

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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Proverbs 1:20-33

NRSV

The “child” (v. 8) is advised to hear his “father’s instruction” and not to reject his “mother’s teaching”. He is warned: “if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, ‘Come with us ... let us wantonly ambush the innocent’” (v. 11), i.e. cause trouble for the good for no reason, the sinners do not heed warnings; in fact they “kill themselves” (v. 18) and “set an ambush – for their own lives”.

Now wisdom, personified as a woman (“she”, v. 20) makes her first appearance in the book and delivers warnings of her own. She speaks in public places where she can be heard – as did the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah – reaching ordinary people in the “street” and business people who work at the “city gates” (v. 21). She calls to the “simple” (v. 22, who don’t know better), to the “scoffers” (who take pleasure in cynicism) and to “fools” (who despise knowledge) – all of whom reject wisdom. If only they would change their ways, she would make God’s ways known to them (v. 23). But they have not (vv. 24-25), so (as they laugh at her), she will have the last laugh: at their downfall (“calamity”, v. 26), her mocking laughter will repay their obstinacy. Their downfall will be sudden and unpredictable, as is a Palestinian “storm” (v. 27) and “whirlwind”. Their call for help will come too late (v. 28). Then vv. 29-31: because they “hated knowledge” and chose not to hold God in awe, would not accept the advice of Lady Wisdom and “despised” her criticism of their ways, they will reap what they have sown: they will be punished by the very evil deeds they have committed (v. 32). On the other hand, those who heed Wisdom’s call will live in peace (“secure”, v. 33) and in comfort, “with no fear of misfortune” (Revised English Bible).

Psalms 19

NRSV

To the Israelites, the “firmament” was a giant pudding bowl over the earth, beyond which was a hierarchy of “heavens”. God’s glory is told “day” (v. 2) and “night”, yet silently (v. 3a), to all people. He has created the sun as his agent (v. 4); it rises early in the morning, as does the “bridegroom” from his night’s rest, traverses from one edge of the heavens to the other, making God’s presence known with its “heat” (v. 6). Vv. 7-9 present the wonders of the law, as an expression of God’s will for Israel. Here we find synonyms for the Law, characteristics of it, and its benefits for humankind, e.g. it *makes* ‘wise the simple’, those immature in understanding and judgement. It warns the psalmist (“servant”, v. 11). If he accidentally break it (“hidden faults”, v. 12), may God forgive him. May God protect him from those who intentionally go against God’s ways (“the insolent”, v. 13), lest he be influenced into sinning intentionally (“great transgression”). May his words and his thoughts be acceptable to God, who restores him to godliness (v. 14).

James 3:1-12

NRSV

The author is a teacher (“we who teach”) and so has written this book, a treatise on Christian conduct. The *code of ethics* for teachers is stricter than for others. V. 2 says: he or she “who makes no mistakes” lives a “perfect” Christian moral life, but none of us achieve this. The tongue is small, as are the horse’s *bit* (v. 3) and the ship’s “rudder” (v. 4), but through this small part of the whole, the teacher, rider and pilot guide – and exercise will. Teachers are tempted to boast (v. 5b). Any deviation from the truth taught by a teacher can have horrific consequences! The meaning of v. 6 is obscure; perhaps it is saying: the tongue can be used evilly; when it is, it adds to the evil in an already corrupt world, affecting all humankind. An Old Testament wisdom book says that, were it not for sin, we would not die.

The “cycle of nature” is successive generations: a person is born and later dies. The devil is the agent of evil; hence the “tongue ... is ... set on fire by hell”. During creation, animals were given to us to tame (v. 7), but the tongue cannot be tamed: it is capable of continually spreading evil, perhaps like a poisonous snake (v. 8). It can be used for good and for evil: we honour God with it, but we also curse fellow humans (“made in the likeness of God”, v. 9). It should only be used for good. In nature, any one “spring” (v. 11) only produces good or bad water. Fig trees and grapevines only yield what God has intended – so we should only speak good. The devil (“salt water”, v. 12) only yields evil.

Mark 8:27-38

NRSV

Jesus travels north from the Sea of Galilee to the villages around Caesarea Philippi, a prominent pagan town. He asks: *who does popular opinion say I am?* There are various opinions, but the Messiah is not one of them (v. 28). Now he asks the disciples: “who do you say ... I am?” (v. 29). Peter’s answer, for the disciples, is pious, but misleading and incomplete. Jews expected the Messiah to come in power, to free them from Roman domination, but they did not expect the Messiah to suffer (v. 31). (Were it to be widely known that he is the Messiah, his time on earth might end before he has done all that he has come to do.) This is the first prediction of Jesus’ Passion. Jesus “must” suffer, for it is in God’s plan. Jesus’ mission is now stated completely, so he speaks about it “openly” (v. 32). He rebukes Peter for his shallowness, seeing his reply as inspired by the devil, as not being godly (v. 33).

What will happen to Jesus has implications for those who follow him: (1) we must cast aside self-centeredness (“deny themselves”, v. 34) and submit to divine authority (as a prisoner submitted to Roman authority when he carried the cross-arm to his execution); (2) we must be willing to die for the cause – real life, true self, comes from God (vv. 35-37); and (3) we should not be ashamed of the way he is treated and his message in this wayward (“adulterous”, v. 38) world; for such an attitude will detract from Christ’s glory, his godly show of power, when he comes as judge at the end of the era.

