

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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1 Samuel 2:18-20,26

NRSV

Elkanah has two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah has borne him children, but for many years Hannah has been childless. Even so, Elkanah has loved her. After years of Peninnah's taunting, Hannah could take it no longer. During an annual pilgrimage to the temple at Shiloh, she has sought out Eli the priest; before him she has vowed that if God granted her a son, she would dedicate him to the Lord. Further, he would refrain from drink and not allow his head to be shaved throughout his life. Eli has interceded with God on her behalf and she has trusted in God to grant her wish. After returning home, a son has been born to her and Elkanah. When Samuel is old enough (probably aged three or four), she has taken him to Eli, to serve in the Temple.

Now we read of Samuel's childhood. A "linen ephod" was an apron, a light ceremonial garment worn by a priest – so Samuel is now a priest. The couple continue to visit the temple annually ("yearly sacrifice", v. 19), perhaps on the Day of Atonement. Hannah's "gift ... to the LORD" (v. 20) is her son. As repayment for Samuel's faithful service, "the LORD took note of Hannah" (v. 21) by giving her five more children. Samuel grows up not in a home and family but "in the presence of the LORD", in the temple. Samuel's fidelity is contrasted with the evil ways of Eli's sons, who even lie with women who have sacred duties (v. 22). The sons' misdeeds are known in the community (v. 24). They sin against God by their disregard for Eli, by their irreverence, and their greed and arrogance concerning sacrificial meat – so God has to punish them (v. 25). On the other hand, Samuel grows in spirituality and popularity in the community (v. 26). Eli's sons die when the Philistines defeat Israel in battle (4:11).

Psalm 148

NRSV

The psalter ends with five hallelujah ("Praise the LORD") psalms, of which this is one. In vv. 1-6 the psalmist invites the heavens to praise God, then in vv. 7-12 he bids all on the earth to do so. Even inanimate objects (e.g. "sun and moon", v. 3) are to praise him. (Ancient cosmology held that the sun, moon and stars travelled on concentric hemispheres above the earth, and above them was God's storehouse of "waters above the heavens" (v. 4), the source of rain and snow.) God commanded that the heavens be created (v. 5). The movement of the celestial bodies are per an everlasting law (v. 6). The heavens shall praise him for creating them and making their existence permanent. In vv. 7-12, the list of created *things* proceeds from the lowest forms ("sea monsters") to the highest, humans. The "wind" (v. 8, Hebrew: *ruah*) does God's will; *ruah* also means *spirit*. In v. 11, "all peoples" are invited to praise the Lord.

The author has already begun to describe the true Christian life. In what is probably an early baptismal instruction, he has called on his readers to "Set your minds on things that are above" (v. 2). When Christ comes again, they will be seen as being with him in power (v. 4) but those who follow evil ways will suffer the wrath of God (v. 5-6). The author has told them: "you have stripped off the old self with its practices" (v. 9) and "have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (v. 10).

Now he tells them, chosen by God as they are, what virtues, ethical qualities, are expected of them: "compassion" (v. 12) is sympathy for the needs of others and "meekness" is gentleness and consideration towards others. Christ's forgiveness of them (and us) is a model for their conduct towards each other (v. 13). The primary quality for the Christian is "love" (v. 14).

In v. 15, the word translated "rule" literally means *be umpire* or *referee*: so may "the peace of Christ" be the *reference point* for your consciences, as it is for you all in the Church ("one body"). May the understanding, the knowledge, of the way Christ works be yours, and may sharing this in the community lead you to deeper understanding ("wisdom", v. 16); may you show your thankfulness to the Father through the Son in worship. In all your words and actions, speak and do as though Christ were doing them.

Luke 2:41-52

NRSV

This is the only passage in the Bible that tells of Jesus' boyhood. On the "festival of the Passover", Jews celebrated both Israel's deliverance from Egypt and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, a symbol of the start of a new year. Jesus' family is pious. He is now "twelve years old" (v. 42); in another year, he will officially become a man (now celebrated by Jews in the *bar mitzvah*). After the eight days of the festival, the "group" (v. 44, probably the whole village) begins the journey back to Nazareth. Joseph and Mary find Jesus in the outer court of the Temple "among the teachers" (v. 46), experts in Jewish law. Respectful of the law, he not only listens and asks questions, but also answers their questions.

V. 49 marks a turning point in the gospel: these are the first words of Jesus we have; for the first time Jesus' father is named as the Father – until now, Joseph has been called his father. Note "must": the relationship between Jesus and the Father requires obedience. Parents do reach the point where they do not understand their children (v. 50); here Mary and Joseph do not comprehend that his relationship with God takes precedence over being their child. Upon return to Nazareth, he obeys his parents in everyday life. In spite of not understanding, Mary "treasured" (v. 51) what Jesus says – as his mother and also as the model believer. Jesus continues to grow physically and in understanding, preparing himself for the mission that lies ahead of him (v. 52).