

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 1:1,10-20

NRSV

V. 1 is the superscription of the book: the first 39 chapters of Isaiah tell of Isaiah's "vision": (1) backward, into the historical origins of Israel and its pact with God; (2) in the present situation, of Israel's disobedience to God, and of impending judgement; and (3) forward, to when the relationship God always intended to have with his people may be restored. The kings listed reigned 783-687 BC.

V. 4 tells of God's father-child relationship with Judah (the south). The child has rebelled against her caring parent. She has been invaded by Assyrian armies; of her cities, only Jerusalem remains free (v. 8). The other cities have been destroyed, but not devastated like "Sodom" (vv. 9, 10) and "Gomorrhah". Isaiah speaks mostly to the "rulers" (v. 10, those responsible for just judgements) but also to the people: listen to God's instructions ("teaching")! God is tired of people who go through the motions of worship but without sincerity. He will no longer accept their worship (and even their "prayers", v. 15), for they mistreat the poor and helpless (v. 17). Their behaviour is an "abomination" (v. 13) to him. Note God's nine *imperatives* in vv. 12-17, e.g. "Trample ... no more", "wash yourselves" (v. 13) ritually. (People worshipped at the time of the "new moon", on the "sabbath", at *convocations* and at "appointed festivals". "My soul", v. 14, means *I*.) God will no longer listen to their pleas. He will however give Judah an opportunity to "argue it out" (v. 18) before him as judge. "Scarlet" was the colour for wickedness; white ("like snow") stood for purity. The rulers and people have a choice: either (1) be "willing and obedient" (v. 19), and be prosperous materially and spiritually; or (2) "refuse and rebel" (v. 20), and be totally devastated by the Assyrian invaders.

Psalms 50:1-8,22-23

NRSV

This is a liturgy of divine judgement. God "summons" the whole earth and the "heavens" (v. 4) to witness his legal judgement of the ungodly. In Jerusalem ("Zion", v. 2) he shows himself in traditional Old Testament ways: in "fire" (v. 3) and "tempest". He will be both "judge" (v. 6) and prosecuting attorney ("testify ...", v. 7). Animal sacrifices sincerely offered are acceptable to him (v. 8), but offering sacrifices as mere ritual is not; indeed it is needless slaughter of his creatures (vv. 9-13). Reciting the Law without the intention of keeping it (v. 16) is to mock him: not obeying him, ignoring his advice, befriending thieves and "adulterers" (v. 18), slandering family members, and thinking that he is evil too (v. 22), are the grounds for God's case against the wicked, "you who forget God" (v. 22). They will be destroyed, but those who "honour" (v. 23) him, who walk in his "way", will be rewarded with "salvation", prosperity.

The author has urged his readers to recall the time after they were baptised: they endured hardships: – public abuse, persecution and "plundering of your possessions" (10:34), accepting these privations cheerfully "knowing that you ... possessed something better and more lasting". So, he urges, "do not abandon ... that confidence of yours" (10:35). "You need endurance" (10:36) to "receive what was promised" (i.e. eternal life with Christ). Christ will come again; keep your faith in him.

In the Revised English Bible, 11:1 reads "Faith gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of the realities we do not see". Through faith we know that, at creation time, the invisible was transformed into the visible by God's command ("the word of God", v. 3) and that the course of history ("worlds") was set by God. The author now gives examples of Old Testament figures who lacked the "promises" (v. 13) we have but even so had faith in God; they "received [God's] approval" (v. 2). "Abraham" (v. 8) trusted that he would have a land to inherit; he didn't know "where he was going". He (as we do) lived a temporary life on earth ("in tents", v. 9) as he "looked forward" (v. 10) to living permanently ("foundations") in "the city", the heavenly Jerusalem, "a better country" (v. 16). In this he is seen to resemble the Christian believer. (Most translations say that Sarah received the "power of procreation", v. 11). Through the faith of Abraham and Sarah, many "descendants were born" (v. 12). These figures (exemplars) saw that Christ would come (v. 13). (In Genesis, actually only Abraham said he was a *stranger and a foreigner*.) God is proud ("not ashamed", v. 16) of them for electing to exercise trust in him; he has prepared a place for them in heaven.

Luke 12:32-40

NRSV

Jesus has told his disciples, in the presence of a large crowd, the story of the farmer who, keeping all of his huge harvest for himself, completely obliterated God from his life. Wealth *per se* is acceptable, but abusing it is not. To "strive for his kingdom" (v. 31) is much more important than acquisition of material goods: "life is more than food" (v. 23). Trust in God's care of you! He knows what you need, and will give it you. Now Jesus calls his disciples "little flock" (v. 32), for they are few, and oppressed ("do not be afraid"). (In Ezekiel 34, God speaks of his people as his "flock".) They will be citizens of "the kingdom". Avoid over-attachment to "possessions" (v. 33) and share what you have with the needy ("give alms"). Emphasize your relationship with God, not material wealth; integrity with him lasts, but wealth ends with the grave. In vv. 35-40, Jesus tells a parable about vigilance and loyalty. Jews expected a great "banquet" when the Messiah came; Christians recognize this banquet as being with Christ, symbolizing our complete union with him. It will inaugurate fulfilment of the kingdom. The "master" (v. 36) is Christ himself: he serves the slaves at the banquet! ("have them sit down ...", v. 37) (The master will tuck his long Oriental robes into his "belt" to give him freedom of movement to serve them.) Christ, "the Son of Man" (v. 40) like a "thief" (v. 39), may come at any time: you must be ready whenever he comes.