

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 17:22-31

NRSV

On his second missionary journey, Paul has crossed Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and has arrived in Athens, a city known for its interest in the divine and its openness to discussion of philosophies and religions. He argues for Christianity in the synagogue and in the marketplace. Epicurean and Stoic philosophers see him as dabbling in philosophy and proclaiming “foreign divinities” (v. 18), of Jesus and the resurrection (possibly thought by them to be a god). He is invited to join in philosophical discussions at the “Areopagus” (v. 19) on edge of the marketplace. He presents the good news to a people of a culture very different from the one in which it was first proclaimed. He explains it in their terms.

After praising the Athenians for their piety and gods (“objects of your worship”, v. 23), he draws attention to an altar to “an unknown god”. He tells them: I know that god; he is God; he “made the world ...” (v. 24) and is “Lord” of it. He depends on nothing (“as though ...”, v. 25), so he is greater than all Greek gods; he is the source of all (“gives ... life”). Not being confined to specific “shrines” (v. 24) and needing no sacrifices (“nor ... served ...”, v. 25) shows his greatness. God created “all nations” (v. 26) from *proto-human*, Adam (“one ancestor”): Stoics too believed in the unity of humanity. Deuteronomy 32:8 says that God “fixed the boundaries of the peoples”; dividing history into eras is basic to faith (v. 26b). The Greeks thought of the seasons of nature’s cycles and the earth’s habitable zones. They *searched and groped for God* (v. 27); we go further: we find, obey and serve him.

Paul now quotes Greek writers in defence of his arguments (v. 28). For “God’s offspring” (v. 29) idols are inadequate objects of worship; only the true God, the creator of heaven and earth and of all lower orders of spiritual being, is worthy of our worship and service. Jesus has brought an era when turning to God is imperative; “ignorance” (v. 30) of his ways is no longer acceptable – because God will have Jesus (“a man”, v. 31) judge people’s worthiness. This we know because he has raised Jesus. Raising “a man” to divine status is hard for Paul’s hearers to accept. Some are open to further discussion but others are not (v. 32).

Psalm 66:8-18

NRSV

“All the earth” (v. 1, not only Israel) is invited to join in praising God, seen as powerful in his “deeds” (v. 3). Throughout history he has done great things “among mortals” (v. 5). His rule is world-wide, over all “the nations” (v. 7). Vv. 8-12 are a communal thanksgiving. God preserves us in life (v. 9a); he protects us. In past difficulties he has “tested us” (v. 10), purifying us as “silver” ore is changed to pure silver. Israel has been subjugated by other people (perhaps during the Exile), yet after enduring every kind of difficulty (“through fire and ... water”,

v. 12), God has brought her to freedom again. In vv. 13-20, an individual (perhaps the king) vows to offer sacrifice in the Temple in thanks. He invites the community to hear “what [God] ... has done for me” (v. 16). He was repentant so God listened to him (v. 19) and has heeded his requests made in prayer. “Blessed be God” (v. 20) for hearing and for his covenant (“steadfast”) love.

1 Peter 3:13-22

NRSV

The author has noted the persecution being endured by his readers; now he treats the topic explicitly. Who will weaken you in your faith or cause you to lose it? (v. 13) As v. 16 (“when you are maligned”) shows “if” (v. 14) is an understatement: *when* is meant. Suffering for good conduct puts you in a happy and fortunate (“blessed”) state with God. Reverence for God should transcend all fears. Be prepared to defend your commitment to Christ, and your faith (“hope”, v. 15) in him, to anyone who asks. Continue to live ethical, godly lives (“keep your conscience clear”, v. 16) so that your persecutors may be shamed (and desist from harrowing you). It is morally “better” (v. 17) to suffer for doing God’s will.

Christ, “the righteous” (v. 18), is your example of suffering; he brings you to God. He really died (“in the flesh”), but he overcame death. Even the condemnation carried out in the Flood is overcome by the power of the gospel, for Jesus proclaimed it (while dead) to the wayward dead (“spirits in prison ... who did not obey”, vv. 19-20), so that their fate might be reversed. (See also 4:6.) The saving of Noah and his family (“eight persons”, v. 20) “through water” is the forerunner of baptism. It saves not by ritual cleansing (“removal of dirt”, v. 21) but rather by putting you in a state to be found worthy at the Last Day (“appeal”), sharing as we do in Christ’s death and resurrection. Christ is now in heaven, where heavenly powers (“angels ...”, v. 22) are subject to him.

John 14:15-21

NRSV

Jesus continues to prepare his disciples for his departure. He has given them a special commandment: to “love one another” just as he has loved them (13:34). Love requires obedience and (v. 21) those who love him are those who obey. Keeping Jesus’ commandments makes possible the continuance of their relationship with him – but how? The Father will send them “another” (v. 16) representative of God, also in God, as their “Advocate” or *champion*: one who will support, help and intercede for them. This is the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (v. 17), of faith, of revealed doctrine. He is neither perceivable nor knowable by unbelievers, so they have no access to him. But “you” both recognize (“know”) him, because he will be within you and will remain (*abide*) in you. Jesus will come to you in the Spirit (v. 18). After Jesus’ death, unbelievers will not perceive him, but you will; because he lives (in a special way), so will you (v. 19). When he returns at the end of this era (v. 20), you will recognize that you have been taken into intimate association with both the Father and the Son. But (v. 21) this will only be so for followers who have divine love and show it by obeying me. Only to them will Jesus, the risen Christ, appear.