

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/

© Chris Haslam

Lamentations 3:17-26,31-33

NRSV

Judah has been conquered by the Babylonians and Jerusalem lies in ruins. The Temple is no more. Many prominent members of the community have been deported. In this crisis in the community, a witness of the devastation writes of his own experience of suffering, but while personal, he probably also speaks for many Israelites and for the nation. In v. 1 he says: "I am one who has seen affliction under the rod of God's wrath". He believes that God has caused the calamity, but why? God is punishing Israel for its deviations from God's ways, its sin; Israel has breached its pact with God. Vv. 4-18 tell of the poet's pain: of hunger, poverty, fatigue, imprisonment, mockery, bitter humiliation and mental anguish. He no longer finds peace with God (v. 17); he has forgotten what being happy (blessed, prosperous) in the Lord is. His "glory" (v. 18, the power God gives him), is gone – as is all hope he had of gifts from God. ("Wormwood", v. 19, is a plant, and "gall", a herb; both taste bitter – here they are used metaphorically.)

But then the poet remembers the good side; this gives him hope (v. 21): there is more to God than his wrath. God continues to love, and does so continually; he will be merciful, compassionate, always. The poet's inner being reminds him that there is cause to hope: God's covenant with Israel lasts for ever (v. 24). (In Numbers 18:20, when Palestine was divided under Aaron, the priests, rather than receiving a *portion* of the land, were given God himself as their "portion".)

Discipline is "good" (vv. 26-27): suffering brings us closer to God. God's punishment will not last for ever. He does cause "grief" (v. 32), but essentially he is compassionate and loving; he does not capriciously cause anyone to suffer ("afflict or grieve anyone", v. 33). God does see injustice (vv. 34-36) and will punish the perpetrators. He does send both "good and bad" (v. 38) into the world. Israelites need to examine their consciences, mend their ways, and return to worshiping God with their whole beings (vv. 40-42).

Psalm 116:1-9

NRSV

The psalmist loves God for hearing him when he has prayed to him, whenever he has sought him out. God's past responsiveness will lead him to seek God's help lifelong.

He recalls a time when he was physically, mentally and/or spiritually ill (v. 3). He felt trapped, as though "snares of death" had grabbed hold of him, dragging him towards the grave. (Birds were caught in *snares*, large nets.) He felt life, even his soul, his very being, slipping away from him. ("Sheol" was the place of the dead where people retained only a semblance of life.) But then, he tells those present (possibly in the Temple): *I called out to God to save me* (v. 4).

God protects those who approach him in humility ("the simple", v. 6). In the psalmist's case, his sickness brought him to this state. When restored by God, he was able to assure his soul that it was safe to return to him; God has given to him generously (v. 7). God has rescued him from "death" (v. 8), or at least from sorrow and deviation from his ways. (Physical and spiritual illness were seen as closely connected.) Finally, he vows that he will be actively godly (v. 9).

1 Peter 1:3-9

NRSV

The author has addressed this letter to those "chosen and destined" (v. 2) by the Father and "sanctified" by the Holy Spirit in order "to be obedient to Jesus Christ" and to share in the forgiveness available through Christ's sacrificial death. ("Blessed be ...", v. 3, is a traditional Jewish prayer form.)

The Father, in his mercy, has caused us to be born again ("new birth", baptism) into a hope which is very much alive, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ". Our rebirth is also into "an inheritance" (v. 4): in the Old Testament, the inheritance was principally Palestine, but for the Church, it is heavenly. Palestine was lost in war, but our inheritance is "imperishable", indestructible, free from sin ("undefiled") and never lost. We, through our trust in God ("faith", v. 5) are guarded by God's power – for "salvation" – already accomplished but to be shown to all at the end of time ("last time").

In all of this (v. 6), the readers rejoice even if they have had to suffer "trials" (ostracism or persecution). These verify their faithfulness to God – as the purity of gold is tested by heating it. Such fidelity will be rewarded when Christ comes (to judge) at the end of time (v. 7). Their faith is such that they love him, believe in him and rejoice, even though they (unlike Peter) have never seen him (v. 8). Why? Because they are aware that they are being saved now – this being a logical and temporal goal of trust in God.

John 11:21-27

NRSV

Martha and Mary have sent for Jesus when their brother Lazarus, a follower, has fallen ill (v. 1). By the time Jesus has arrived, Lazarus is dead (v. 17). The two sisters live in Bethany, a village near the city of Jerusalem so many have come to mourn, as is their sacred duty. When Martha has heard that Jesus is about to arrive, she goes to meet him – perhaps to warn him of the rites – while Mary remains at home receiving condolences. Martha's words to Jesus (v. 21) are a rebuke, but they also express her confidence that Jesus would have healed Lazarus. V. 22 is a broad hint, which Jesus answers non-committally: Lazarus may "rise" (v. 23) at the end of time (as many believed). In v. 22, Martha echoes Pharisaic doctrine, and a position Jesus holds, but he modifies it (vv. 25-26). Jesus brings people to life ("resurrection") and is the principle of "life". The "life" after death he offers is *eternal life*; none who believe will be annihilated at the Last Day ("never die"). In v. 27, she echoes statements of faith made by Andrew, Nathanael and those at the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus does command Lazarus to come out of the tomb, which he does (v. 44). Lazarus resumes physical life.