

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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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

NRSV

15:1-31 tells of God's further rejection of Saul. He has won various wars, but in 15:10 God says through Samuel: "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands". His orders from God were to *utterly destroy* (annihilate, in a holy war, 15:15) the Amalekites, including their possessions. But Saul has disobeyed: he has spared their king, and allowed his soldiers to keep the best of their livestock. As Samuel has turned to leave, Saul has grasped the hem of his robe, tearing it. Samuel has taken this as evidence that "the LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you ..." (15:28).

Now Samuel returns home to "Ramah" (15:34) and Saul to his base, "Gibeah". God commands Samuel to make a journey to Jesse and his family, secretly, lest Saul kill him. He is to appear to be on a pilgrimage. Perhaps the elders are let into the secret in 16:5: they are to *sanctify themselves*, perhaps wash ritually in preparation for a consecration. Jesse's sons are presented to Samuel, the eldest first, but it is the youngest, David, whom God has chosen – and whom Samuel anoints. David has gained legitimacy as future king of Israel, but it is only in 2 Samuel 5:1-5 that he is actually made king.

Psalms 20

NRSV

This psalm appears to be liturgical: a priest says or sings vv. 1-4; the people answer in v. 5 ("we"), a priest ("I") speaks again in v. 6; the people answer in vv. 7-9. It is a prayer for the king's victory in battle, and may have accompanied a sacrifice made before the fighting began – as 1 Samuel 13:8-15 tells us Saul did before facing the Philistines. The mood changes after v. 5, so perhaps a proclamation of a prophecy of victory was made at this point. Vv. 1-5 are a petition, vv. 6-9 an expression of confidence. In v. 1, "the name of ... God" is God himself, in his power. "Zion" (v. 2) is God's earthly dwelling; he also lives in "his holy heaven" (v. 6). "His right hand" is his power. V. 5a is a promise to celebrate victory.

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17

NRSV

In vv. 1-5, Paul has used a metaphor to contrast our modes of existence: now a temporary "earthly tent", with the future permanent "heavenly dwelling" assured by God for his people. He has then used another metaphor: that of being "clothed" and "naked". This leads Paul to write of "the body" (vv. 6, 8, 10).

We are now, in relative terms, compared with our future mode of being (of which we are "confident"), "away from", separated from, God. Now we trust ("by faith", v. 7) that we will attain the heavenly mode; then we will see that we are fully

united with Christ (v. 6) – clearly a more desirable state. Our objective, to be obedient to God ("please him", v. 9) is the same whether we are in heavenly mode ("at home") or in earthly mode ("away").

At the end of the current era, Christ will judge each of us on our fidelity to God while in earthly mode. We will be rewarded accordingly. Paul writes to faithful people who will receive "recompense", (v. 10, reward), for walking the way of Christ; however, those who have done "evil" will be punished. This *way* consists of, while holding God in proper reverence (awe), "fear" (v. 11), trying to influence others into being Christ-like. Paul hopes that the Christians at Corinth are at peace with their "consciences". He is on guard against those who "boast in outward appearance ..." (v. 12). These detractors seem to have considered Paul and his associates to be crazy, "beside ourselves" (v. 13), perhaps for speaking in tongues (or for Paul's experience on the road to Damascus). May his detractors know that he speaks "in our right mind" to them! They may not think so, but "the love of Christ urges us on" (v. 14, motivates us): Christ did die on the Cross and rose again for us all, so we are all called to abandon ("all have died") self-centeredness (v. 15) and turn to being Christ-like.

There was a time when Paul saw Jesus' conviction and death as being right, when he judged the action by worldly standards, but now he sees everyone from God's point of view. Indeed, for those who seek to be Christ-like ("in Christ", v. 17), Christ is risen Lord, and head of a new created order. Everything is to be viewed in a new, enlightened, way. It is one in which, through Christ bearing the burden of sin, our deviations from God's way will not be held against us (vv. 18-19). We are to pass this message on to others, as "ambassadors for Christ" (v. 20).

Mark 4:26-34

NRSV

In vv. 3-8 Jesus has told a parable about sowing seed: depending on where it lands, some flourishes greatly but other seed dies, is carried off by birds, or does not grow. Then in vv. 14-20 he has interpreted this parable to the disciples: the seed is his message of good news, "the word", the key to "the kingdom of God" (v. 11). At this time, he intends only his followers to understand.

Now he tells two more seed parables. In the first (vv. 26-29), Jesus makes two points: (1) his kingdom will grow relentlessly unseen by us and independent of what we do; and (2) at the end of the era, when Christ comes again, the kingdom will be fully grown, after which Judgement Day will follow immediately. Joel 3:13 speaks of the arrival of the end-times as the time of "harvest" (v. 29).

In the second parable (vv. 30-32), Jesus exaggerates to make his point: the mustard seed is small, but not the smallest; in Palestine, mustard matures to a large shrub but not a tree with "large branches". He intends parables to be easy to remember: the image of birds nesting in a mustard shrub would remain with his audience for a long time. The kingdom of God will grow tremendously: from Jesus and a few followers, some of them outcasts from society, to larger than any can imagine.