

## Comments

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 2, 2007

*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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### Jeremiah 2:4-13

NRSV

An ancient editor has added an introduction to our reading (vv. 1-3). God remembers the relationship both he and Israel enjoyed during the Exodus and the wandering in the “wilderness” (v. 2): one of mutual faithful and merciful love (“devotion”), made concrete in the Sinai covenant. The people of Israel were “holy to the Lord” (v. 3), separated by him from other peoples, and reserved for him; they were his *first pickings* (“first fruits”, v. 3) of his acts of creation. In the Promised Land, he brought “disaster” on intruders. The Law had effect back then: anyone who ate God’s portion of the harvest was punished.

Now God presents a lawsuit against Israel, through Jeremiah. As there were witnesses to the making of the Sinai covenant, so there are witnesses now (“heavens”, v. 12). For generations (“ancestors”, v. 5) Israel, the northern kingdom, (“house of Jacob”, v. 4) has worshipped “worthless things” (v. 5), i.e. idols. The people have forgotten the very nature of Israel’s religion (vv. 6-7): the recognition of God’s gifts to them, through his intervention in earthly affairs through the centuries. The leaders are at fault (v. 8): “priests”, “rulers” (literally *shepherds*) and “prophets”. Priests have become specialists in the laws on sacrifices; they no longer know anything of God, so they worship nothingness. The *court* and *temple* prophets (as against the *vocational* prophets like Jeremiah) utter prophecies which are false, being from other gods (“by Baal”) and not from God. So you, Isaiah, are on trial! (v. 9) God asks (vv. 10-11): throughout the whole known world, from “Cyprus” in the west to the nomadic tribe of “Kedar” in the east, has any nation ever forsaken their gods for none at all? That’s what Judah has done! (“Glory” is God’s attribute, so “their glory” is God himself.) God is “the fountain of living water” (v. 13). In Palestine, a country where water was (and is) scarce, people dug “cisterns” to collect winter rains for use in the dry season. Israel’s cisterns are “cracked”: worship of idols (foreign gods) is no investment for the future. In vv. 14-19, God says that Israel has forsaken her birthright of responsible freedom, guaranteed by the covenant. She has become a slave to Assyria (or Babylon) and Egypt – politically, through defence pacts, and religiously, by worshipping their gods.

### Psalm 81:1,10-16

NRSV

This psalm was sung on a “festal day” (v. 3), probably the autumn harvest thanksgiving. Celebrating “it” (v. 4) is commanded in the Law. Mention of the “God of Jacob” shows its northern origin. Vv. 1-5a are a hymn-like summons to worship; in vv. 6-16, a priest or temple prophet speaks God’s words of warning. God freed the Israelites from slavery, from the “basket” (v. 6) they used to carry clay bricks in Egypt. He heard them, and rescued them. At Sinai, where he gave

them the Ten Commandments, he “tested” (v. 7) them with “thunder”; at “Meribah” he gave them water from a rock. God has done many things for them in the past. Vv. 8-10 are his demand for loyalty: note the first commandment. In return, he promised to nourish them. But they were disobedient (v. 11), so he allowed them to go their own ways (v. 12). If Israel will only return to fidelity, to walking in God’s ways! (v. 13) Then he would give them political freedom (v. 14), damning their foes eternally (v. 15). Israel would enjoy the very best (v. 16).

### Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16

NRSV

The author, in concluding his letter, offers guidance regarding the shared life in the Christian community. He expects members to “show hospitality to strangers” (v. 2), i.e. to Christians from other churches. (Inns existed, but because they were frequented by prostitutes and bandits, travellers generally stayed with other Christians.) Perhaps you will entertain “angels”, as Abraham did at Mamre: he looked after three men who were either angels or God himself. Marital irresponsibility (v. 4) and greed (v. 5) can corrupt community life, so should be avoided. God will look after your needs. (The quotation is God’s words to Joshua, after Moses died.) Emulate the way of life of your past “leaders” (v. 7), now deceased. Jesus is always the same (v. 8); the “word of God” (v. 7) they spoke continues. Vv. 9-11 counsel avoidance of errant teachings: dietary restrictions and (probably) sharing in Jewish sacrificial meals. Be “strengthened” by God’s gift of love, not Mosaic law. Being Christian may involve persecution and even martyrdom; remember and share Jesus’ suffering. Focus on eternal life, not earthly (v. 14). Offer the “sacrifice” (v. 15) of thanksgiving, made in faith. Lead an exemplary life of faith so your present “leaders” (v. 17) can be proud of you.

### Luke 14:1,7-14

NRSV

Luke continues his series of sayings of Jesus about the qualifications for entry into the kingdom of God. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the godly at the end of time, and were keen to be among those chosen as faithful, so they “were watching him closely”. As he has done earlier, Jesus heals a person on the sabbath (vv. 2-6), this time one with “dropsy” (edema). The “lawyers and Pharisees” (v. 3), experts on correct observance of the sabbath, are speechless when Jesus challenges them (v. 6): surely acts of compassion can be done on this day. Jesus’ host is a prominent *Pharisee* (v. 1); we recognize that the “parable” (v. 7) is about membership in the Kingdom. The Greek word rendered as “guests” means *apparently chosen* or *see themselves as chosen*. The gathering of God’s elect at the end of time was commonly depicted as a “wedding banquet” (v. 8). There the host is God. The *punch line* (v. 11) is good manners, but Jesus is drawing a conclusion about the kingdom: attendance depends on God’s invitation. God will not be fooled by self-promotion! Jewish and Greco-Roman societies both spurned the “poor” (v. 13) and the disabled. A Qumran document says that these people will be excluded from the banquet, but Jesus says: *share with them!* (v. 13) Giving to those unable to “repay” (v. 14) will admit one to the kingdom. For the Pharisee, this is a real surprise. He should have invited the man with dropsy.