

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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Acts 7:55-60

NRSV

As the community grew, the need for leaders in addition to the apostles was recognized (6:1), so seven were chosen to attend to social-service and administrative functions (“daily distribution of food”), of whom Stephen, “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (6:5), was one. He “did great wonders and signs among the people” (6:8), and as his defence when brought before a sanhedrin on charges of blasphemy shows (7:2-53), he was a great teacher as well. He foresaw that Jesus would “change the customs” (6:14), especially that the Temple would no longer be the centre of worship – God can be worshipped anywhere. He has accused all Israel, both present generations and past, of obstinate resistance to God’s commands; he has stated that God repeatedly sent prophets to correct their ways, but they rejected, persecuted (and murdered) these prophets “who foretold the coming of the Righteous One” (7:52) – for which God punished them by ending the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and by exiling them. They have now betrayed and murdered “the Son of Man” (7:56), Jesus.

Now he receives confirmation of his insights through a vision of Jesus exalted at God’s “right hand”. But the mob purposely avoids listening to him: they *cover their ears* (7:57). Victims were *dragged out of the city* (7:58) and pushed over a ledge, to be crushed and buried by heavy stones hurled down upon them. “The witnesses” were legally required to cast the first stones. Stephen’s words (7:59-60) echo those of Jesus on the cross: he intercedes for his murderers as Jesus did. We meet “Saul” (v. 58, Paul) for the first time: 8:1a says “And Saul approved of their killing him”. With the stoning of Stephen, animosity to the Church in Jerusalem reaches its peak. In Chapter 8, spreading of the good news to non-Jewish areas begins.

Psalms 31:1-5,15-16

NRSV

Illness, persecution and separation from God were seen as allied concepts; all three involved *losing face*, “shame”. The psalmist prays that God, ultimate rectitude (“righteousness”) and reliability (“rock”, vv. 2-3, “fortress”), will show him his ways (or perhaps the psalmist recalls a past time.) He feels as though a “net” (v. 4) waits to ensnare him – either of death, or of his enemies. Jesus quoted v. 5 just before he died: *into your care I commit my very being*: an expression of supreme confidence. God has made the psalmist whole, restored him to union with God. The psalmist protests his innocence (v. 6): I deserve your protection, for I am loyal to you. God has restored him to stable life (vv. 7-8). He tells of his afflictions in vv. 9-13. In the ancient Near East, people believed that the milestones of life, especially birth and death, were in the hands of the god(s). In v. 15a, the psalmist acknowledges that his destiny depends on God. May God be present in

him (v. 16a); may he restore him to godly living. The psalm ends with the psalmist praising God for his love, for returning him to his favour, for preservation of the faithful, and for punishment of evildoers.

1 Peter 2:2-10

NRSV

It seems that the first readers were recent converts to the faith, “newborn infants”. If they have had a genuine conversion experience (“tasted ...”, v. 3), may they enjoy God’s nourishment (“spiritual milk”, v. 2) as an aid to growing into the salvation Christ brought us. In vv. 4-5, the author uses two metaphors for believers: (1) as *living stones* making up God’s building, “spiritual house”, and (2) as a “priesthood” dedicated to God (“holy”) presenting lives of faith and love (“sacrifices”) to him on behalf of all humans. Christ is the “living stone”, the cornerstone, the foundation of the *building*, the Church.

The author then shows that Psalms, Isaiah and Hosea foretell this *building* image of Christ, Christians and the Church (vv. 6-8). In v. 7, Christ is the “stone”; he is rejected by the community’s pagan persecutors but to us he is of great value (“precious”). Their rejection was ordained by God before time (“as they were destined ...”, v. 8). In v. 9, the terms used of Christians are all from the Old Testament – where they refer to Israel. The Church, the *new Israel*, is “chosen” by God to proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection (“mighty acts [of God]”); it is God who chose the new Christians for conversion from paganism, “out of darkness into ... light”. In baptism, they have come from having no relationship to God (“not a people”, v. 10) to being “God’s people”, to receiving God’s gift of “mercy”.

John 14:1-14

NRSV

Judas Iscariot has left to do his dastardly deed. Jesus now prepares his disciples for his departure. Belief in God includes belief in him (v. 1). He is *going*, through resurrection and ascension, to the Father, to prepare a place of permanent fellowship for them (vv. 2, 3). He will return to take them there, a place where there is ample room (“many dwelling places”). Thomas is logical, and bewildered. Jesus is the *road map*, “the way” (v. 6); he is ultimate “truth” and the source of “life” itself. Access to God is only through him. Being both God and human, to know him is to know the Father. Knowing him, they are already getting to know the Father and “have seen him” (v. 7) in Jesus.

Philip shows by his question in v. 8 that he still does not understand (“know”) Jesus, for Jesus is the revelation of God. The Son is present (“dwells”, v. 10) in the Father, and the Father in the Son. Father and Son are one and the same. A master entrusted his *agent* to act on his behalf in every way. Jesus is the Father’s agent, empowered to act completely for the Father. Jesus says, in essence, if you do not *buy* this *mutual presence*, then trust in me on the basis of what I do: you are seeing the Father’s “works” (vv. 10, 11), including miracles.

The faithful will continue these works. (The ones they do will be “greater”, v. 12, because Jesus has nullified sin.) By asking Jesus in prayer (“in my name”, v. 14), God will do whatever the faithful ask.