

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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Jeremiah 1:4-10

NRSV

The people of Israel have strayed from God's ways. In the late 600s BC, King Josiah guided the people back to godliness by removing all traces of foreign worship and by making Jerusalem the one place of worship. Jeremiah played a key role in Josiah's reforms.

"The word of the LORD" is a characteristic expression in this book: the message Jeremiah proclaims is God's word. The Hebrew word *yashar*, translated "formed" (v. 5), is a technical term for *created*; a potter *forms* clay into pottery. Recall Genesis 2:7-8, where God *forms* man. The idea that God himself forms a child in its mother's "womb" (v. 5) was accepted. God has known Jeremiah since his first moment of existence – both intellectually and in his capacity for action. Even before that, God dedicated him, separated him for his purposes ("consecrated"), to serve him. Jeremiah is but a youth ("boy", v. 6 – probably in his early twenties), without experience and authority, but God will give him all necessary support. (Moses' reaction to God's command to lead the people of Israel was similar.) God commissions Jeremiah through the symbolic action of touching his mouth (v. 9). In vv. 5 and 10, the "nations" and "kingdoms" are most likely Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and Judah: the history of Israel is intertwined with that of the whole Near East. Jeremiah's mission is to do away with corruption and ungodliness, and to promote ethical conduct and godliness. God's instructions to the prophet continue in v. 17. Jeremiah is to be ready for action ("gird up your loins"); he is to respond promptly to God's commands. Mighty as the ungodly are, he is not to flinch, but to "stand up" to them; if he fails to do so, God will "break" him. Even though the deviants will fight against him and persecute him, he will prevail, "for I am with you ... to deliver you" (v. 19).

Psalms 71:1-6

NRSV

The psalmist finds sanctuary in his trust in God; even so, he asks God to be his reference point ("rock", v. 3) and strength in life, to rescue him from "cruel" (v. 4) and ungodly people. He has trusted in God "from my youth" (v. 5) and, as v. 18 shows, he is now in "old age" and has "gray hairs". God has supported him throughout his life ("from my birth", v. 6). Note the belief that God caused him to be born. From vv. 7-10, we learn that his enemies consider him so evil that they avoid him *like the plague*: a "portent" (v. 7) was always evil. The psalmist especially seeks God's help now that he no longer has the "strength" (v. 9) to defend himself; his foes believe that God has forsaken him: may they be disgraced and scorned (v. 13). He will always proclaim how God acts with integrity and tell of the many times God has rescued him. God has taught him throughout his life (v. 17). A musician, he will praise God on the "harp" (v. 22) and the "lyre", and by

singing God's praises. He is confident that God will help him.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

NRSV

In response to a letter, Paul has further instructed the Christians at Corinth about the gifts of the Spirit. It seems that they value the gift of tongues too highly. Three groups of gifted people are especially important – "apostles" (12:28, spreading the good news), "prophets" (telling new insights into the faith) and "teachers" (of the faith) – but now he says that the most important gift is love, the expression in the community of Christ's love for us. The statements in vv. 1-3 are all on the same model. Whatever is spoken, if said without love, is like the clatter of pagan worship. (At the time, rabbis debated what language "angels" spoke.) Prophecy is important but without love of one's fellows it is "nothing" (v. 2). Even helping others to the extent of self-denial is worthless without love.

In vv. 4-7, he tells his readers how their behaviour contrasts with the qualities of this love: it is the reverse of their proud, contemptuous, divisive attitudes. "Truth" (v. 6) is integrity, ethical living. Love, he says, is different from God's other gifts (v. 8); unlike them ("prophecies", "tongues", "knowledge"), it never ends: it is transcendent, continuing beyond this era, into the time when we will be fully one with Christ. In the present age, all that we do through the Spirit is "partial" (v. 10), incomplete, immature. *Mirrors* then, being polished metal, gave a fuzzy image, but in the age to come ("then", v. 12) we will see God clearly. We will know him fully, as God knows Paul now. "Love" (v. 13) is the "greatest" because it will continue unchanged, while "faith" will become *sight* and "hope" will become *certainty*.

Luke 4:21-30

NRSV

At Nazareth, Jesus attends the synagogue service on the sabbath. He has just read some verses from Isaiah. He now tells worshippers that he fulfils them: he is the expected messiah; he will rescue all those who are in need; God's promises made to Israel are "fulfilled" in the new age. All are "amazed" (v. 22), they *keep wondering*: at (as a scholar puts it) Jesus' *words of grace*, of God's freely given gift of love. An Old Testament usage suggests the "words" are the word of God.

Probably vv. 22ff describe a subsequent visit to the synagogue. Isn't this the person we have known since he was a child? In v. 23, as often in Luke, Jesus takes the offensive: people want him to perform miraculous deeds to satisfy their curiosity, and for their benefit. In vv. 25-27, Jesus reminds them of instances where God has helped foreigners (both women and men) rather than Israelites. (In 1 Kings 17-18, a "famine", attributed to God cutting off Israel, lasts 3 years; in contemporary books about the end times, the period of persecution and disgrace lasts three and a half years.) The people are "filled with rage" (v. 28) because they begin to realize that Jesus is for others as well as for them. Nazareth, being on a hillside, has steep slopes down which a person might fall to his death. Jesus escapes the *lynch mob*: they let him go because they think he might just be the messiah. He continues his mission in accord with God's plan.

