

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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Isaiah 43:16-21

NRSV

Babylonian armies captured Jerusalem in 587 BC; many residents were deported to Babylon. Chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah were written there in the final years of the Exile. The author had great faith in God as intervening in human affairs when needed throughout history. He sustains the theme of a new Exodus throughout *Second Isaiah*: God will surely restore the Israelites to Judea (v. 14).

A prophet serves as a channel of communication between the divine and the human realms. Today we say that *history repeats itself*; this prophet would add: *continually*. In vv. 16-17, he recalls God's saving act of enabling the Israelites to cross the Reed (or Red) Sea: how the waters separated, providing "a way in the sea", and how the Egyptian chariots, "army and warrior[s]", were swallowed up by the waters, "never to rise again" (Revised English Bible). This is who God is: he was the motive force behind Israel's deliverance; he saved Israel from slavery. (Perhaps the audience is people who, in exile, have *given up* on God.) But, says God through the prophet (v. 18), do not wallow in the past to the extent of being blind to what is happening now! God is "about to do a new thing" (v. 19); in fact, he has already begun ("now"). Can't you see it? He is providing a godly way for his people, protecting them and giving them sustenance ("water", "drink", v. 20). The allusion is to return from exile across the Arabian desert: the animals who will honour God live in the desert. Israel, the people whom he moulded by his instruction and discipline ("formed", v. 21) are to declare to all that he is praise-worthy for his love and actions on their behalf. However, say vv. 22-25, the covenant relationship between God and his people has become one of *weariness* for, in spite of God being reasonable in his expectations as to how the people should honour him, the Israelites have ignored him. All they have done is complain and stray from his ways. Even so, God is merciful; he will forget their waywardness.

Psalm 126

NRSV

This is a prayer for deliverance from national misfortune. Vv. 1-3 recall past events: it was a joyous occasion when God showed favour towards his people ("Zion"), almost beyond belief (although "those who dream" can be translated as *those healed*.) Other nations recognized what God had done for Israel (v. 2). Then the community prays that God may grant them his favour once again: may it spring up, as the parched dry wadis ("watercourses", v. 4) in the "Negeb" desert rush with water during the seasonal rains. Perhaps v. 5 is a proverb: may our fortunes be reversed! V. 6 expands on v. 5. The good times remembered may be the Exodus or the return from Exile; if the latter, it reminds us that life in Palestine was difficult: it took years to restore agriculture.

Philippians 3:4b-14

NRSV

Paul has warned his readers about those who try to convince them that being a Christian requires acceptance of Jewish law, including circumcision. True circumcision is *of the heart* – and not of the "flesh", i.e. following legal precepts, as in Judaism. Inner circumcision is what is required of us.

He cites his own experience as an example. In early life, he was as true to Judaism as anyone could be: he was circumcised; he is from the elite tribe ("Benjamin", v. 5), as Jewish as one can be ("a Hebrew born of Hebrews"); like other Pharisees, he knew the Law well and applied it in daily life. He zealously persecuted Christians and faultlessly kept the Law. And yet, knowing Christ has made him realize that a Jewish, law-based, approach to God is a "loss" (vv. 7-8) for Christians: it obstructs God's free gift of love. True "righteousness" (v. 9) comes through "faith in Christ", not self-assessment of godliness, per legal precepts. He has cast aside all his Jewishness in order to realize the gain Christ offers (v. 8).

He wants to "know Christ" (v. 10) as risen and living. This involves attaining oneness with him through sharing his sufferings and participating in his death. Out of this, he will come to know "the power of his resurrection". He is still working on understanding Christ completely (v. 12), an obligation he has – for Christ has chosen him ("made me his own").

He has made progress not on his own, but through God's grace (v. 13); however he has left his past behind and eagerly seeks what lies ahead. As the winner in a Greek foot race was called up to receive his "prize" (v. 14), so he seeks God's call to share in eternal life. ("Heavenly" is literally *upward*.)

John 12:1-8

NRSV

Jesus has raised Martha's and Mary's brother, "Lazarus", "from the dead", because Martha trusts that Jesus is the Messiah. Many people are making the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. The religious authorities, aware that Jesus has performed "many signs" (11:47), and afraid that the Romans will destroy the Temple and the nation because of him, ask that anyone knowing where he is tell them so they can arrest him.

Now Jesus returns to Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, a mere three kilometres (two miles) east of Jerusalem. "Perfume made of pure nard" (v. 3, spikenard oil), was derived from the roots of a plant grown in the Himalayas. If the guests were reclining on couches, Jesus' feet would be accessible for anointing, but a respectable Jewish woman would hardly appear in public with her hair unbound. Judas' reaction points forward to Jesus' arrest (18:1-11). "Three hundred denarii" (v. 5) was close to a year's wages for a labourer. Anointing was the last step before burial, but not for executed criminals. Perhaps in v. 7 Jesus means that Mary bought the perfume so as to have it ready for his burial, that what she did has a meaning she does not realize, and that the perfume is not wasted. Perhaps v. 8 says: the poor are constantly in need, but Jesus' impending death is unique. There is a place for spontaneous love of Jesus.