

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 65:17-25

NRSV

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (64:1): thus the people of Israel pray that God will reveal himself to them as in days of old. God answers, speaking through the prophet, “I was ready to be sought out” (65:1) but no one has sought my help. Instead, Israel was disobedient and self-centred; they will be punished, but God will preserve a faithful line, chosen by him. Fortunes will be reversed: “my servants shall eat” (v. 13) and be joyful but the majority will go hungry and be shamed. God will give “a different name” “to his servants” (v. 15), the faithful. God will completely transform the cosmos (“new heavens and a new earth”, v. 17); he will forget waywardness. The inhabitants of the new Jerusalem will be joyful (v. 18); sorrow will cease (v. 19). Long life was considered a blessing; now lifetimes will be even longer (v. 20). Life will be stable and harvests plentiful; God will bless his people (vv. 21-23). In v. 22, the “tree” is probably the *tree of life* in the Garden of Eden: there will be a return to the sin-free life God originally intended. Now God will initiate dialogue with humankind: he will no longer wait for his people to seek him (v. 24). All will be at peace in “my holy mountain” (v. 25), the new Jerusalem. Conflict between animal species will cease, and humans will live in harmony.

Psalms 118:1-2,14-24

NRSV

Vv. 1-2 are a call to thanksgiving: God’s mercy, his “steadfast love”, is everlasting. May “Israel” (v. 2) and “those who fear the Lord” (v. 4) proclaim this! Vv. 5-13 say that, when the psalmist (possibly the king) was in distress, he “called on the Lord”, who heard him. With God on his side, there is nothing to fear; trusting in God is better than trusting in humans. Surrounded by his enemies, “in the name of the LORD, I cut them off” (v. 10), with God’s help. V. 15 recalls Exodus 15:2a, Israel’s classic victory song sung by Moses and the Israelites after crossing the Reed Sea. The “glad songs” (v. 15) are heard in the Temple, the community of the faithful.

The psalmist expects to live to old age (v. 17); he will proclaim God’s acts of power. He has suffered greatly at God’s hands, as a discipline, but God has preserved his life. He seeks entrance to the Temple (“gates of righteousness”, v. 19) to give thanks; only the godly may enter therein (v. 20). V. 22, possibly based on an ancient proverb, may speak of the king’s rise to power or his victory. On this day (v. 24) God has either saved his people or punished the ungodly – or both. This is a time for rejoicing. In v. 26, all proclaim he who was “rejected” (v. 22), but is now God’s chosen ruler. All the faithful share in the power and blessing of God, who “has given us light” (v. 27).

Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment of the Roman army (and so a Gentile), and already a believer in God, has had a vision, so he has invited Peter to visit him at home. Jewish law forbade a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile, but Peter comes anyway, with “some believers from Joppa” (v. 23). The Greek here is rough, full of grammatical errors, unlike the rest of Acts, so we may well have Peter’s unedited words. He tells the assembled company that God does not favour Jews over others: anyone, whatever his nationality, who reveres God and lives in unison with him “is acceptable to him” (v. 35). In vv. 36-38, Peter summarizes Jesus’ earthly ministry; he applies prophecies found in Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1 to Christ. (Psalm 107:20 says “... he sent out his word ...”) Christ is *Kyrios*, “Lord of all” (v. 36). In baptism, the Father “anointed” (v. 38) Jesus “with the Holy Spirit” and with the “power” of God (but he was already integral with God’s very being.) The good news (“message”, v. 37) spread throughout Palestine (“Judea”); he “went about” (v. 38) “doing good” and combatting evil, doing deeds so powerful that it is clear that he was God’s agent: he is a model for all to follow.

He suffered death as one guilty of a capital offence, per Deuteronomy 21:23: he hung on a “tree” (v. 39) and was cursed. (By Jesus’ time, the “tree”, a pole, had acquired a cross-arm.) But, although cursed, the Father “raised him” (v. 40) and “allowed him to appear” to those chosen by God – to be “witnesses” (v. 41). In Luke 24:41-43, Jesus eats broiled fish with them, so he was clearly humanly alive again, i.e. physically brought back from death, resurrected. Jesus, the *Kyrios*, is the one appointed by God to set up the Kingdom and to judge both those who are alive, and those who have died, at Judgement Day (v. 42). Then v. 43: he fulfills many Old Testament prophecies: he is the one through whom sins are forgiven. Forgiveness is now available to “everyone who believes”, not just to Jews.

John 20:1-18

NRSV

Early on Sunday morning, before dawn, Mary Magdalene (witness to Jesus’ death and burial) comes to the tomb and finds that the “stone” door has been rolled back, so she and those with her (“we”, v. 2) tell “Peter” and “the other disciple” (v. 4, traditionally thought to be John) that they suspect that someone has removed the body. The “other disciple”, apparently younger, outruns Peter (v. 5). But the orderliness of the “cloth” (v. 7) and “linen wrappings” show that the body has neither been stolen nor spiritualized. *John*, when he sees, comes to trust (“believed”, v. 8) that God is active; by implication, Peter does not understand yet. They do not yet understand the significance of what is occurring (v. 9), of how it fits into God’s plan, because they have not yet received the Holy Spirit.

Mary, still thinking that the body has been moved, has returned to the cemetery. In her grief, she sees “two angels in white” (v. 12), heavenly messengers. She recognizes Jesus when he calls her by name. But something has changed: they are in a new relationship: “do not hold on to me” (v. 17). To John the evangelist, Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation and return to heavenly glory, his ascension, are parts of a single event.