

Comments **Third Sunday of Advent** **December 17, 2023**

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 61:1-4,8-11

NRSV

This passage was probably written after the people of Israel returned from Exile. It foretells the total salvation of God's people: bodily, spiritually, individually and socially. The prophet says that God has empowered him to act on God's behalf; God has "anointed" him, commissioned him to preach and to hear the Word of faith, to understand God's word, and to be strengthened in following it. (Vv. 1b-2 are Jesus' text when he preaches the good news in the synagogue in Nazareth: see Luke 4:18-19.) This is a message of rescue for God's people, in all ways. "The year of the Lord's favour" (v. 2) is mentioned in Leviticus 25:10: in a jubilee year, a year dedicated to God, one of liberty, all shall return home to their families. It is a year of rest in which the land produces without being sown. (The word translated as "vengeance" can be rendered as *rescue*.) In 60:21, God promises the people *righteousness*, oneness with God. Calling them "oaks of righteousness" here (v. 3) indicates the strength of their bond with him. They will show God's majesty and power ("glory"), as intermediaries ("priests", v. 6) between him and other nations.

Vv. 4-7 tell us that strangers, foreigners, from all nations will contribute to the restoration of righteousness on earth. They will be greatly ("double") blessed, and have eternal joy. The promises to Abraham made in Haran are finally to be fulfilled (v. 9). "They" (probably Israel, but possibly the foreigners too) will be rewarded ("recompense", v. 8); God's agreement with them will last for ever. In vv. 10-11, the prophet speaks as the renewed Jerusalem. All will rejoice because God has provided salvation and has healed their rift with God. Just as seeds grow into plants that can be seen, so God will cause people to be joined with him, to grow in him, and to praise him as an example for "all the nations".

Psalms 126

NRSV

This is a liturgical song, part of public worship. V. 1a can be rendered as *When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion*. When the people first returned from exile in Babylon, they hardly believed their good fortune ("like those who dream"). So great was their success that other nations (v. 2) recognized God's mighty works on Israel's behalf, and the people of Israel "rejoiced" (v. 3). But after the initial euphoria, life is difficult. Please, God, "restore our fortunes" (v. 4), as the land around a normally dry river in the desert ("Negeb") blooms when the water flows. May we, who are sorrowful as we sow, gather the harvest in joyfulness – as God once more acts on our behalf.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

NRSV

Paul is drawing toward the conclusion of his letter. He has just exhorted the Thessalonian Christians regarding their personal conduct and their relations within

the community. Now he turns to spiritual matters. God's plan for them, realized in Christ, is to "rejoice always", to make their lives a continual prayer, a working in unison with God, and to be thankful to God for his freely-given gifts, whatever may happen to them (vv. 16-18).

Do not, he says in v. 19, suppress manifestations of the Holy Spirit as he works through members of the community; do not despise "the words of prophets" (v. 20), i.e. preaching inspired by God, words of consolation and warning spoken by members who receive messages from God, and predictions of future events, but be aware that there are true and false prophets; there are those who authentically speak God's word, but others who do not, who are false, "evil" (v. 22). Take care to discern, in the context of the community, all supposed manifestations of the Spirit ("test everything", v. 21).

Finally, in vv. 23-24, Paul prays that God, who brings peace (*shalom*) in the community now and promises eternal peace in his kingdom, may bring them into union with him ("sanctify"). Also, may every aspect of each one of them – their relationship to God ("spirit"), their personal vitality ("soul"), and their physical bodies – be (and be ready to be) found godly, worthy of the kingdom, when Christ comes again. God, who calls them to the Christian way, in his fidelity will sanctify them and make them worthy of the kingdom.

John 1:6-8,19-28

NRSV

In the opening verses of the book, the evangelist has told us, that the Word, the *logos*, (i.e. what God says, God in action, creating, revealing and redeeming) existed before all time. He is the force behind all that exists; he causes physical and spiritual life to be; life, goodness, light, overcomes all evil. Jesus, the "light" (v. 7), took on being human through God, and is a force for goodness, light, godliness, for all people.

Now he tells of John *the baptizer*, who is sent, commissioned by God, to point to Jesus, to "testify to the light" (v. 7). He is the lamp that illuminates the way, but Christ is the light (v. 8). When the religious authorities ("Jews", v. 19) send emissaries ("priests and Levites") to assess the authenticity of this religious figure, John tells them that he is neither of those whom they are expecting to come to earth: neither "the Messiah" (v. 20) nor the returned "Elijah" (v. 21). (Jews believed that one or both would establish a kingdom on earth free from Roman domination.) Nor is he "the prophet" who was expected (by some) to be instrumental in establishing the Messiah's kingdom. John says simply that he is the one who prepares "the way of the Lord" (v. 23), who announces the Messiah's coming, fulfilling Isaiah 40:3. Representatives of the Pharisees (who enforced traditional Jewish law and practice) ask in v. 25: why are you performing an official rite without official status? (Jews baptized proselytes at the time.) John tells them that the one to whom he points is already on earth (v. 26); he is so great that I am not even worthy to be his slave. Surprisingly, per v. 28, this occurred outside Israel.