zion” will be God’s earthly residence “forever” (v. 14). In the Temple, the divine and human realms meet, so God will be able to bless the city’s inhabitants (v. 15). God will give the priests power to forgive sins (“salvation”, v. 16). A “horn” (v. 17) was a symbol of a king’s strength; here it speaks of David’s line, his seed continuing. The king’s “crown” (v. 18), in its radiance, showed the

power (glory) that he possessed as a reflection of God’s glory; here it is contrasted with the disgrace which will cover the king’s “enemies”.

Revelation 1:4b-8

NRSV

John begins and ends this book as a letter. Literally, it is “to the seven churches that are in Asia” (v. 4a), Asia being a Roman province in western Asia Minor, but “seven” symbolizes totality, so John may speak to all churches in the province, or to all everywhere. The salutation combines both Greek (“grace”) and Hebrew (“peace”) forms, and is from God, here described as being throughout time, meaning *eternal*. The salutation is also from “the seven spirits”: this may mean the Spirit of God (in Isaiah 11:2, the Spirit operates in seven ways) or the seven angels (Michael, Raphael, etc) closest to God (“before his throne”, v. 4) in contemporary Jewish thinking.

Further, it is “from Jesus Christ” (v. 5), who is: (1) “the faithful witness”: he revealed the Father perfectly in his earthly life, and crowned this by the sacrifice of his life; (2) “firstborn of the dead”: in his resurrection, he inaugurated a new era; and (3) “ruler ...”: being now exalted, he has power over all creation. Vv. 5b-6 praise God: (1) Christ loves us continually and, by his death, he has freed us from sins; and (2) he has marked us as God’s, and has made us all “priests”, mediators between God and the rest of humanity. “Amen”, a Hebrew word, means *It is sure and trustworthy!* or *so be it!*: it is both valid and binding. (In 3:14, Christ is called “the Amen”.) V. 7 combines two Old Testament prophetic sayings to predict the return of Christ at the end of the age. Those who put him to death and all unbelievers “will wail” for showing hostility to Christ and his Church: they will be condemned when Jesus comes us as judge. V. 8 tells us that, from *A to Z*, God is sovereign over all events of human history; his power is supreme (“Almighty”).

John 18:33-37

NRSV

This is part of John’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Pilate has met with those Jews seeking his death outside his “headquarters”, the praetorium. He has asked: *what charge, valid in Roman law, do you have to bring against him?* (v. 29). V. 30 shows that they have none to propose. Pilate refuses to get involved by telling them to try him under Jewish law. They then make it obvious that they seek Jesus’ death.

Now Pilate goes inside the praetorium and asks Jesus: *are you the leader of a revolutionary movement?* In return, Jesus asks him: *Is this question your idea, based on what you have heard, or did others put you up to it?* Pilate shows his scorn for Jews; *the religious authorities seek your death, but what grounds are there for killing you?* In v. 36, Jesus begins to explain the nature of his kingship. Were he a rebel leader, his followers “would be fighting to keep me from being handed over” to the religious authorities, but he is no threat to Pilate’s authority. Pilate picks up on Jesus words “my kingdom”. Jesus is king of “truth” (v. 37); his subjects are those who belong to the truth. He was “born” and “came into the world” to establish the kingdom of God, the ultimate truth.