

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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Lamentations 1:1-6

NRSV

The Babylonians first invaded Judah and occupied Jerusalem in 597 BC. They deported King Jehoiakim, Ezekiel and many leading citizens to Babylon and installed Zedekiah as puppet king. Judah rebelled, thus gaining a degree of freedom until 587, when Nebuchadnezzar attacked again; this time he destroyed Jerusalem (including the Temple) and other fortified Judean towns. Many people were deported. The five poems of Lamentations were written as communal laments. A scholar has written: *When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt religiously, we lament.*

Jerusalem is depicted as a “widow”, a person open to mistreatment because she lacks protection in law. Her “lovers” (v. 2) and “friends” are Judah’s former allies (e.g. Egypt); now she is a “vassal” (v. 1) of Babylon, they have become “enemies” (v. 2). The invasion is seen as God’s punishment for Judah’s sins; he now acts through Babylon, not Judah. God, speaking through Nathan, promised David (as Israel’s representative) “I will give you rest from all your enemies” (2 Samuel 7:11). Now Judah, the true Israel, “finds no resting place” (v. 3): God appears to have withdrawn his promise. No longer does anyone come to “Zion” (v. 4, Jerusalem) to celebrate “festivals”, for the Temple lies in ruins. Moses told the Israelites that, if they obey the Sinai covenant and live by God’s word, God “will make you the head, and not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13); now, because of her disobedience, Israel has her “foes” (v. 5) as her “masters”. A covenant included *curse*s, the consequences of a party not keeping the pact. A curse mentioned by Moses is: “You shall have sons and daughters, but they shall ... go into captivity” (Deuteronomy 28:41); Israel has broken the pact, so “her children have gone away, captives” (v. 5). Finally v. 6: those of Judah’s nobility (“her majesty”), leaders of the people, who have escaped deportation have fled and now rule nothing (“no pasture”).

Psalms 137

NRSV

This psalm appears to have been written after the return from exile. The psalmist remembers the time when the people were settled, as deportees (“sat down”), near the “rivers of Babylon”, the irrigation canals fed by the Tigris and Euphrates. When their “captors” (v. 3) mockingly demanded songs praising Jerusalem as the city where God dwells (“Zion”), they found it difficult to sing God’s praise, the city being in ruins. But now, back in Jerusalem, they do praise God. “If I forget you” (v. 5), forget your “joy” (v. 6), may my “right hand” (v. 5) cease to be able to pluck the strings of the *harp* (v. 2) and may my “tongue” (v. 6) be cleft to my palate, making me unable to sing!

Vv. 7-9 seek vengeance on an *eye for an eye* basis. May God remember that the “Edomites” (v. 7) helped the Babylonians in sacking Jerusalem in 587 BC! May we have the opportunity to exact retribution on both Edom and Babylon for the atrocities they inflicted on us then!

2 Timothy 1:1-14

NRSV

Paul was made an apostle as part of God’s plan of salvation (vv. 1, 11) to bring eternal “life”, found in the Christian community (“in Christ Jesus”), to all. Paul worships God in continuity with his Jewish “ancestors” (v. 3). V. 4a probably recalls Paul’s departure from Timothy: may sorrow be replaced by “joy”. Timothy’s faith has been handed down from generation to generation (v. 5). He was given and received “the gift of God” (v. 6), through Paul (“my hands”) but now this gift, “a spirit of power ... love ... self-discipline” (v. 7, or ethical behaviour) has become dormant through neglect. God has not withdrawn it, so, Timothy, “rekindle” (v. 6) the gift! The teaching of Jesus (or the preaching about him, “testimony ...”, v. 8) and of Paul’s servitude (“prisoner”) are not shameful; rather Timothy should emulate Paul in suffering for spreading the good news (“the gospel”). Our godly “calling” (v. 9) is based on God’s plan and his gift of love (“grace”). Grace, in Jesus’ becoming human, was part of the plan since “before” God’s creative act. In his “appearing” (v. 10, in taking on human form) Christ brought eternal life (“abolished death ... immortality”). The body of faith (Christian doctrine) has been entrusted to Paul until “that day” (v. 12) when Christ comes again. So, Timothy, faithfully hand on the valuable teachings you have received from me, with the help of the “Holy Spirit” (v. 14), which is present and active in us.

Luke 17:5-10

NRSV

Jesus has told his followers that (1) there will be times when you lose your faith, but if you cause another to do so, your fate will be worse than death! (vv. 1-2) and (2) if a fellow Christian sins, rebuke him; if he repents, forgive him – however often he sins and repents (vv. 3-4). The twelve (“the apostles”, v. 5) now speak to him, asking him to give them enough faith to remain faithful. (The “mustard seed”, v. 6, is very small. The “mulberry tree” is large with an extensive root system, making it hard to uproot. It would not normally take root in the sea.) Jesus tells them that with genuine faith, however small, anything is possible. *Quality* of faith matters more than *quantity*.

Jesus now tells a parable (vv. 7-10). Slaves were expected to do their duties, and no master would absolve a slave of them, so the disciples would answer *of course not!* to the question in v. 7: should a slave eat before his master? The master stands for God and the slave for his people. The Greek word translated “worthless” (v. 10) means *those to whom nothing is owed, to whom no favour is due*, so God’s people should never presume that their obedience to God’s commands has earned them his favour. (The Revised English Bible translates v. 10b as *We are servants and deserve no credit; we have only done our duty.*) However, as 12:35-38 says, God will reward those who are prepared when Christ comes again.