

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 16:16-34

NRSV

Paul has entered Europe for the first time, and is now in Philippi. He, Silas and Timothy have visited the Jewish community, which meets “by the river” (v. 13), perhaps at an outdoor “place of prayer”. There they have met Lydia, a business-woman; after hearing the good news, she has been converted to the faith.

Now we read of two miracles: the curing of a girl from possession by evil (vv. 17-18) and the events after the “earthquake” (v. 26). Pagans at times spoke of Israel’s God as “the Most High God” (v. 17). The girl’s cry reminds us of exorcisms Jesus did himself. There too evil spirits recognized God and spoke the truth. Paul continues what Jesus began; it is Jesus who cures (“in the name of Jesus ...”, v. 18). The *agora* (“marketplace”, v. 19) was the seat of the local “authorities” (v. 19); “magistrates” (v. 20) heard legal cases there, and the city jail was near by. The girl’s owners bring two false charges against Paul and Silas: disturbing the peace and urging Roman citizens to practice a foreign cult (vv. 20-21, a law usually ignored, but used when convenient).

The owners *whip up* the “crowd” (v. 22); *justice* is carried out immediately. The police carried a bundle of “rods” sometimes bound around an axe. “Stocks” (v. 24) were a form of torture, for they forced the legs apart. The “earthquake” (v. 26) is a manifestation of God’s presence: being *beyond the natural*, it is a miracle. A Roman “jailer” (v. 27) was likely to be put to death for letting a prisoner escape; this one chooses suicide. Vv. 30-33 tell of the conversion of the jailer and his family: he asks the key question, to which Paul and Silas reply with a brief statement of “a way of salvation” (v. 17). Instructed in the faith, he and his family are baptised, and share a meal, rejoicing (v. 34).

Psalm 97

NRSV

This is a hymn celebrating God’s kingship. It emphasizes God’s supremacy as Lord of the earth. “The Lord is king”, i.e. he has won the battle for world kingship over the forces of chaos. May the whole earth rejoice! Vv. 2-5 are a *theophany*, a description of how God has appeared as he has visited earth: in a cloud and in a burning bush during the Exodus, etc. He rules with righteousness and justice. He is “Lord of all the earth” (v. 5). Note the three occurrences of the word “all” in vv. 6-9, emphasizing God’s omnipotence. V. 7a says that those who worship other gods (“images”, “idols”) will realize their error. Other gods, recognize God’s supremacy! Then v. 8: the people of Israel rejoice in his justice. Vv. 10-12 tell us the kind of rule God exercises. Those who “hate evil” are faithful to him; he delivers them from the ways of those opposed to him, and escape their oppression. The righteous, the godly, are joyful and “give thanks” to him, praise him.

John comes to the end of God’s revelation to him: God “has sent his angel to show his servants [faithful Jews and Christians] what must soon take place” (v. 6). People then expected time to end soon. The angel says that he is a “fellow servant” (v. 9) with John: “Worship God!”, not me. He continues: make the contents of this book widely known (v. 10). The time is already too late for evildoers (v. 11) to change their ways; those who are godly now will be faithful to the end.

In v. 12, Jesus (the Lamb) speaks (see v. 16). He will soon return, bringing reward and recompense for the faithful, to the extent they have acted for Christ. “Those who wash their robes” (v. 14) are those who, after enduring suffering (“the great ordeal”, 7:14), are transformed – as was Jesus in his sacrificial death. 22:1-5 tell of the glorious estate of the godly when Jesus comes again, of the “tree[s] of life” which nourish them continually, and of free entry into the “city”, the heavenly Jerusalem. V. 15 tells of the exclusion of the ungodly. Jesus identifies himself in v. 16; he, born of David’s line, sent his angel to John’s readers (“you”) with this revelation “for the churches”. He is the “star [that] shall come out of Jacob [Israel]” (Numbers 24:17); the “morning star” was a deity in ancient Near East and Greco-Roman religions, so Jesus is for all people. The “bride” (v. 17) is the Church (21:2, 9); both the “Spirit” and the Church are integral with God, and both seek Jesus’ return. The “water of life” flows from “God and ... the Lamb” (v. 1); God’s “gift” (v. 17) of eternal “life” is available to all. Vv. 18-19 seek to ensure (long before copyright laws) that this book is transmitted accurately to all, for it is from God. In 1:2, John wrote of “the testimony of ... Christ”; in v. 20, he is “the one who testifies”. V. 21 is a fitting closing to the book, and to the Bible.

John 17:20-26

NRSV

Our reading is from Jesus’ *high priestly* prayer: he consecrates his body and blood for the sacrifice in which they will be offered, and he blesses the Church. Jesus’ time of perfect obedience even to death has come, securing eternal life for all who really know him and, through him, the Father (vv. 1-5). May the Father restore him to the place he enjoyed before creation began (v. 5). In vv. 6-19, Jesus prays for his followers, that they may be protected from the evil, be “one” (v. 11) as he and his Father are one, have “joy” (v. 13), and fulfill his mission as his agents in the world.

He now prays for the Church of all times. He looks beyond those who follow him now, to those who will come to believe through their witness. May the Church be rooted in the oneness he shares with the Father (v. 21), a relationship of mutual love (v. 23). May his followers attain the ultimate goal: to be with him in heaven (at the end of time), sharing in his “glory” (v. 24, in part by continuing his earthly ministry), given to him before time began. Christians know that the Father sent him (v. 25); he has given them intimate knowledge of God (“... name”, v. 26) and will continue to do so, so that they may have the love for each other and for God that he and the Father share.