

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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Acts 9:1-6,(7-20)

NRSV

Luke has told us, in Acts 8:3, that in Jerusalem “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Now we see his great transformation: from persecutor to evangelist. At the time, Jews often had two names: a Semitic one (“Saul”, v. 1) and a Roman or Greek one (Paul). A scholar says that the Empire granted Jews the right to extradite their own from beyond Palestine. Those “who belonged to the Way” (v. 2) were Jewish Christians; they worshipped in synagogues. In the early days, Christianity was known as “the Way”. Paul later called the glory of God (or Christ) a “light” (v. 3). Vv. 4-5 make it clear that in persecuting members of the Christian flock, Paul persecuted Christ.

In v. 7, the Greek suggests that Saul’s companions heard the sound of the voice but not what was said. God commands “Ananias” (v. 10), a leader of the followers in Damascus, to seek out Saul to restore his sight. Naturally, Ananias is fearful, Saul being a known enemy of Christians. In today’s terminology, God might say that he had chosen Paul as a *medium* to convey his *message* (v. 15). He will “suffer” (v. 16), as Jesus told the eleven apostles they would. Through Ananias, God restores Paul’s sight; Paul receives the Holy Spirit and is baptised, thus becoming a member of the Church.

Psalm 30

NRSV

The psalmist clearly praises God for his recovery from grave illness, but this psalm may also be allegorical: its title says that it was sung at the dedication of the Temple, which was desecrated in 164 BC and rededicated in 161 BC. “Sheol”, “the Pit”, (v. 3) was thought of as a place under the earth where the dead existed as mere shadows. In vv. 4-5, the psalmist invites all present to join in giving thanks. In vv. 6-10, he recounts what happened to him. He had felt perfectly secure and healthy (v. 6), but he fell from God’s favour (God “hid”, v. 7, from him) – he became ill. Feeling near death, he prayed to God, pointing out that if allowed to go the Sheol, no one, not even God, could hear him. God did hear his prayer and restored him to health and favour (vv. 11-12): his sorrow was turned to joy, even to liturgical “dancing”. He will praise God for the rest of his life.

Revelation 5:11-14

NRSV

This book is an inspired *picture-book*, intended to make a powerful appeal to the reader’s imagination. Using a literary genre known as *apocalyptic*, John gives us an insight into what will occur at the end of the current era. In his vision, he sees God’s throne and the heavenly scene around it and hears the praises sung there. He describes the glory of God in terms of precious gems (4:3). Around God’s

throne are “twenty-four elders” (4:4, perhaps the twelve Old Testament patriarchs and the twelve apostles), so an image of the ideal Church. As in a Roman court, God’s counsellors are “seated”: they share in ruling and judging. “Lightning” (4:5) and “thunder” express God’s majesty. The “seven spirits” before the throne may be the seven angels of high rank, as in 1 Enoch, a non-biblical apocalyptic book. Tobit 12:15 speaks of Raphael as “one of the seven angels who ... enter before ... the glory of the Lord”. The “sea of glass” (4:6), a valuable commodity in John’s day, suggests the distance between humans and God, even in heaven. The “four living creatures” around the throne are angelic beings representing the whole of creation (Ezekiel 1:5, 10); they are God’s agents who watch over all of nature (Ezekiel 1:18, 10:12), and symbolize what is most splendid about animals: nobility (lion), strength (ox), wisdom (human), and oversight (eagle). Representing earthly beings, they continually praise God as ruler of history (or time). He will restore (or liberate) creation (“is to come”, 4:8). They are joined by the “elders” (4:10), representing heavenly beings, who acknowledge God’s superior power by placing their crowns “before the throne” – that all power comes from God.

Next a “scroll” (5:1) is presented – a record of God’s plans for the end-time: see Daniel 10:21. No one is found worthy to open the scroll and reveal its contents (5:3), but finally, one is revealed, “a Lamb” (5:6), representing Christ.

In a scene reminiscent of the honours given to a Roman emperor, large numbers sing of Christ’s worthiness to disclose God’s plans. There are seven honours he is worthy to receive (5:12): the first four (“power ... might”) concern his dominion; the others express the adoration of those present. The “Lamb” and the Creator (“the one”, 5:13) are equal in majesty. All creatures in heaven and on earth certify this to be true (“Amen”, 5:14).

John 21:1-19

NRSV

Since his resurrection, Jesus has twice appeared to the disciples in the house where he hosted the Last Supper. Now he appears to six disciples near the Sea of Galilee (“Tiberias”, v. 1). Led by Peter, they go fishing but catch nothing. When they return to the shore in the morning, Jesus is there. When he invites them to cast their net again, they catch many fish (v. 6). One (probably John) recognizes him now (v. 7); the others do later. V. 10 looks odd, for some fish is already on the fire (v. 9), but it leads into the eucharistic scene in vv. 12-13. In John 6, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus has blessed a meal of bread and fish. (The significance of “a hundred [and] fifty-three”, v. 11, is unknown.)

Jesus asks Peter about his love for him (v. 15). Peter avoids comparisons with “these”, the other disciples. Jesus asks three times – a reversal of Peter’s denial of him; each time Jesus tells him: *feed/tend my lambs/sheep*. V. 18 begins with a proverbial saying: in old age, we lack the mobility and freedom of movement we had when young. But Peter’s life will be cut short: he will either be bound a prisoner, or be crucified (“stretch out ...”). In 13:37-38, Peter offers to follow Jesus even to laying down his life for him. Now Jesus says: “Follow me” (v. 19). Tradition says that Peter was crucified too.