

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 52:7-10

NRSV

51:17 says: "... Rouse yourself! Stand up O Jerusalem, you have drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath." The people are still in exile; they yearn to return to Jerusalem. They believe that God is so angry with them, for infidelity, that he has deserted them. But God says (v. 6): "my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I". Release seems to be close.

And now the prophet sounds an exciting note. Echoing 40:9, where God commands the prophet to announce "good tidings" to the people, v. 7 tells us what he announces: peace, salvation and God's kingship. (The reference to "feet" may be a reminder of 2 Samuel 18:19-33: there a messenger runs to tell David "good tidings" – that his troops have secured a victory.) The "sentinels" (v. 8) on the city wall, normally occupied in watching for approaching enemies, now sing for joy because they see God returning to his people.

God has comforted his people; his supposed wrath is over; he has reinstated Israel in his affections ("redeemed Jerusalem", v. 9). God has shown his might, his power ("his holy arm", v. 10) to all peoples (not only to Israel). His saving acts will be known by the whole world. In the following verses there is a picture of an army of his people, moving peacefully and serenely, with God as their protector.

Psalms 98

NRSV

Worshippers are invited to sing "a new song" marking new evidence of God's rule. With truth ("right hand") and power, he has won the "victory", i.e. salvation, saving acts – for his people Israel. (Note the emphasis on "victory": the word occurs three times in vv. 1-3.) He has triumphed over all who seek to overthrow his kingdom.

All peoples can see that Israel is right in trusting him ("vindication", v. 2). Then v. 3: as he did when the Israelites groaned under oppression in Egypt (Exodus 2:24), he now remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – to lead them and protect them. All peoples will see his saving acts. (These verses are in the past tense, but a scholar points out that the reference is to a future event.)

Vv. 4-8 call on all creation ("earth", "sea", "floods" and "hills") to acknowledge and be joyful in God's rule. Per v. 7b, people of all lands are invited to join in. God's coming to "judge the world" (v. 9) will be a truly marvellous event. He will judge us, but his judgement will be perfectly fair and equitable, for he is righteous.

Hebrews 1:1-4,(5-12)

NRSV

Our passage is the prologue of this anonymous epistle. The book stresses the im-

portance of salvation through Christ – perhaps to Jewish Christians who were tempted to return to Judaism, or to Jews who were interested in becoming Christian. One point these verses make is that Christ is the perfect priest: he is *mediator* between the Father and humans, and *purifies* us of our sins.

In vv. 1-2, the author contrasts the old and new ways of God: that of "long ago" and that "in these last days". God spoke then to the ancestors of Israel, our spiritual ancestors; in this era he speaks to us; then he spoke through "prophets" (v. 1, including Moses); now he speaks through "a Son" (v. 2). The Son's role is much more significant than that of "prophets": he is "heir" of God, and shared in (and *mediated*) creation of the "worlds" (in Jewish cosmology, the earth and the heavens.) These are the "last days" because God's reign, his kingdom, has already begun.

Jesus ("He", v. 3) shows us something of God's greatness, and is an exact image, icon, of God. Christ continues to sustain all that is created. Jesus *purified* us through his death; then he was exalted in returning to the Father. Since before time and now he is "much superior to angels" (v. 4). (Jews held that Mosaic law was spoken by angels.) In Judaism, he is Wisdom; to us, he is Son (v. 5). (To Semites, receiving a new name indicated some change in a person: he is now both pre-existent and exalted.) The gist of vv. 5-12 is: while angels were held in high esteem at the time, Jesus is much greater than they.

John 1:1-14

NRSV

The intent of this gospel is "that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah [the Christ], the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). John begins from God's creative act: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth ..." (Genesis 1:1), the Word, he who became a human (v. 14a), already existed. He was "with God" (v. 1) and (with the Father and the Holy Spirit); he was God. He was the agent through whom "all things came into being" (v. 3). Through him, life (physical and spiritual) began: life given by God, "the light of all people" (v. 4). It shines in a world of unbelief and opposition to God's ways, and wins out (v. 5).

John the Baptist came to "testify" (v. 7) to goodness, to point to Jesus (v. 8), the embodiment of perfect goodness, who was to come (v. 9). Jesus was rejected by most people (v. 11), but to those who believed in him, in who he was, he gave the opportunity to be adopted by God, as his children (v. 12) – and so to become one with him. Believers are *reborn* into God's family through the Holy Spirit ("of God", v. 13). The Word, Christ, became human ("flesh", v. 14) and "lived among us". The author is witness to God's manifest power ("glory") as seen in Jesus, that he is the only, unique, highly valued, son of the Father, that he possesses God's attributes of free giving to humankind ("grace") and ultimate truth.