

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 9:1-4

NRSV

Isaiah says that a time will come (“the latter time”) when God “will make glorious”, show his power, to three northern regions of Israel made provinces of Assyria after the conquest of 733 BC: “the way of the sea” (Dor), “the land beyond the Jordan” (Gilead) and “Galilee” (Megiddo). (Galilee was known as multi-ethnic, “nations”). The current “anguish” inflicted by God through the Assyrian king upon the Israelites there (the tribes of “Zebulun” and “Naphtali”), will end. The tense of the verbs is mixed perfect and future, so when the “latter time” will be is hard to tell; perhaps it is in the distant future. (In biblical times, northern Israel never regained its freedom.)

As “on the day of Midian” (v. 4), when Gideon led the people of Israel to defeat a vastly superior force of Midianites with God’s help, the people will be freed from oppression. (“Yoke”, “bar” and “rod” are symbols of oppression.) But this conquest will be a holy war; in such a battle, none of the plunder can be kept (“shall be burned”, v. 5), for it is God’s. God will increase the numbers of the Israelites (*multiply the nation*, v. 3). They will rejoice before God (“you”) as they do in times of plentiful harvest and of victory in battle (“when dividing plunder”). Vv. 6-7 are familiar to us from Christmas: “For a child has been born to us ...”. Originally written to prophesy the continuance of the house of David, we also see these words as foretelling Jesus’ birth.

Psalms 27:1,4-9

NRSV

The psalmist expresses his confidence in God. “Light” is linked with “life”. When “evildoers” (v. 2) try to destroy him (“devour my flesh”), they fail to do so. Even if they are many (“army”, v. 3), he is sure that they will fail. He has asked of God that he may worship in the Temple (“live”, v. 4) for as long as he lives, see the “beauty” of what God does, to know more of God; these things he intends to do. God’s “tent” (v. 5) is the Temple, the psalmist’s refuge; there God makes him unreachable by his ungodly foes (v. 6). So he will praise God. He pursues his request in vv. 7-12. May God allow himself to be seen (v. 9); in the past he has seemed hidden from Israel. May God care for him (v. 10). May God guide him in godly ways so that he may not become subject to the “will” (v. 12) of his foes who tell lies about him (“false witnesses”, v. 12). V. 13 is the conclusion: he trusts that he will see the effects of God’s caring, throughout his life. Possibly v. 14 is a later addition: God does not act according to our schedule.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

NRSV

Last week we noted Paul’s omission of faith, hope and love for each other as gifts of the Spirit prominent in the Christian community at Corinth. In this reading, we

learn of divisions in the church there. Paul appeals for commonality in their thinking about the faith and in their vision for the church. He has heard from “Chloe’s people” (v. 11), who are either (1) members of, and slaves in, her household, or (2) the church that meets in her home, or (3) those who look to her as leader, – that their factiousness has reached the level of recrimination (“quarrels”). We do not know what the three (or four) factions believed; perhaps those who “belong to Christ” (v. 12) give allegiance to him without the mediation (and the participation) of the church. (“Cephas” is Peter.)

V. 13 presents three rhetorical questions, to which Paul expects a negative answer (as the Greek shows). The sarcasm is biting! (By “Christ” he means the worldwide church.) To put loyalty to a leader above fidelity to Christ is unacceptable. While Paul probably baptised the first converts in Corinth (“Crispus”, v. 14, “Gaius” and “the household of Stephanas”, v. 16), his prime mission is to teach the faith (v. 17). Claims of *belonging to Paul* are unfounded. All are baptised in the name of Christ, so all “belong” (v. 12) to him. Paul teaches straight-forwardly, relying on the message, the “power” (v. 17) of the “cross of Christ” (Jesus’ sacrificial death) to convince people – not “eloquent wisdom”, appealing to reason with clever arguments and rhetorical prowess. To those who hear the message and do not accept it and trust in it, it is “foolishness” (v. 18) about a man who died an ignominious death; they “are perishing” both now and when Christ comes again. But to the faithful (“to us who are being saved”) it bespeaks how powerful God is.

Matthew 4:12-23

NRSV

Jesus has been tempted by the devil in the wilderness. His responses show his complete dedication to the will and purpose of God. He has refused to use his divine power to his own human ends. Now he *withdraws* from “Nazareth” (v. 13) to “Capernaum”, so he can begin his mission safe from government interference. (John the Baptist has been arrested. Sepphoris, near Nazareth, was a Roman administrative centre. If the authorities seek to arrest him, he can escape more easily from Capernaum – by boat – than from Nazareth.) Matthew is keen to show Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies: he quotes Isaiah in condensed form (vv. 15-16) to show that Jesus is the future ideal king, the Messiah. (In Isaiah, the “sea” is the Mediterranean; here it is the Sea of Galilee.)

“From that time” (v. 17) marks a milestone: the launch of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus proclaims: turn back to godly ways, to making God part of your way of thinking, for the completion of God’s plan for all created beings is close! Vv. 18-22 tell of the calling of the first four disciples. (We know “Simon” as “Peter”.) Jesus the teacher invites them to follow him, speaking in their terms (“fish for people”, v. 19) and fulfils Jeremiah 16:16; there the LORD is “sending for many fishermen” to Israel. They give up their trade and “immediately” (v. 20) begin a radically different way of life. Jesus expects, and receives, prompt obedience. He proclaims the “good news” (v. 23) in both word and deed (healing). His ministry is to Jews, but people from “Syria” (v. 24), “the Decapolis” (v. 25, Hellenistic towns) and “beyond the Jordan” also come to him to hear his message.

