

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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Joshua 5:9-12

NRSV

The Israelites have entered the Promised Land. Circumcision has not been practised since leaving Egypt. It being many years since they crossed the Reed Sea, none of the males have been circumcised: "The warriors who came out of Egypt perished [on the way], not having listened to the voice of the LORD" (v. 6). V. 9 is problematic. Perhaps the author uses "rolled away" (Hebrew: *galal*) because it rhymes with "Gilgal". Perhaps "disgrace of Egypt" refers to the abject social status the Israelites had there: they were slaves. Perhaps God is saying: *my rescue of you is complete*. Another interpretation is: in circumcision (see vv. 2-5), the foreskin is "rolled away"; in Genesis 34:14, for an uncircumcised foreigner to marry an Israelite woman would be a "disgrace" for Israel. In thanks for God's gift of the Promised Land, the Israelites are circumcised and celebrate two feasts: Passover (v. 10) and Unleavened Bread (v. 11). This is the time of the full moon, the "fourteenth day" (v. 10) in the lunar calendar. A later law says two things about Passover: (1) men must have been circumcised to join in it, and (2) lamb must be eaten. Because the men were uncircumcised and only manna was eaten in the desert, this is the first celebration of the feast since leaving Egypt. "Manna" (v. 12) is no longer needed, for they can now live off the harvest. One life ends, and another begins.

Psalms 32

NRSV

The psalmist tells us what he has learned in life: happiness is having one's sin forgiven and taken away ("covered") by God, and enjoying a clear conscience (v. 2). In vv. 3-5, he states his experiences: he was seriously ill ("your hand was heavy upon me") and was in pain ("groaning"), both signs of his alienation from God. (Illness was commonly regarded as punishment for sin.) He acknowledged his sin and did not continue his waywardness ("I did not hide ...", v. 5); he confessed to God, and God forgave him. Now v. 6: those who are faithful to God are not in danger of dying when gravely ill ("distress", v. 6). (The "waters" are a symbol of death.) He is now protected by God (v. 7). Perhaps God speaks in vv. 8-9: he will lead the psalmist in his ways, through instruction and counsel. Don't be like "a horse or a mule" (v. 9) who must be coerced into action: use your initiative in being open to God. V. 11 is spoken to the congregation in the Temple: rejoice in the Lord!

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

NRSV

Some have criticized Paul for being ineffective in persuading others to follow Christ. Motivated by "love of Christ" (v. 14), his approach is not to promote himself "in outward appearance" (v. 12) but rather to challenge the conscience. He is convinced that Jesus "died for all" (v. 14) and "was raised" (v. 15) for all, so liv-

ing for oneself, rather than for Christ, is *passé*.

So he no longer judges anyone by worldly standards ("human point of view", v. 16) as he once did (when he was a Pharisee) in thinking that Jesus was rightly put to death. He now sees Jesus as the risen one, the reconciler. By "new creation" (v. 17), he probably means *a new standard of judgement*, set by Christ for the Church, by which its members ("in Christ") live: they have been radically changed. In the process of reconciliation, of returning humankind to oneness with God, he *mediates*, he tells God's message of forgiveness to people. He (the *we* is *editorial*) is God's representative in the world, God's agent ("ambassadors", v. 20). He does not coerce, but rather *entreats*, acceptance of God's offer of his gift of forgiveness. In v. 21, Paul does not say *made Christ a sinner*; he means *to bear our sin*: Jesus was sin-less, yet became part of sinful humanity, as mediator with God – in order that we might attain unity with God.

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

NRSV

The dregs of society ("tax collectors and sinners") coming to Jesus causes the religious leaders ("the Pharisees and the scribes", v. 2) to wonder whether Jesus sees anyone as beyond God's mercy. To explain, Jesus tells three parables: the Lost Sheep (vv. 4-7), the Lost Coin (vv. 8-10) and the Lost (or Prodigal) Son (vv. 11-32). In all three, the recovery of what was lost is cause for rejoicing. There are no limits to God's mercy.

Briefly, the story of the Lost Son is this: the younger son leaves home and squanders his inheritance (vv. 12-16); finding himself a hungry outcast resorting to Gentile ways (feeding "pigs", v. 15), he decides to return to his father (vv. 17-19); his father, who seeks him, welcomes him back (v. 20); the son confesses, and his father celebrates his return (vv. 21-24); the elder son returns (v. 25); he learns the reason for the festivities (v. 26-27); he accuses his father of favouritism (vv. 28-30); the father explains the situation to him (vv. 31-32). In the context of first-century Palestine, several things look out of the ordinary: (1) for a son to ask his father for his share of the inheritance would be like a *death wish*; (2) no older self-respecting Jew would *run* (v. 20) to his son; (3) a father would demand a full display of repentance, not the truncated one of v. 21.

Clearly Jesus tells a somewhat unrealistic story to make a point. Allegory is at work: each character stands for someone other than himself: the younger son for the "tax collectors and sinners" (v. 1), the elder son for the religious authorities, and the father for God. Jesus makes three points: (1) the younger son could return home – so all sinners may repent and turn to God; (2) the father sought the son (he saw him while "still far off", v. 20) and offered him reinstatement – so God seeks people out to restore them; and (3) the good brother begrudges his father's joy over his brother's return – so those who are godly should welcome God's extension of love to the undeserving. The parable raises a question: at the end of the era, will godly people be ready to be joyous in sharing the Kingdom with reformed sinners and a God who loves them?