

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 50:4-9a

NRSV

The part of Isaiah written in exile (Chapters 40-55) contains four *servant songs*, sections that interrupt the *flow* of the book but have a unity within themselves. The first (42:1-7) begins “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen ...”; in the second (49:1-7) the servant, abused and humiliated, is commissioned anew; in the third (our passage) he is disciplined and strengthened by suffering; and in the fourth (52:17-53:12) even the Gentiles are in awesome contemplation before the suffering and rejected servant. In late Judaism, he was seen as the perfect Israelite, one of supreme holiness, a messiah. In the gospels, Jesus identifies himself as the servant (or slave), the one who frees all people.

In vv. 4-6, God has “opened my ear”; he has commissioned the servant as one who is taught, i.e. like a disciple. God has made him a “teacher” (a prophet) of the “word” of God, to bring God’s comfort to “the weary”, his fellow Israelites – who reject God. He has accepted this command: he is not “rebellious”. They have tortured him (v. 6), as they did prophets before him, but he has accepted their “insult and spitting”.

In vv. 7-9a, in courtroom language, the servant says that, because God helps him, he is not disgraced; he confidently accepts the suffering (“set my face like flint”), and will not be put to shame. God will prove him right (“vindicates”, v. 8). He is willing to face his “adversaries”, his accusers – for the godly to “stand up together” with him against the ungodly. He is confident that, with God’s help, none will find (“declare”, v. 9) him guilty.

Psalm 70

NRSV

Psalms have headings, or superscriptions, which are not part of the text, but are very ancient. That of this psalm includes *a lament*. A scholar has written: *when we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt religiously, we lament*. Such is the state of the psalmist here; he is in deep spiritual despair. He calls on God to “help” him, to be his “deliverer” (v. 5). He feels that he is under attack, and asks that fortunes may be reversed. May those who taunt him, and *seek his life* (v. 2, perhaps condemn his spirituality, or see him as lacking faith) be put to shame. He is “poor and needy” (v. 5) spiritually.

This psalm is much like 40:13-17. Where “God” appears here, “LORD” is used there; where “LORD” appears here, “God” appear there. “Who seek to snatch away my life” in 40:14 is stronger than “who seek my life” (v. 2) here.

Hebrews 12:1-3

NRSV

In Chapter 11, the author has told given us examples of the “cloud of witnesses”

(12:1): (1) figures mentioned in Genesis and Exodus who lacked the promise of eternal life with Christ yet acted on faith in God, acting “by faith” (11:17, 23, 29) in doing God’s will; and (2) of others who relied on God’s promises for the future, e.g. the crossing of the “Red Sea”, the fall of “Jericho” (11:30), and Rahab hiding the Israelite spies (sent to scout out Jericho’s defences), and many others.

So being “surrounded” (12:1) by all these exemplars of faith (“witnesses” to the efficacy of faith in God), let us “lay aside” anything that may hinder us in living a godly life (“the race”): in it, we look to Jesus as both forerunner (“pioneer”, 12:2) and *fulfiller* of our faith. He, we, and those who have gone before us *run the race* to attain eternal life (“joy”) and oneness with God – through suffering and “shame”.

From 1 Kings 2:19, we can see that the “seat at the right hand” (12:2) of the monarch was the seat of honour. Keep in mind the “hostility” (12:3) that Jesus “endured”, as you face hardships due to your faith, to help you pursue the goal of oneness with Christ. We have not suffered to the point of being killed, as he did (12:4).

John 13:21-32

NRSV

Jesus has shown his humility and his love for his disciples, by washing their feet – an act of ritual cleansing, rather than merely of hygiene (vv. 2-11). By doing so, he has set an example for them; they should do it for each other (v. 13)

But there is one of member of this community who will not follow his example (v. 18), as Jesus’ quotation from Psalm 41:9, the one “who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me” foretells. The disciples have been forewarned, lest they lose faith in him (v. 19). Even this person’s betrayal of him is part of God’s purpose.

Now Jesus is humanly “troubled in spirit” (v. 21) – betrayal is not nice. As was the custom, the host and his guests recline, propped on their left elbows, at an angle to the table. We do not know which disciple is “the one whom Jesus loved” (v. 23). He only has to lean back to ask Jesus who the traitor is, being “next to him”.

This disciple is the one to whom Jesus entrusts care of his mother in 19:25-27; it is he who identifies Jesus in his post-resurrection appearance (in 21:7). 20:24-25, the second ending of the gospel, say that this is the disciple “who is testifying to these things and has written them” (21:24).

While usually a “piece of bread” (v. 26) is a form of communion, of oneness with Christ, here it is an instrument of evil.

Jesus urges Judas to carry out his dastardly deed “quickly” (v. 27). The other disciples do not understand. “Night” (v. 30) is a symbol of evil. 3:19 tells us that Jesus is “the light come into the world”. “All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed” (3:20). The events leading to Jesus’ death, crucifixion and resurrection are now underway.