

*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 42:1-9

NRSV

In 41:1, God speaks to Israelites scattered around the Mediterranean (“coastlands”, also in 42:4) in courtroom language, calling them together “for judgement”. God has “roused a victor from the east” (41:2, Cyrus) to serve him by conquering nations. God has acted in the past (“first”, 41:4) and will prophesy a coming revelation of himself (“last”). God demands: “set forth your case” (41:21): prove that you can foretell the future based on the past (“former things”, 41:22)! They cannot (41:28), but God can.

42:1-4 is one of four Servant Songs, poems about God’s special agent who will fulfill his purpose for the faithful community; though innocent, he will suffer for his people. People of other nations choose their gods, but God will select his “servant”, his “chosen”; he has anointed this person (or Israel) with his “spirit”. When the agent comes, he will be unobtrusive and quiet (42:2, unlike Cyrus), gentle, respectful of others, and patient (v. 3). He will “bring forth justice”, i.e. take legal decisions ratifying and executing God’s will. He will not fail (“faint”, 42:4) nor be discouraged (“crushed”) until he has achieved God’s purposes; he will win over people to God’s ways (“teaching”). He will continue to do what God did in the past (42:5): he, the creator, is the source of life for his people (as he was in Adam); he will give his “spirit” to those who follow him. God called Israel as his people, led and “kept” (42:6, Revised English Bible: “formed”, as he *formed* Adam) them, and swore a pact with them. They are to bring enlightenment to others (“as ... a light to the nations”, 42:6), to set them free. 42:8-9 returns to the courtroom: God’s name is *Yahweh* (“the LORD”); he alone is God. Having seen his integrity in his acts in the past, his people can be sure that the “new things” he announces will indeed happen. He will bring his integrity to all (42:1).

### Psalms 36:5-11

NRSV

This psalm opens and closes in typical wisdom style. Vv. 1-4 tell of the “wicked”, the ungodly: as the Spirit of God “speaks” in the very being of the godly, so “transgression” (personified) speaks to the ungodly. They convince themselves that God will not punish them (v. 2). They are thoroughly rotten; their ways are neither wise (v. 3) nor moral in God’s eyes.

On the other hand, the faithful enjoy God’s “love” (v. 5) and “faithfulness” (part of his covenantal pact with his people). God’s integrity (“righteousness”, v. 6) and justice are immense, as great as the “mighty mountains” and the “great deep”. He restores, gives life to, all rational beings; he protects “all people” (v. 7). Vv. 8-10 say, using the image of a banquet, that knowing God’s life-giving presence in the Temple (“your house”) is the supreme experience of his love. In v. 9, to “see light” is to live. God’s luminance, as encountered in the temple liturgy, dispenses

good (“fountain”) and enables us to live. Vv. 10-11 are a prayer: please, God, continue to love us and to restore us who are faithful at heart! Do not allow me to be oppressed by “the arrogant”, the ungodly!

### Hebrews 9:11-15

NRSV

Vv. 1-7 tell of temple practice in ancient Israel. The forerunner of the Temple was a “tent” (v. 2), called the “Holy Place”. Within this “tent” was a second one, called the “Holy of Holies” (v. 3), where God dwelt. On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), only the high priest went into “the second” tent (v. 7), to offer a sacrifice of animal blood for the redemption of unintentional sins. Annual repetition of this ritual shows that redemption from sin was of limited duration; that there were two tents shows that sacrifices could not remove the inner guilt (“perfect the conscience”, v. 9) of the faithful.

In somewhat like manner, when Christ came the first time, to redeem us of our sin, he passed through his risen body (equivalent to the outer tent) into “the Holy Place” (v. 12, the Holy of Holies, i.e. heaven). The blood in his saving act was his own (in crucifixion), not animal blood; therefore the redemption it achieved is forever. In the Temple, “ashes of a heifer” (v. 13) were mixed with water and used to *purify the flesh*, i.e. restore the ritual purity, of those who had touched the dead. If the high priest was able to achieve this, how much greater will be the effect of Jesus’ “blood” (v. 14), his sacrifice of his sinless self, in removing all traces of guilt for our past ungodly (“dead”) deeds enabling us to “worship the living God”. (His “eternal Spirit” is probably his spirit of self-offering.)

### John 12:1-11

NRSV

Jesus has raised Martha’s and Mary’s brother, Lazarus “from the dead”, for Martha trusts that Jesus is the Messiah. Many pilgrims visit Jerusalem for Passover. The religious authorities, aware that Jesus has performed “many signs” (11:47), and afraid that the Romans will destroy the Temple and the nation, because of him, ask any knowing his whereabouts to tell them so they can arrest him.

Now Jesus returns to Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem. “Perfume made of pure nard” (v. 3, spikenard oil), was derived from the roots of a plant grown in the Himalayas. If the guests were reclining on couches, Jesus’ feet would be accessible for anointing, but a respectable Jewish woman would hardly appear in public with her hair unbound. Judas’ reaction points forward to Jesus’ arrest (18:1-11). “Three hundred denarii” (v. 5) was close to a year’s wages for a labourer. Anointing was the last step before burial, but not for executed criminals. Perhaps in v. 7 Jesus means that Mary bought the perfume so as to have it ready for his burial, that what she did has a meaning she does not realize, and that the perfume is not wasted. Perhaps v. 8 says: the poor are constantly in need, but Jesus’ impending death is unique. There is a place for spontaneous love of Jesus. The religious authorities plan to kill Jesus – and Lazarus, for his miraculous recovery has led many to believe in Jesus (vv. 9-11).