

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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Acts 8:26-40

NRSV

We are in the part of Acts where Luke (the author) tells of the spread of the good news to non-Jews in the Middle East. He has just told us about carrying the gospel to Samaria. Jews rejected Samaritans because they had a different principal place of worship and scriptural tradition. Now we hear of the conversion of another *outcast*, a eunuch. Per Deuteronomy 23:1, a eunuch could not be “admitted to the assembly of the LORD”. The eunuch is from *Ethiopia*, now northern Sudan – on the extreme limits of the known world.

“An angel”, an agent of God, instructs Philip to seek out the eunuch. “Gaza” is near the Egyptian border, on the Mediterranean. “Candace” (v. 27) is the queen’s title; the eunuch is her *finance minister*. He is probably an admirer of Judaism. In the ancient world, people always read aloud, so Philip “heard him reading” (v. 30). The eunuch is reading part of a Servant Song, i.e. Isaiah 53:7-8 (vv. 32-33). Jesus was “silent” (v. 32) at his Passion. “Generation” (v. 33) is probably taken as referring to Jesus’ contemporaries, some of whom put him to death. Philip proclaims the “good news” (v. 35) to the eunuch by showing how the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ. (Most texts of this story lack v. 37, the eunuch’s confession of faith, as does the NRSV: it was probably added later.) Philip baptises him, but Luke does not mention the coming of the Holy Spirit on him: to Luke, the Spirit comes in the context of the community, the Church. Philip is *spirited away*, as was Elijah in 2 Kings 2. Philip finds himself at “Azotus” (v. 40, also known as *Ashdod*), a port, and entry point to the wider Roman world. He proclaims the good news throughout the Palestinian coastal “region”, a Gentile area, as he travels home, to “Caesarea”.

Psalms 22:23-31

NRSV

This psalm, as a whole, is a prayer for deliverance from illness. The psalmist, gravely ill, feels that God has forsaken him. In the past, God has helped his people (vv. 4-5): may God help him now. His detractors laugh at him for trusting in God (vv. 6-8); his suffering is worse because they think that his illness is proof of God’s displeasure. But, he says, God helped me when I was an infant, so I trust in him (v. 9). I will offer thanksgiving in assembly of the community in the Temple: v. 22 is that vow. God does hear, even the “poor” (v. 26, or *afflicted*); he provides perpetual life for the “poor” those who live in awe of him. May all people everywhere turn to God and worship him (v. 27). God is Lord of all (v. 28). All mortals, all who die (“go down to the dust”, v. 29) worship him. I, the psalmist says, will live following his ways, and so will my offspring: they will be God’s forever, and will tell future generations about God’s saving deeds.

1 John 4:7-21

NRSV

In earlier chapters, the author has stressed two signs of fellowship with God: faith in Christ and love of fellow Christians. In vv. 1-6, the author contrasts the work of the Holy Spirit with that of other supernatural powers (working through false teachers): the Holy Spirit inspires confession of who Christ really is: he has come from God, to be truly human. The author has told his Christian readers: you “are from God” (v. 6).

Our passage can be summed up in three words: “God is love” (vv. 8, 16). This love originates in God; this is the kind of love we have for each other. Being *lovers*, we are God’s children and we love him (v. 7). If we don’t actively love, we don’t know God – because the very nature of God “is love” (v. 8). God’s greatest expression of love for us, the Church, was sending “his only Son” (v. 9) into the far-from-perfect “world”, thereby giving us a path to godly living (“atoning sacrifice”, v. 10). God took this initiative, this action restoring us to unity with him. So we have a duty to love “one another” (v. 11). It is only through Christ that we can see the Father (v. 12a). The *flip side* is: if we love our fellows, God (love) is “in us”: fraternal love completes (“is perfected”, v. 12) God’s.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is proof that we and God are inter-related (v. 13). Part of this is witnessing and believing who Christ is (v. 14). Being thus *in love* has a consequence: we need not fear judgement at the end of the era; fear and “punishment” (v. 18) are incompatible: God’s “love casts out fear”. We are called to love both God and are fellows; it is impossible to love our fellows and not God, or God and not our fellows (vv. 20-21).

John 15:1-8

NRSV

Jesus is preparing the disciples for the time when he will no longer be physically with them. He has said: “... I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples ...” (13:34-35).

In our reading, he probably has in mind the judgement on Judah in Isaiah 5:1-7: God has lovingly prepared a vineyard for the people, but the vines yielded “wild grapes”, so God destroyed the vineyard. In John, God is the “vinegrower” (v. 1), Christ the vine, and members of the Church the fruit. Jesus says that he is the “true” (godly) vine, the one of whom Isaiah spoke. He is the Father’s agent. Followers who are ineffective will be cut off, but those who are productive will be aided by God’s power (v. 2). V. 3 may allude to Jesus’ washing the disciple’s feet: in 13:10, he tells the disciples that they are now clean: they have been *cleansed* by his revelation of God. Shared life with each other and with God is the basis for being fruitful (v. 5b). Leaving this community ends productivity, and leads to destruction and damnation (“thrown into the fire”, v. 6). If they remain in unity with him, whatever they ask in prayer will be granted (v. 7). God’s power and authority are shown forth (“glorified”, v. 8) in the bearing of fruit, *doing* in Christ’s name. The disciples represent Jesus in the world.