

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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Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

NRSV

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah form one story. Ezra begins with Cyrus of Persia's decree, in 538 BC, permitting the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple, a venture in which they are to be materially aided. Cyrus orders that the sacred vessels taken from the Temple in 587 be returned. More than 42,000 leave Babylon for Judah. The altar is erected on the site of the destroyed Temple; the priests again offer burnt offerings. Construction of the new Temple begins: a more modest structure than Solomon's.

But subversion arises among local people; they succeed in convincing the Persian king that the Jews plan a rebellion against his rule, so he halts rebuilding. Eventually construction is allowed to continue. Ezra, the scribe and priest, enters the picture in Ezra 7. Commissioned by King Artaxerxes, he travels to Jerusalem with a wave of exiles; he is "to study the law of the LORD ... and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10), and to prepare the Temple for worship. He is to appoint "magistrates and judges" (Ezra 7:25). Many scholars say that Nehemiah 8 (and 7:73b) follow here (although Nehemiah 6:15-7:4 tell of the building of the walls of the city, including the "Water Gate", Nehemiah 8:1). The people who have come from Babylon are now "settled in their towns" (Nehemiah 7:73b).

The "book of the law of Moses" (v. 1) is most likely an earlier version of the biblical Leviticus: it is quoted in vv. 14-15. Note the stress on "understanding" (vv. 2, 3, 7). V. 4 says that Ezra stood on a "wooden platform" or *tower*. The people agree to obey the law ("Amen", v. 6). Ezra reads in Hebrew (v. 8); the Levites (priestly assistants) translate into Aramaic (the common language) and "gave the sense", interpret it in the current context. Nehemiah is not listed elsewhere as a "governor" (v. 9): here this is probably a prestige title. Ezra declares the day "holy", a *sabbath*. It seems that what Ezra reads makes the people sad, but he commands that they celebrate a feast: vv. 14-15 tell us that this is the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles, *Sukkoth*).

Psalms 19

NRSV

To the Israelites, the "firmament" was a giant pudding bowl over the earth, beyond which was a hierarchy of "heavens". God's glory is told "day" (v. 2) and "night", yet silently (v. 3a), to all people. He has created the sun as his agent (v. 5); it rises early in the morning, as does the "bridegroom" from his night's rest, traverses from one edge of the heavens to the other, making God's presence known with its "heat" (v. 6). Vv. 7-9 present the wonders of the law, as an expression of God's will for Israel. Here we find synonyms for the Law, characteristics of it, and its benefits for humankind, e.g. it *makes* "wise the simple", those immature in understanding and judgement. It warns the psalmist ("servant", v. 11). If he

accidentally break it ("hidden faults", v. 12), may God forgive him. May God protect him from those who intentionally go against God's ways ("the insolent", v. 13), lest he be influenced into sinning intentionally ("great transgression"). May his words and his thoughts be acceptable to God, who restores him to godliness (v. 14).

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

NRSV

Paul has told the Christians at Corinth that spiritual gifts come through the Holy Spirit and are given by him, as he chooses, for the benefit of the whole community. Now he turns to the nature of the Church – using the analogy of the human body. Whatever our ethnic or social origins, "we were all baptised into one body" (v. 13), into the risen glorified body of Christ, and empowered by the same Holy Spirit acting in the Church. V. 14 is key: the body needs various members; so too the Church needs various spiritual gifts, each making its own contribution. In vv. 15-20, Paul makes the point that all members contribute in various ways to the welfare of the whole. Diversity is rooted in, and contributes to, unity. In vv. 21-25, he says that each member needs every other member, whether he or she be strong or weak (v. 22). Vv. 23-25 say that the instinct of modesty reveals part of God's plan, e.g. by respecting our "less respectable members", we make them equally respectable. This applies in the community as it does in the body. In this way, the community is peaceable, without "dissension"; each cares for others. When one suffers the whole community does (v. 26).

In vv. 27-28, Paul applies these principles: "you", Corinthian Christians, are both one body and individually its members. Three groups with God-given and -appointed spiritual gifts are especially important: (1) "apostles" chosen to continue spreading the good news; (2) "prophets", those with new insights into God's plan; and (3) those who teach the faith. He then lists some other gifts: some help the poor and needy; others are leaders, managers, in church affairs. The questions in vv. 29-30 must surely be answered *no*. Perhaps v. 31a suggests that all seek to grow in the use of the gifts, great or small, given to them.

Luke 4:14-21

NRSV

Jesus has been tempted by the devil in the wilderness (vv. 1-13) to misuse his power for his personal benefit, for worldly domination, and for protection from God's plan fulfilled on the cross. Now he returns to Galilee. Jesus customarily attends synagogue services to worship and present his message; it is there that Luke tells us who Jesus is: he stands in continuity with God's promises of old. Jesus is a great teacher; he has great authority in telling people about God and his plan. Jesus begins with one part of the scroll (Isaiah 61), then *rewinds* to another: vv. 18-19 emphasize his mission to those who are "poor" in any way, be it financially, in spirit, in health. In "the year of the Lord's favour", the jubilee year, debts were forgiven and slaves were set free. Jesus applies these verses to himself: he performs the works of the Messiah then expected. He then sits to interpret the readings: he says that God's plan is now being completed ("fulfilled", v. 21).