

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 49:1-7

NRSV

This is the second Servant Song. The servant speaks to Israelites scattered around the Mediterranean (“coastlands”); he identifies himself as chosen before he was born (like Jeremiah, Paul and John the Baptist) and even named (like Jesus). Further, God made him an effective instrument in proclaiming his message (“sharp sword”, v. 2). Perhaps God hid him for protection or in preparation for his mission. V. 3 may tell us who the servant is: “Israel”, the community of the faithful, led by the prophet. They will show God’s power to others (“glorified”). But the servant retorts (v. 4): despite all our/my efforts, no one listens! Surely I minister on God’s behalf and God will “reward” me for it (even if people don’t). The servant’s “strength” (v. 5) is from God; he is to turn “Jacob” (Israel) back to God. God (not the prophet) will gather “Israel” to him. But his mission is to all peoples, not only wayward Israelites and the faithful (“survivors”, v. 6). God continues to speak to the servant, “one deeply despised” (v. 7), hated by many and “the slave of rulers”: God’s fidelity is his surety that all, even rulers, will hold him in awe.

At the first level, in vv. 8-13 God invites the exiles to return from Babylon; this is the servant’s mission (“you”, v. 8). They will travel in safety (“not hunger or thirst ...”, vv. 10-12) from throughout the known world. God gave them a “covenant” (v. 8) at Sinai; perhaps the servant is the new covenant – God will make a new covenant with his people. But note also “a time of favour” (v. 8) and “a day of salvation”: these terms speak of the end times. God saves both now and in the era to come.

Psalms 40:1-11

NRSV

This psalm may have been two psalms (vv. 1-11 and 12-17) later joined through use in a liturgy. Vv. 1-3 tell of the psalmist’s experience (but not what troubled him). The “desolate pit” (v. 2) may be Sheol, the subterranean abode of the dead; perhaps he was near death, and recovered. This hymn is his “new song” (v. 3) of thanksgiving. The “proud” (v. 4) trust in themselves (not God) or in materialism. The psalmist marvels at God’s innumerable “deeds” (v. 5) and “thoughts” for his people. God prefers people listening to him and doing his will over sacrificing to him (v. 6). (It was thought that God kept a “book”, v. 7, a record of how ethically each person lived.) In thanks, the psalmist has told “the glad news” (v. 9) in the Temple, “the great congregation”. He has not held back (“restrained”) in telling of God’s “faithfulness” (v. 10) to him and all God has done for him, so may God not withhold his “mercy” (v. 11), “love” and fidelity to him.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

NRSV

Paul uses the schema of Greek letters of the time, expanding it to include specifi-

cally Christian notions. He is an “apostle”, one sent out by Christ to perform a special mission. (“Sosthenes” may be the “official of the synagogue” beaten in Acts 18:17.) The church at Corinth is made up of ordinary people “called to be saints” (v. 2), set apart for God’s work in the world, “sanctified” in baptism. Perhaps Paul reminds them that there are Christians elsewhere too. V. 3 is his greeting: he wishes them “grace” (God’s freely given gift of love) and “peace” (the total state of well-being to which we are admitted through Christ): both come from the Father (as source) and the Son (as means or agent). In later chapters, Paul cautions his readers against misuse of *spiritual gifts* (v. 7), so in v. 5 he may be damning them with faint praise. He praises their eloquence (“speech”) and understanding (“knowledge”) but not (as in other letters) their faith, hope and love for each other and for Christ. In v. 6, “testimony” is *bearing witness*: God has strengthened them through their telling of the good news. They are indeed richly blessed (v. 7), but (as mentioned later), they tend to dwell on the excitement of the present rather than looking forward to “the revealing of ... Christ”, his second coming. God will help them prepare for that day, so that they may be among those judged worthy of eternal life (“blameless”, v. 8). “God is faithful” (v. 9): he will not abandon what he has begun. He has called them into “fellowship”, union with other believers which is union with Christ.

John 1:29-42

NRSV

John the Baptist has denied that he is any of the figures expected by Jews to inaugurate a new era: he is neither the Messiah, Elijah, nor the prophet like Moses; rather he prepares people for the coming of the Lord. He has also told some religious authorities that one is already among them who is far more worthy than he.

“The next day” John acclaims Jesus as “Lamb of God”. He is probably thinking of the fourth Servant Song: there the servant is “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter”. John recognizes that Jesus outranks him (“ranks ahead”, v. 30) and “was” (existed) before him. In vv. 31-33 he recalls his experience of Jesus’ baptism, and justifies what he has proclaimed. He says: I didn’t recognize him as Messiah (“know him”), but I now realize that I baptised with water in order that Jesus might be shown to Jews. The coming of the Spirit showed me that Jesus is the one chosen by God. I am convinced that he is, and I have told others (v. 34). (Later on, on the lips of Martha, “Son of God” and “Messiah” are synonymous.)

In vv. 35-42, two of John’s disciples begin to follow Jesus. First, they are curious about Jesus when John tells them who he is. They follow him, recognizing that he is an authority (“Teacher”, v. 38). Jesus invites them to “Come and see” (v. 39), to investigate what he teaches. “Staying” and “remained” are technical terms in this gospel: the two begin to understand the way of life Jesus offers and expects. V. 40 tells us that one of the two is “Andrew”; the other is unnamed. Andrew tells “Simon” (v. 41) the good news and introduces him to Jesus. (The Greek word translated “Anointed” is *Christos*.) Jesus prophesies that Simon will be nicknamed “Cephas” (v. 42), the Aramaic word for *rock*. *Petros*, the Greek word for “Peter”, also means *rock*.

