

Last Sunday after Pentecost: The Reign of Christ

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 23:1-6

NRSV

In Chapters 21-22, Jeremiah has made prophecies about four of the five last kings of Judah. Three of these he considers bad, for siding with foreigners. Rather than predicting the fate of the last one, Zedekiah, God now speaks (through Jeremiah) about an ideal future king. God blames Judah's kings ("shepherds") for scattering his "sheep"; they will be punished "for your evil doings" (v. 2). But God will bring the people together again, to perfect safety, and will set good kings ("shepherds", v. 4) over them. Their state will be as God originally intended: in the first creation story, God commanded humans to "be fruitful and multiply" (v. 3). God makes a formal pronouncement ("the days are surely coming", v. 5) when God will "raise up" a godly "Branch" (shoot, descendant) of David's line who will be wise, just and godly, ruling over both "Judah" (v. 6) and "Israel". (Zedekiah is alluded to in a wordplay, the Hebrew for "righteousness" being *tzidkenu*.) Later prophets, in dark times of unfaithful kings, recalled this ideal rule and promised its realization in the future. This led to expecting a new era, when God would himself rule the faithful.

Luke 1:68-79

NRSV

Zechariah has been struck mute upon hearing that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child in old age. Later, she has given birth to a son, and his parents have brought him to be circumcised and named. Elizabeth has favoured the name John, and Zechariah has agreed. Now Zechariah "filled with the Holy Spirit ... spoke this prophecy" (v. 67), known as the *Benedictus* – the Latin translation of "Blessed" (v. 68). Vv. 68-69 tell of the blessing Israel's God brings to "his people": the Jews are the elect. (While the verbs in translations are in the past tense, the present is equally appropriate. The tense in Greek shows that they describe how God characteristically acts and what he is inaugurating in Jesus.) God gives them one who will save them from sin ("mighty saviour", v. 69), descended from David, in fulfilment of prophecies he made through the Old Testament "prophets" (v. 70) who told of rescue from "enemies" (v. 71). God fulfils his promises, especially his pact with Abraham (vv. 72-73), so Israel may from now on hold him in proper respect but not fear his wrath. The "child" (v. 76) is John the Baptist. He will be thought to be Elijah, "the prophet ..." (although Luke sees the prophet long expected as Jesus). John's mission will be to bring people to an ethical, godly, way of living, thus preparing the way for "the Lord". Vv. 78-79 return to Jesus' role: he will be the "dawn" (new light) from heaven, the one through whom God fulfils his purpose for humanity. At a time when hopes are at low ebb and people are particularly in need, he will be a beacon guiding them into "peace" (v. 79), i.e. wholeness, harmony, well-being, prosperity and security.

The author has heard of the trust in Christ his readers have because of their hope of eternal life. "This hope ... is bearing fruit and growing ... from the day you ... truly comprehended the grace of God" (his freely given gift of love expressed in Christ, vv. 5-6). So he prays for them that they may experience God's ways to the full, leading the ethical lives God expects, and growing in knowledge of him (v. 10). Faced with deviant teaching, may God make them "strong" (v. 11) and "prepared to endure everything". God (in Christ) has "rescued us" (v. 13) from the power of evil ("darkness") and moved us to Christ's realm, enabling us to share with others in the "inheritance" (v. 12, in being God's children).

Vv. 15-20 is a hymn about Christ ("He"); he is how we see (and access) God ("image"). *Angelology* was popular at the time; "thrones ..." (v. 16) were orders of angels; each was "created", had its origin "in him", and exists "for him"; any power they have is subordinate to Christ's. The whole of creation, both heavenly and earthly, were created "through him" (v. 16), with his participation. He is the "first-born" (v. 18), the inheritor from the Father, of *created-ness*; he governs it and is the cohesive power of the universe (v. 17). He existed "before all things", before the first creative act. Greeks saw the "head" (v. 18) as the body's source of life and growth. Christ is this to the Church, and "head" of it in the modern sense. He is "the beginning", the nucleus of restoration of humanity to union with God, of the new *created-ness*. In his death ("blood of his cross", v. 20), resurrection, and ascension to the Father, he is the *forerunner* ("firstborn", v. 18) of our elevation to being with the Father, of our *reconciliation* with the Father (v. 20). Christians at Colossae tried to find ultimate power and truth in various deities, but in Christ all power and ultimate truth is present (v. 19).

Luke 23:33-43

NRSV

Jesus has been betrayed, arrested, mocked, beaten, and sentenced to death. He, Simon of Cyrene (carrying the crossbar), two criminals and a few police have walked to Calvary, "the place that is called The Skull" (v. 33).

Jesus continues his ministry of giving forgiveness to those who have not heard the Good News (v. 34). The division of his clothing fulfils the prophecy in Psalm 22:18; to be deprived of one's clothing was to lose one's identity. (Biblical examples are prisoners, slaves, prostitutes and damned people.) The mob contemplates what is happening, but the "leaders" (v. 35) taunt Jesus: they blaspheme against God. In accord with Psalm 69:21, a psalm of the innocently suffering godly one, Jesus is offered "sour wine" (v. 36) – to revive him, and to prolong his ordeal. Ironically, "Messiah of God, his chosen one" (v. 35) and "King of the Jews" (v. 38) are all true. Jesus refuses to subvert God's plan by saving himself from a horrible death. A placard was placed around the criminal's neck, bearing an "inscription" (v. 38) stating his crime. One criminal joins with the mob (v. 39) but the other responds positively to Jesus (vv. 40-41). For him there is salvation; Jesus pronounces him free of sin. Only a king can give pardon. ("Paradise", v. 43, was the Jewish name for the temporary resting place of the godly dead.)