

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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Hosea 1:2-10

NRSV

Hosea was active as a prophet to the northern kingdom, Israel, during the decades before it fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC. It was a time of warfare and virtual anarchy. Israel is described as a prostitute (whore) for deserting her contractual relationship with God; people worshipped pagan gods (“the land commits great whoredom”). She has been *married* to God since he made a pact with her, through Moses, at Sinai. So some scholars question whether Hosea’s marriage to a whore should be taken literally (or symbolically). “Gomer” (v. 3) and “Diblahim” are both pagan names. “Jezreel” (v. 4) is the plain between Galilee, Samaria and the Jordan, where the kings of the north lived. There “Jehu” killed the wicked Queen Jezebel, but there he also installed himself as king, after much bloodshed. Through Hosea, God tells of the termination of Jehu’s dynasty (“house”) and of the northern kingdom.

The daughter’s name, “Lo-ruhamah” (v. 6) means *unloved* (by parents) or *un-pitied*. God will no longer have compassion on the north, but he will save “Judah” (v. 7, the south) – but not by military means. The second son’s name, “Lo-ammi” (v. 9) means “not my people”: God will end the pact that made Israel the people of God. But, says v. 10, Israel’s punishment will not be for ever. God told Abraham that his descendants would be “as numerous as ... the sand ... on the seashore” (Genesis 22:17); God will restore the covenant, his relationship with Israel. The two kingdoms will become one again (v. 11). The symbolism of the children’s names continues in 2:1: the daughter will be renamed “Ruhamah” (meaning *pitied* or *shown compassion*) and the second son “Ammi” (*my people*).

Psalm 85

NRSV

Vv. 1-2 recall God’s restoration of Israel (“Jacob”): he forgave the people their sins. But now times are tough: vv. 4-7 are a prayer that God may again show favour – in the present difficulties: please, God, “restore us again”; give us life and salvation. The people returned to a ravaged land. In vv. 8-13 the psalmist foretells what God will do: he will impart blessings upon the faithful. They will receive “peace”, *shalom*, rightness, well-being, including “salvation” (which is very near). In this process, God’s presence and power will be apparent. V. 10 says that four of God’s attributes, his gifts to humankind, will come together. God will show his “faithfulness” (v. 11) to his people, both spiritually and materially – including providing good crops (“our land ...”, v. 12).

Colossians 2:6-15,(16-19)

NRSV

From this letter, we know that Christians at Colossae, an industrial city, were subject to influences from other religions: some tried to synthesize Christianity with

them. Our reading gives us an idea of notions they tended to adopt. Vv. 6-7 advise them to remain true to the gospel as they received it – in continuity with tradition. Vv. 8-13 warn against false teachings: “be on your guard” (Revised English Bible) that you not be made “captive” (and carried off) by any of these errant beliefs (“philosophy ...”) which are of “human” (not divine) origin: they see “elemental spirits” (spirits thought to infuse the four basic elements of the world) and cosmic (angelic) powers (“ruler and authority”, v. 10) as controlling the universe for God. The whole of God is found in Christ, without such intermediaries! (v. 9). (“Bodily” may mean: (1) *corporately*: in the Church; (2) *incarnate*: in bodily form; or (3) *actually*: not only in appearance.) Christians have full access to God’s power; he is superior to (and over) these spirits and angels.

Vv. 11-12 speak of “baptism” as “spiritual circumcision”. (The “body of the flesh” is probably human weakness.) Baptism introduces us to sharing in Christ’s suffering and death (“buried with him”, v. 12); through it, we are already exalted with Christ (although our appearance with him in glory will come later). Before baptism, the Colossian Christians were alienated from God (“dead”, v. 13), mired in sin; now they are “alive”: for God (in love) forgave their sins. In effect, he *cancelled the legal note of debt* (v. 14a); Christ took this *note* on himself. V. 15 continues the military image begun with “captive” in v. 8: Christ leads the triumphal parade, followed by the subjugated angels who are on public display (perhaps in chains). Vv. 16-19 refute specific errant beliefs. Neither adopt Jewish dietary laws nor observe their holy days. The real “festivals” are Christ’s, not theirs (v. 17). Don’t be led astray from Christ’s way by those who insist on extreme asceticism (“self-abasement”, v. 18), by worship of powers other than Christ (“angels”), by devaluing earthly things in favour of spiritual fancies (“visions”), or by false pride. Take care not to separate yourself from Christ (“the head”, v. 19), the source of nourishment, unity and spiritual growth.

Luke 11:1-13

NRSV

Then and now, a religious community has a distinctive way of praying; ours is exemplified by the Lord’s Prayer. In 5:33, Pharisees and scribes have noted that followers of John the Baptist “frequently fast and pray”; now Christians have their own prayer. Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer is shorter than Matthew’s (which we use). We approach God in a personal way, as “Father” (v. 2). His “name” is more than just a name: we pray that all may give respect due to him, so all may see his love. “Your kingdom come” looks forward to the Kingdom, where all barriers – of wealth, sex and ritual cleanness – will no longer exist. Of the five petitions, the last two seek filling of our needs. “Bread” (v. 3) is what we need to live; it is God’s gift to us. We share it with all, especially in the Eucharist. “Daily” here means *day after day*. The “time of trial” (v. 4) is the final onslaught of evil forces, before Christ comes again; it is also the temptations which assail us day-by-day. In vv. 5ff, Jesus tells two stories: even one who is asleep with his family responds “because of ... persistence” to a neighbour in need; a parent provides for a child. Even these people, separated from God, respond to the needs of others. How much more so will God respond to our prayers for help, through the Holy Spirit.