

Comments**Eighth Sunday after Epiphany**

February 27, 2011

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 49:8-16a

NRSV

In vv. 1-7, the prophet, called by God before he was born, speaks to people everywhere. God prepared him for his mission, as a trained spokesman, ready for action (v. 2). Through him, God has told him, his disciples and faithful Israelites ("Israel", v. 3) that they are his agents who will show God's glory. The prophet has tried to convince other Israelites to trust in God, but without success: he feels that his ministry has been wasted; even so he still trusts in God (v. 4). But now God commissions him to a greater mission than bringing Israelites back to God: to be "a light to the nations" (v. 6) so all peoples may be saved.

Now he continues to speak on God's behalf. God has given this prophet to Israel as assurance ("covenant", v. 8) that, at a time of God's choosing ("time of favour"), the people will indeed return to Palestine ("the land") and take possession of the properties they owned ("desolate heritages"), taking with them those deprived and oppressed. It will be as though God is a shepherd leading his people in a new exodus, protecting them from harm and making the way easy (v. 11). It will be a new era. As well as coming from Babylon (the east), the returnees will travel from all directions, including from as far away as southern Egypt ("Syene", v. 12). V. 13 invites all of heaven and earth to join in rejoicing over God's deliverance and renewal. "Zion" (v. 14) was the hill on which the Temple was built. Jerusalem (and its inhabitants) may feel that they have been ignored by God, but he assures them of his love (vv. 15-16): they are as close to him as a tattoo ("inscribed ..."). Indeed (vv. 19-21), the returnees will be so numerous that some will say "the place is too crowded ...". People of many "nations" (v. 22) will assist the returnees, and will be subject to you ("lick the dust ...", v. 23). God will punish their oppressors (v. 26); and all people will know that God is "your Saviour, ... Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob [Israel]".

Psalm 131

NRSV

The superscription, *Song of Ascents*, suggests that this psalm was sung in procession to the Temple. V. 1 states what the psalmist is not: he is neither vain nor arrogant to the point of denying God's greatness and standing. V. 2 tells us what he has achieved and is: he has successfully become at peace spiritually; as is a child in its mother's arms, he is tranquil. V. 3 may be a liturgical response: by others making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Another translation is *Israel, rely on the LORD, now and always!*

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

NRSV

In Chapter 1, Paul writes that he has heard disturbing news: there are factions in the Corinthian church. Some "belong to Paul" (1:12), some "to Apollos", others

"to Cephas", and others "to Christ". These divisions cause "quarrels" (1:11). But later, in 3:4, he rethinks: isn't it human to be attached to "servants through whom you came to believe" (3:5)? Paul "planted [the garden], Apollos watered [it], but God gave growth" (3:6); God giving growth is what really matters. Paul and Apollos "have a common purpose" (3:8) so it is silly to set them against each other. Both are "God's servants, working together" (3:9) for God.

In our reading, Paul picks up the topic again. How should members of the Church think of him and Apollos (and perhaps Cephas)? What should be the role of apostles in the Church? A servant's work is not his but his master's; apostolic ministry makes no claim for itself but points to Christ: we are "servants of Christ" (4:1). A steward in a Greco-Roman household was entrusted with custody and protection of its assets. "God's mysteries" are what was unknown of God's plan in Old Testament times, now revealed by Christ. With this responsibility, an apostle must be "trustworthy" (4:2). It seems that criticism of Paul has already begun; he is indifferent to it. He does not even examine himself; he has nothing on his conscience, but "it is the Lord who judges me" (4:4). Do not reach a verdict ("pronounce judgement", 4:5) before Christ comes again ("before the time"); When he does, he will elucidate God's plans ("things now hidden") further. He will also make known people's inward thoughts. At that time, each person will receive the praise he deserves – from God.

Matthew 6:24-34

NRSV

This passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount. In v. 24, Jesus speaks of the impossibility of serving two masters: one cannot love both. "You cannot serve God and wealth".

A key word in vv. 25-34 is "worry" (vv. 25, 27, 31). The Greek word means *be preoccupied with* or *be absorbed by*. To be preoccupied with food and appearance is to view life much too narrowly. Birds are an example of a proper attitude towards food (v. 26): they work hard to find it, but they do not store it for possible future shortages. Worry, preoccupation, is futile: people desire a long life, but excess concern for it will not lengthen it (v. 27). Wild "lilies" (v. 28), abundant on Palestinian hillsides but dull brown for much of the year, are only brightly coloured for a few weeks. Even "Solomon" (v. 29), known for his accumulation of wealth, could not compare to their (God-given) beauty. The "grass" (v. 30) ends up being "thrown into the oven" as fuel for cooking. But if God cares for such plants, how much more will he provide for, *clothe* those who are faithful to him. So do not be preoccupied with your physical needs (v. 31). Such preoccupation is wrong on two counts: (1) those who do not follow Jesus ("Gentiles", v. 32), not knowing of God's munificence, seek security in possessions; and (2) God knows the needs of his people, so worrying about these needs is to suspect him of forgetting or neglecting his people. Our prime objective must be to put God first, to seek union with him, and to attain godly integrity ("righteousness", v. 33).

Worry about material well-being is largely being concerned about "tomorrow" (v. 34). Today's worries are "enough" for today; do not anticipate tomorrow's.