

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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Joel 2:23-32

NRSV

After stating that his authority is from God (1:1), the prophet says that what he writes is to be told to future generations. He gives a highly realistic account of a plague of locusts. So great was the devastation that there were no grapes with which to make “sweet wine” (1:5) for celebrating a feast. The priests are to mourn, for no cereal offerings can be made in the Temple – all the crops have been destroyed. Even “joy withers away among the people” (1:12). This invasion, Joel says, is a foretaste of “the day of the LORD” (1:15); it is a punishment from God. The “pastures” (1:19) are as though burnt by “fire”. *Blow the shofar*, the ram’s horn, he says, to warn of the approach of the End! (2:1) Judah is under attack. So thick are the locusts that the sun is obscured – a sign also of the end times (2:2). The insects, like a conquering army on the move, are commanded by God. Can any survive the onslaught? (2:11) But there is still a chance: if a person repents and turns to God, perhaps God will be “gracious and merciful” (2:13).

Again Joel advises blowing the *shofar* (2:15): to summon the people to a fast. Put off your marriage! (2:16) Priests, intercede for the people: may God spare Judah from mockery by other nations, of being thought God-less (2:17). God does forgive; he has “pity on his people” (2:18). He returns fertility to the land, restores Judah to place of honour among nations, and destroys the locusts. “Early rain” (2:23) softened earth parched by the summer heat; it made ploughing possible; “later rain”, in April/May, provided sustenance for summer crops. Trees again bear fruit (2:24). God will “repay” (2:25) for the destruction by the locusts (“hopper ... cutter” – stages in insect development) sent by him. He is still Judah’s God, “in the midst of Israel” (2:27), the only God. Judgement Day, “the day of the LORD”, will come “afterward” (2:28), much later. He will grant his power, his “spirit”, to all Judeans, to “sons ...” and even to “slaves” (2:29). Signs (“portents”, 2:30) will warn of the coming of the Day. Then the remnant faithful to God “shall be saved” (2:32), including those “whom the LORD calls”.

Psalm 65

NRSV

“All flesh” (v. 2), people of all classes, praise God for the harvest. He answers prayers and forgives. Those *whom he chooses* (v. 4) he brings to worship in the Temple (“your courts”, “house”). His “goodness” is his presence there and his gifts, especially rain. He saves us by his actions in the world; all people everywhere hope in him and praise him (vv. 5b, 8b). Vv. 6-8 praise him for his creative act; then he overcame chaos; now he keeps it at bay. Freedom from invasion (“silence ... tumult”) makes farming possible. He makes the land fertile (vv. 9-13). The “river of God”, the reservoir ancients thought to lie above the firmament, the giant *pudding bowl* over the earth, is the source of rain; he provides it for planting

“grain” (v. 13). “Pastures” (v. 12) parched by the sun “overflow” with rain; on the hillsides it helps grapes to grow; the wine from them causes “joy”. People blessed by his bounty, and all nature, “sing together for joy” (v. 13).

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

NRSV

In the conclusion of the letter, the author depicts Paul as seeing his death as imminent. He says that his coming martyrdom is a “libation”, literally an offering poured around the base of the altar as an offering for sin; Paul’s death will pay homage to God and will contribute to the saving of others. Like a prize boxer and a runner, he has completed the event, i.e. his ministry; he has preserved and guarded “the faith” (v. 7) handed down to him. Jews wore *crowns* or wreaths in joy and honour; in Greece, winners of athletic meets wore them. Paul will receive his – as will other Christians – when Christ comes again (“his appearing”, v. 8). As Jesus was deserted as death approached, so is Paul almost alone: “only Luke is with me” (v. 11). At his first trial or hearing (“defence”, v. 16), “all deserted” him – all but Christ, who helped him proclaim the good news to all, both present and beyond. Then Paul was rescued “from the lion’s mouth” (v. 17), from violent death. Christ will rescue him from the devil’s onslaughts (but likely not from physical death). After final personal messages (vv. 19-21), the author prays that Christ may be with Timothy; may God’s “grace” (v. 22), his freely-given gift of love, be with the members of Timothy’s community.

Luke 18:9-14

NRSV

Luke has presented Jesus telling a parable about a judge and a widow. Even the uncaring judge listens to a petition, eventually; when Christ comes again, he will hear and answer the prayers of the faithful with due alacrity. Now Jesus tells a parable to “some” who take a legalistic approach to Judaism: “they were righteous”, pious. Pharisees kept the Law scrupulously – both written and aural, so they must be acceptable to God! (The *unwritten* law formed a *protective shell* round Mosaic law, reducing the chances of ever erring to the point of transgressing the *real* law.) Like the Pharisee in the story, they were fastidious in their observation of ritual practices: they fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, and tithed (v. 12): they were seen to be religious. But their pride in keeping the Law led them into self-righteousness (“trusted in themselves”, v. 9), self-importance, and arrogance (“regarded others with contempt”). On the other hand, tax collectors were despised for collaborating with the Roman occupiers. At this point, Jesus’ hearers would be cheering for the Pharisee, especially since most were followers of the Pharisaic party. The tax collector admits he is a sinner (v. 13), repents (“beating his breast”) and seeks God’s mercy. In v. 14, Jesus explains the example story: the tax collector goes home “justified”, accepted by God, acquitted in God’s court of justice, for he has recognized his need for God’s mercy – but not the Pharisee. In the kingdom, roles will be reversed: God receives those who turn to him and implore his mercy; he rejects those who parade their supposed virtues. We should receive the Kingdom as a child does (v. 17).

