

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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Joel 2:21-27

NRSV

After stating that his authority is from God (1:1), the prophet says that what he writes is to be told to future generations. He gives a highly realistic account of a plague of locusts. So great was the devastation that there were no grapes with which to make “sweet wine” (1:5) for celebrating a feast. The priests are to mourn, for no cereal offerings can be made in the Temple – all the crops have been destroyed. Even “joy withers away among the people” (1:12). This invasion, Joel says, is a foretaste of “the day of the LORD” (1:15); it is a punishment from God. The “pastures” (1:19) are as though burnt by “fire”. *Blow the shofar*, the ram’s horn, he says, to warn of the approach of the End! (2:1) Judah is under attack. So thick are the locusts that the sun is obscured – a sign also of the end times (2:2). The insects, like a conquering army on the move, are commanded by God. Can any survive the onslaught? (2:11) But there is still a chance: if a person repents and turns to God, perhaps he will be “gracious and merciful” (2:13).

Again Joel advises blowing the *shofar* (2:15): to summon the people to a fast. Put off your marriage! (2:16) Priests, intercede for the people: may God spare Judah from mockery by other nations, of being thought God-less (2:17). God does forgive; he has “pity on his people” (2:18). He returns fertility to the land, restores Judah to place of honour among nations, and destroys the locusts. “Early rain” (2:23) softened earth parched by the summer heat; it made ploughing possible; “later rain”, in April/May, provided sustenance for summer crops. Trees again bear fruit (2:24). God will “repay” (2:25) for the destruction by the locusts (“hopper ... cutter” – stages are in insect development) sent by him. He is still Judah’s God, “in the midst of Israel” (2:27), the only God. Judgement Day, “the day of the Lord” (1:15; 2:1, 11, 31), will come “afterward” (2:28), much later. He will grant his power, his “spirit”, to all Judeans, to “sons ...” and even to “slaves” (2:29). Signs (“portents”, 2:30) will warn of the coming of the Day. Then the remnant faithful to God “shall be saved” (2:32), including those “whom the LORD calls”. Fortunes will be reversed (3:1-8): those nations who have oppressed Judah will be judged adversely.

Psalm 126

NRSV

This is a liturgical song, part of public worship. V. 1a can be rendered as *When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion*. When the people first returned from exile in Babylon, they hardly believed their good fortune (“like those who dream”). So great was their success that other nations (v. 2) recognized God’s mighty works on Israel’s behalf, and the people of Israel “rejoiced” (v. 3). But after the initial euphoria, life is difficult. Please, God, “restore our fortunes” (v. 4), as the land around a normally dry river in the desert (“Negeb”) blooms when

the water flows. May we, who are sorrowful as we sow, gather the harvest in joyfulness – as God once more acts on our behalf.

1 Timothy 2:1-7

NRSV

The author has written: “I urge you ... [to] instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine” (1:3-4) but rather to teach “divine training” (or the plan of salvation) “that is known by faith”. He portrays Christian life as being like the discipline of servants in a large household.

Now, at a time when Christians were suspect for not joining in worship of Roman gods, an act expected of all, the author urges them to pray for “everyone” (2:1), including civil authorities (“kings ...”, 2:2), so that Christians may live “a quiet and peaceable life”, as *good citizens* yet godly ones. This, he says, is in accord with God’s plan, for he wishes “everyone” (2:4) to be saved, through knowledge of Christian “truth”. God wills this for: (1) he is the “one God” (2:5) for all people; (2) the “one mediator”, Christ, shared in being human with all of us, and represents us all before the Father, and (3) gave his life as the price of freedom (“ransom”, 2:6) for all. His life and death were “attested” (shown to be an authentic part of the plan) “at the right time”, at the time chosen by God. Paul (“I”, 2:7) was “appointed” by God to announce (“herald”) this to all, genuinely sent out by him (“apostle”) to teach doctrine (“faith”) and the truth about God to everyone.

Matthew 6:25-33

NRSV

This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount. In v. 24, Jesus speaks of the impossibility of serving two masters: one cannot love both. “You cannot serve God and wealth”. (Calvin wrote that an idol is anything that comes between us and God.)

A key word in this passage is “worry” (vv. 25, 27, 31). The Greek word means *be preoccupied with* or *be absorbed by*. To be preoccupied with food and appearance is to view life much too narrowly. Birds are an example of a proper attitude towards food (v. 26): they work hard to find it, but they do not store it for possible future shortages. Worry, preoccupation, is futile: people desire a long life, but excess concern for it will not lengthen it (v. 27). Wild “lilies” (v. 28), abundant on Palestinian hillsides but dull brown for much of the year, are only brightly coloured for a few weeks. Even “Solomon” (v. 29), known for his accumulation of wealth, could not compare to their (God-given) beauty. The “grass” (v. 30) ends up being “thrown into the oven” as fuel for cooking. But if God cares for such plants, how much more will he provide for, *clothe* those who are faithful to him. So do not be preoccupied with your physical needs (v. 31). Such preoccupation is wrong on two counts: (1) those who do not follow Jesus (“Gentiles”, v. 32), not knowing of God’s munificence, seek security in possessions; and (2) God knows the needs of his people, so worrying about them is to suspect him of forgetting or neglecting his people and their needs. Our prime objective must be to put God first, to seek union with him, and to attain godly integrity (“righteousness”, v. 33).

