

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 58:1-12

NRSV

Written after the Exile, this passage speaks of fasting, but its implications are wider: it encompasses the whole of the people's attitude towards God. Through the prophet, God issues a legal summons to "my people" for "their rebellion", for "their sins". They go to the Temple daily ("seek me", v. 2) and "delight" (in a sense) to know God's ways – but their "righteousness" (keeping the Law and seeking godly judgements) are purely ritual, external.

Why, they ask, are you ignoring us, God? (v. 3a) He begins to explain in v. 3b: "you serve [only] your own interest" (delight yourselves, not me) and (as slave masters did in Egypt) "oppress all your workers": there is a gulf between the rich and the poor. Because your lives outside the Temple are inconsistent with your worship (v. 4a), God will not hear your pleas. You kid yourselves if you think an insincere show of fasting is "acceptable" (v. 5). ("Sackcloth" was worn by mourners and the penitent.) God demands a proper relationship with others, one free from "injustice" (v. 6) and servitude ("yoke"), one in which the rich "share" (v. 7) with the "hungry", forming one community, giving to the less fortunate. When you do this. God will hear you ("light", v. 8) *heal* you (restore you to well-being), and protect you (both before and behind). He will be present with you.

Vv. 9-12 continue this theme, adding that contempt ("pointing of the finger") and slander ("speaking of evil") are unacceptable. God will be present with his people, guiding them, strengthening them when they find their trust in him waning, and making them a source of good/godliness for others ("a spring of water", v. 11). From v. 12, we learn that Jerusalem is still not yet fully rebuilt: God will help them mend the "breach" in the walls, and restore their heritage.

Psalm 103:8-18

NRSV

The psalmist gives thanks to God for recovery from illness in vv. 1-5. He speaks to his very self ("soul"), reminding himself not to forget God's healing power, both in curing diseases and in forgiving sin. God fills one's life with godliness and gives renewed vigour. After recalling God's care during the Exodus, he tells of God's qualities in all times (v. 8), expanding on them in vv. 9-18. God is slow to anger and is only angry for a time (v. 9). He is lenient when we go against him (v. 10). He loves greatly those who hold him in awe ("fear", v. 11). He is infinitely forgiving (v. 12); he is like a "father" (v. 13) in his mercy. The dry east "wind" (v. 16) devastated vegetation. Humans have finite lifetimes but God is everlasting, loving those who keep his Law (vv. 17-18). In vv. 19-22, the psalmist calls on heavenly beings and all whom God has created to praise God.

Paul has written of a "new creation" (5:17), probably meaning a *new standard of evaluation* set by Christ. He and his coworkers, Timothy and Apollos, are "ambassadors for Christ" (5:20a) urging (not compelling) the Christians at Corinth to seek for oneness with God. While Christ was sin-less, he did bear our sins, becoming our mediator with God (5:21). May the readers of this letter follow the ambassadors' example, accepting God's love productively rather than "in vain" (6:1). "Have" in 6:2 is prophetic, so by roughly quoting Isaiah 49:8, Paul tells the Corinthians that now is the time when God gives grace (undeserved love) to us; now we are being restored to union with God.

Paul and his coworkers, ("servants of God", 6:4), are aiding "in every way" they can. They have shown themselves true agents of God in enduring physical and mental pressures ("afflictions", 6:4-5) and "hardships" – unlike Paul's critics – by using what the Spirit has given them (vv. 6, 7a and Galatians 5:22-23) including the whole offensive ("right hand", 6:7) and defensive ("left") arsenal that God provides, whether honoured or discredited (by their critics, who even call them "impostors", 6:8, i.e. not true to God.) Seen as insignificant (as bad teachers), they are valued by true Christians, "dying" (6:9) to self-centeredness but alive in following Christ; "sorrowful" (6:10) that the Corinthian Christians feel hurt that he refused their aid (he did not need it), yet "rejoicing" that they are faithful; living in poverty, yet "making many rich" spiritually and "possessing everything" that matters.

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

NRSV

Matthew tells us some of Jesus' teachings that raised the ire of the Jewish religious authorities. Jesus presents his view of three major features of Jewish "piety" or righteousness, ways of seeking favour with God. In all three, he decries advertising one's acts of piety, *sounding a trumpet* (v. 2) about them.

The "reward" (v. 1) the worthy receive from God, "your Father in heaven", is not earned but is freely given by him. The "hypocrites" (v. 2) are people who do not genuinely follow God's ways; they are shams. They ostentatiously stop in the "street" (v. 5) to pray many times each day; they are *paid in full* ("received their reward", v. 2) by the praise of onlookers; they receive no heavenly *reward*. Alms are to be given *quietly*, "in secret" (v. 4). Almsgiving was the prime act of piety in Judaism.

While Jesus shared in public prayer, he warns against ostentatious private prayer in public (v. 6). V. 3 says: avoid all scheming to achieve public notice! Fasting is a valid form of self-discipline but should be done in a way not to attract attention to oneself. It should be directed only to God (vv. 16-18). Now for advice to the faithful community. *Earthly treasures* (v. 19) then were mostly costly clothes, prone to destruction by moths. Mud-brick houses were easy to break into. Place value on unity with God, not on earthly possessions.