

*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 6:1-8

NRSV

In this passage, Isaiah gives the grounds for his authority as a prophet. The “year” is 742 BC. Assyria is expanding its borders. (“Uzziah” is called “Azariah” in 2 Kings 14:21). The northern kingdom, Israel, is trying to coerce Judah into a military alliance against the Assyrian threat. Isaiah has a vision of God enthroned, surrounded by courtiers, with “seraphs” (v. 2, griffin-like creatures), hovering above him, guarding him. One pair of wings cover “their faces” in the awesome presence of God, and a second cover their genitals (“feet” is a euphemism) as a sign of commitment to purity; the third is used to fulfil commissions from God. “Holy” (v. 3), repeated three times for emphasis, identifies God as *all-holy*, sinless, apart from earthly things. God is “LORD of hosts”, the warrior for Israel; he rules over “the whole earth”, all peoples. The setting appears to be the Temple, so the “pivots” (v. 4), which shake due to an earth tremor – a sign of God’s presence, are those on which the heavy Temple gates turned. “Smoke” is also a sign of divine presence, as is the cloud of glory in the desert (Exodus 40:34).

Isaiah feels totally inadequate in God’s presence: he feels “unclean” (v. 5), unfit to stand before God, yet he sees God. He also sees the “people” (either Judah or his disciples) as unworthy, but a “seraph” (v. 7), an agent of God, purifies him, rendering him fit and qualified to speak God’s word to his people. God confers with his advisors: “Whom shall I send ... ?” (v. 8), and Isaiah volunteers to be prophet to Judah. In vv. 9-13, God accepts his offer, and tells him that most people will reject God’s message (will not *hear* it and will fail to understand it), preferring traditional (corrupt) ways. But a small number will accept it. Most will be destroyed; even the remnant will endure difficult times. Within nine years, Assyria had invaded and made Judah a puppet state.

### Psalm 29

NRSV

This psalm is probably based on one to the Canaanite god Baal, the storm god, who brings the annual thunder-storm, the source of fertility for the land. In Israelite hands it expresses God’s supremacy and universal rule. In vv. 1-2, all other gods are invited to acknowledge the Lord’s supremacy and the glory due to him. (Israel was not yet strictly monotheistic.) Vv. 3-9 give us a picture of the storm. The “voice of the Lord” (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7-9) is thunder (repetitious claps). The storm is first seen approaching over the Mediterranean (v. 3); it sweeps in to the land, breaking the tall “cedars” (v. 5), as it advances across southern Lebanon. It vents its power on Mount “Lebanon” (v. 6) and then on Mount “Sirion”; it proceeds on into “the wilderness” (v. 8, the Arabian Desert). (“Flames of fire”, v. 7, is lightning.) “Kadesh” (v. 8) is probably *Kedar*, part of the desert. The word of God is indeed mighty. In v. 9, “all” the gods do acknowledge God’s supremacy; they cry

*Glory be to the Lord!* God rules over all from his throne (v. 10). May the Lord strengthen Israel and give it peace.

### Romans 8:12-17

NRSV

Paul has told us how Christian experience is dominated by life in the Spirit rather than by the desires of the flesh, or self-centeredness. Christians are still subject to suffering, to bearing crosses and affliction, but not to eternal condemnation. Not being condemned, we have hope.

Now he says that we are under an obligation (“debtors”) to God: to live according to the Spirit. Living this way, rejecting self-centeredness, we look forward to eternal *life* (v. 13) at the end of time rather than to the finality of physical death. Heeding the Spirit, we are “children of God” (v. 14), *sons of God*; we have a new relationship with God. When baptised, we do not lose freedom (“slavery”, v. 15) but are *adopted* by him. As his children, we are “heirs” (v. 17) with hope for the future – unlike slaves who “fear” (v. 15) their master. (In the Old Testament, the land of Israel is God’s *inheritance* for his people.) In seeking his help or proclaiming him as *Dad* or “Abba! Father!”, we express the close relationship we have with him; our hearts are motivated by the Spirit. (“Abba” is Aramaic for “Father”; slaves did not inherit.) Being “with Christ” (v. 17), by sharing in his suffering, we will be able to attain union with him in heaven (“glorified”).

### John 3:1-17

NRSV

Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and teacher, comes to Jesus to ask him questions. He comes secretly (“by night”, v. 2) because a man of his stature could not be seen consulting Jesus. He has understood from Jesus’ miracles (“signs”) that Jesus is “from God”. But Jesus (in v. 3) tells him that he has not yet understood the main point: to “see the kingdom of God”, spiritual rebirth is required. Nicodemus misunderstands: he thinks Jesus is speaking of *biological* rebirth (v. 5). Being “born from above” (v. 3) requires being baptised (v. 5). “Flesh” and “spirit” were seen as constituents of life, of which spirit (breath, wind, *pneuma*) was the life-giving force. Many things can be seen only in their effect; such is birth in the Spirit (v. 8). Still Nicodemus doesn’t understand: in order for him to do so, he needs to have faith (“receive our testimony”, v. 11). Then, in v. 12, Jesus says: you, Nicodemus, don’t comprehend what can be told in analogies (“earthly things”, i.e. “wind”, v. 8), so how can you possibly believe mysteries?

Vv. 13-17 are a monologue. Only Christ has descended and ascended. The “serpent” (v. 14) is mentioned in Numbers 21:9-11: there the people were bitten by poisonous snakes; some died and others became gravely ill. Instructed by God, Moses mounted (“lifted up”) a bronze snake on a pole. Those who looked at this emblem (trusting in God) were healed, lifted up, given life. God in his love provides eternal life to all who believe (v. 16). If you wilfully do not believe, you will perish. There is no third alternative! God’s intention is that you believe, rather than be condemned (v. 17).