

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 2:1-2,12-17

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 he 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 the 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”. Fortunes will be reversed (3:1-8): those nations who have oppressed Judah will be judged adversely.

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.

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

NRSV

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.