

Comments

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost November 13, 2022

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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Isaiah 65:17-25

NRSV

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down” (64:1): thus the people of Israel pray that God will reveal himself to them as in days of old. God answers, speaking through the prophet, “I was ready to be sought out” (65:1) but no one has sought my help. Instead, Israel was disobedient and self-centred; they will be punished, but God will preserve a faithful line, chosen by him. Fortunes will be reversed: “my servants shall eat” (v. 13) and be joyful but the majority will go hungry and be shamed. God will give “a different name” “to his servants” (v. 15), the faithful. God will completely transform the cosmos (“new heavens and a new earth”, v. 17); he will forget waywardness. The inhabitants of the new Jerusalem will be joyful (v. 18); sorrow will cease (v. 19). Long life was considered a blessing; now lifetimes will be even longer (v. 20). Life will be stable and harvests plentiful; God will bless his people (vv. 21-23). In v. 22, the “tree” is probably the *tree of life* in the Garden of Eden: there will be a return to the sin-free life God originally intended. Now God will initiate dialogue with humankind: he will no longer wait for his people to seek him (v. 24). All will be at peace in “my holy mountain” (v. 25), the new Jerusalem. Conflict between animal species will cease, and humans will live in harmony.

Isaiah 12

NRSV

V. 1 and v. 4 begin “... in that day”; 11:10 says “On that day” other nations will note that a king of David’s line (“the root of Jesse”) sits on Israel’s throne; they will ask about him and the divine glory that is with him. “On that day”, says 11:11, God will gather the remnant, the remaining faithful, from throughout the world. So the *day* is the end of the era, when the Messiah will come. “You” (12:1) is singular, so perhaps God instructs a herald of events to come. He will tell the people to give thanks for the end of God’s anger and return to his *comfort*. Perhaps metaphorically, “salvation” in 12:2 and 12:3 is restoration to the Promised Land: note “wells of salvation”. God’s “strength and ... might” (12:2) will protect his people. Life-giving water (12:3) symbolizes God’s saving power. In a second song (12:4-6), the people not only give thanks but also proclaim the good news to all nations: that all may know of him and his actions. His people are inhabitants of “Zion” (12:6), “royal” because God, “the Holy One of Israel” dwells there.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

NRSV

The author comes to the concluding section of his letter, written to counter the false belief that Christ will come again soon. Writing in Paul’s name, he has asked all members of the church at Thessalonica to pray for him and for those who work with him “so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly” (v. 1), and

that they may be rescued from those who oppose God’s ways, especially those who teach falsehoods. God will “strengthen ... and guard” (v. 3) members of the community from the Devil. May Christ direct them to love for God and to “the steadfastness of Christ” (v. 5).

Now the author orders the members to avoid those who, believing that the era will end soon, “are living in idleness” (v. 6) – probably living off the material support of others and failing to spread Christ’s message. (The Greek suggests that these people are *disorderly*.) They also fail to adhere to the “tradition”, the teachings handed down from the apostles. Paul (“us”) is proposed as an example to imitate: he had the “right” (v. 9) to be financially supported by the community (thus freeing him to spend all his time spreading the good news) yet he earned his living (as a tentmaker). V. 10b is strong language! It has been reported that those who are *idle* are in fact “busybodies” (v. 11), disturbing others and meddling in their affairs. If any continue to preach the imminent arrival of Christ or continue to be idle (“do not obey ...”, v. 14), avoid them and shame them (perhaps they will see the error of their ways). Even so, love them as members of the community (v. 15). In vv. 16-18, the author prays that his readers may have Christ’s peace, and certifies the letter as genuine.

Luke 21:5-19

NRSV

Our reading is from the last story about Jesus teaching in the Temple. He foretells its destruction (“thrown down”, v. 6) – an event then some 40 years in the future. At that time, Roman legions (“armies”, v. 20) surrounded the city. In Jesus’ time, people were concerned about when the world would end, and what signs would indicate “this is about to take place” (v. 7). Jesus begins to answer, in terms drawn from prophetic books (Micah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, vv. 8-11) and brought together in contemporary books (e.g. 2 Esdras). He adds “the end will not follow immediately” (v. 9), and then diverts to issues that matter now: the treatment his followers will receive, and how they should react to it (vv. 12-19). (“The time”, v. 8, is the time chosen by God for the end of the era.)

They will be treated as he has been: they will be accused of heresy in “synagogues” (v. 12) and be brought before civil courts (“prisons”). On these occasions, be yourselves (the word translated “prepare ... in advance”, v. 14, literally means *practise a gesture or rehearse a dance*); take this “an opportunity to testify” (v. 13, to tell the good news). Following Christ entails suffering – *betrayal* (v. 16) and being “hated” (v. 17). Perseverance under duress will gain you eternal life (v. 19). In vv. 20-27, Jesus combines prophecy (when Jerusalem was invaded, Christians did flee across the Jordan) and more images drawn from prophetic and contemporary books (“desolation”, v. 20; vv. 23-26). We do not know whether to take these images literally or symbolically. Jesus, the “Son of Man” (v. 27), will then come again. True disciples should then “stand up and raise your heads” (v. 28) for you will soon have eternal life (“redemption”). So (vv. 34-36), be prepared for this day, “praying that you may have the strength to escape”, to avoid the fate of the ungodly.

