

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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Genesis 18:1-15,(21:1-7)

NRSV

Abraham has set up an altar at “the oaks of Mamre” (13:18), near Hebron. Here divinity appears to him, as he sits in a sacred spot (“at the entrance of his tent”, 18:1). In Genesis, God’s messengers, here “three men” (18:2), seem to be human in appearance. Abraham offers them the best in oriental courtesy and hospitality (18:2-8). Weary travellers welcomed a foot wash (18:4) and a meal (18:6-8). Addressing them as “my lord” (18:3) was part of the etiquette. That they are divine becomes clearer in 18:9-15, especially when one of them speaks (18:10). He (probably God himself) promises the couple a son: an incredible, laughable, idea, considering their ages. Sarah is no longer of child-bearing age (18:11); to have sexual “pleasure” (18:12) is beyond belief. (In 17:17, Abraham has laughed at the idea of having a son.) God will return “in due season” (18:10, next year). God keeps his promise (21:1-7). Isaac (meaning *he laughs*) is circumcised as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and his descendants (21:4). The author neatly divides Abraham’s life: 75 years in Ur and Haran (12:4), 25 years waiting for the child in Canaan, and 75 years after Isaac’s birth. Sarah is rescued from the cultural stigma of being childless; she reverses her earlier skeptical laughter: “everyone who hears will laugh with me” (21:6).

Psalms 116:1,12-19

NRSV

The psalmist tells the congregation why he loves God: “he has heard my voice”. Because God helped him in his time of “distress and anguish” (v. 3, serious illness), he will “call on him” (v. 2) for the rest of his life. He was near death; he felt life slipping away. (“Sheol”, v. 3, was the place of the dead. People believed that it *ensnared* those gravely ill.) When he called on God for help (v. 4), God “delivered ... [me] from [near] death” (v. 8). (Vv. 5-6 are a lesson for those present; the “simple” are those who are direct, rather than devious, with God.) Even when afflicted, he kept his faith in God (v. 10). He now *walks before the Lord* (v. 9, follows God’s ways). How can he pay back God for saving him? (v. 12) He will make a drink-offering in the Temple for his deliverance and “call on the name of the Lord” (v. 13) in thanksgiving, in the presence of the worshipping community (v. 14). God almost always preserves the lives of the faithful (v. 15). He sees his status with God as being like a “child of your serving girl” (v. 16, one in perpetual servitude) but God makes him a free man (“loosed my bonds”). The “house of the LORD” (v. 19) is the Temple.

Romans 5:1-8

NRSV

Paul has already demonstrated that “we are justified by faith”. *Justified* is *found worthy* in God’s court. He says that there are three consequences of being justifi-

fied: (1) “peace with God”, a state of harmony with him, (2) “hope” (v. 2) of sharing his power and eternal life, and (3) being reconciled with him. It is through Christ that we have “access to this grace”, this blessed state of harmony. We also bask in the glory (“boast”) of “our sufferings” (v. 3, and not our accomplishments). Through a progression from them to patient “endurance” under spiritual duress, to maturity in the faith (“character”, v. 4) we come to hope. This is hope of a certainty (“does not disappoint”, v. 5) for God’s love enters and permeates our very beings “through the Holy Spirit” (which is also God’s gift.) “For while we were still weak” (v. 6, i.e. before we knew Christ), at the appropriate time in God’s plan, “Christ died for the ungodly”. It would be rare enough for anyone to die for a pious (“righteous”, v. 7) person, and perhaps a bit more likely for a particularly “good person” to do so, but Christ sacrificed his life for us when we were neither: we were sinners without hope then!

Matthew 9:35-10:8,(9-23)

NRSV

Matthew has just told us of ten miracles Jesus performed; he has cured people both physically and spiritually. He has “compassion” (9:36) on the “crowds” in their leaderless state, “like sheep without a shepherd”; he has announced that the completion of God’s plan, his “harvest” (9:37), to return all to godliness, is about to begin. Now he instructs and commissions his disciples.

Both the physically and mentally sick were seen as “unclean” (10:1), under the power of evil spirits and so separated from God. Jesus gives the twelve “authority” and power to heal as he heals. (“Apostles”, 10:2, means *sent out* or *commissioned*.) As is his practice, their mission is mainly to Jews, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:6, including the marginalised and outcast). The mission to all nations will be announced later (28:19). The “good news” (10:7), as Jesus and John the Baptist have taught, is that complete union with God is near. Vv. 8-10 should be taken together: the message of salvation is freely available to all; however, emissaries must be supported. Do not waste time preparing for the mission. Missionaries are to depend on the local hospitality of “worthy” (10:11) people, i.e. those in favour with God; “greet” (10:12) them with the peace of God. Do not waste time on people who are not open to the gospel (10:14); God will judge them harshly, as he did the ungodly in “Sodom and Gomorrah” (10:15). Being an emissary for Christ will not be easy: be wary and sincere. Some will prey on you like “wolves” (10:16), bringing you before regional sanhedrins (“councils”, 10:17) and having you flogged. Some will bring charges against you to Roman prefects (“governors”, 10:18) and vassal “kings” under the Romans. Your endurance under persecution (“testimony”) will demonstrate to them and the world the validity of the gospel. At such times, the Holy Spirit will prompt you to witness to the good news. The era of the Church is the era of the end times; as prophesied by Micah, these will be times of betrayal (10:21) and hatred: particularly of those active in Christ’s cause. However, persistent patience in the face of suffering will lead to salvation, to citizenship in God’s kingdom. The early Church understood 10:23b as foretelling Jesus’ return in their lifetimes. To us, it is perplexing.