

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 43:1-7

NRSV

Judah has complained that God has deserted them, his people, in the destruction of Jerusalem and in their exile. God has told them, “my servant” (42:19), that they are “blind” and “deaf” to his will and his way. They see but do not observe; their “ears are open” (42:20) but they do not hear. They are a devastated people, a “prey with no one to rescue [them]” (42:22) God asks, through the prophet, “Who among you ... will attend and listen for the time to come?” (42:23).

Now God tells them (“Jacob”, 43:1), whom he has created, not to fear for the future: he has and will rescue, save, them. In all times, the Israelites are his, his people (“called you by name”). Even when in grave danger (“waters ... rivers ... fire”, v. 2), “I will be with you”. (Thunderstorms were considered evil, and the “waters”, the seas, to be inhabited by demonic monsters.) Because the Israelites are so “precious in my sight” (v. 4), God will “exchange” them for other nations: Israel will be freed (at least spiritually) while Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba (in Yemen) will become Persian vassal states. Vv. 5-6 prophesy that Jews, God’s people, will gather from the whole known world. So completely will God’s children share divine life that they will be addressed by God’s name (“called by my name”, v. 7). When God’s people observe and listen, they will contribute to his “glory”. While here God calls his family “sons” (v. 6) and “daughters” (those to whom he imparts life), it is only after Jesus comes that we are told to respond with “Abba” and “Father” (Luke 11:2 and Romans 8:15).

Psalms 29

NRSV

This psalm is probably based on one to the Canaanite god Baal, the storm god, who brings the annual thunder-storm, the source of fertility for the land. In Israelite hands it expresses God’s supremacy and universal rule. In vv. 1-2, all other gods are invited to acknowledge the Lord’s supremacy and the glory due to him. (Israel was not yet strictly monotheistic.)

Vv. 3-9 give us a picture of the storm. The “voice of the Lord” (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7-9) is thunder (repetitious claps). The storm is first seen approaching over the Mediterranean (v. 3); it sweeps in to the land, breaking the tall “cedars” (v. 5), as it advances across southern Lebanon. It vents its power on Mount “Lebanon” (v. 6) and then on Mount “Sirion”; it proceeds on into “the wilderness” (v. 8, the Arabian Desert). (“Flames of fire”, v. 7, is lightning.) “Kadesh” (v. 8) is probably *Kedar*, part of the desert. The Word of God is indeed mighty. In v. 9, “all” the gods do acknowledge God’s supremacy; they cry *Glory be to the Lord!* God rules over all from his throne (v. 10). May the Lord strengthen Israel and give it peace.

Philip was one of the seven chosen by the Church to ensure that widows received basic rations: see 6:1-6. When persecution has started in Jerusalem, he has travelled to Samaria to preach the good news there: the first known evangelism outside Jewish areas. The crowds there “listened eagerly” (v. 6) to what Philip told them, “hearing and seeing the signs that he did”. Even Simon the well-known magician told them that Philip spoke and acted through God’s power. Those who believed, including Simon, were baptised (vv. 12-13).

Now the apostles send Peter and John to Samaria. Usually in Acts, converts receive the Holy Spirit at baptism (see 2:38 and 19:5-6) or before it (see 10:44), but here they receive it some time after being baptised, and only when the two apostles, representatives of the mother church, come. In vv. 18-24, Simon *gets it wrong*: he offers the apostles money if they will give him the power to impart the Spirit to people. Peter reprimands him: the Holy Spirit is “God’s gift” (v. 20); it cannot be bought.

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

NRSV

People flock to John the Baptist, responding to his urging to start new, ethical lives – as a way of preparing for Jesus (vv. 3-6). John has condemned those who seek his baptism with no intention of reforming their ways (v. 7). He has warned that being Jewish is no assurance of being part of the renewed Israel. Failure to respond to his call to repentance can lead to condemnation at the end of time.

V. 15a, in the Revised English Bible, says: “The people were all agog, wondering about John ...” People expected a “Messiah”, an agent of God who would restore Israel and the triumph of God’s power and authority. John tells them that “one who is ... coming” (v. 16) is so great that he is unworthy even to “untie ... his sandals”, a task done by slaves. Baptism purifies, removes sin. The agents the “one” will use are vastly superior to the water John uses. Jesus is also more “powerful”, mightier, as leader of the final struggle against evil. (At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes with tongues of fire.) V. 17 uses the metaphor of harvesting to tell of Christ’s action as judge at the end of time. The wheat was tossed in the air with a “winnowing fork”: the grain fell to the ground but the chaff was carried by the wind to the edge of the “threshing floor”. God will “gather” the godly but will condemn the ungodly (to burn in hell).

Jesus is baptised (v. 21) to show his solidarity with John’s proclamation of part of God’s plan for saving all who come to him. Jesus begins and ends (22:46) his ministry with a prayer. In vv. 21c-22, God shows himself to believers: an event beyond human language. The Holy Spirit, always with Jesus, is seen descending on Jesus, marking a milestone in Jesus’ career. People really see the event (“in bodily form”). The Holy Spirit seems “like a dove” – a bird symbolizing the hopes of humans for love, life and union with God – hopes now realized in Jesus. The voice calls on Jesus as God’s “Son” and servant (“well pleased”, v. 22). Jesus is God’s “Beloved”, the one whom he chooses as his agent.