

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 18:1-11

NRSV

Jeremiah, inspired by God, uses an example story, an allegory, to try to teach the people and rulers of Judah a lesson. As we will see, no parallel is perfect. A potter's "wheel" (v. 3) consisted of two stones on a vertical axis. He turned the lower wheel with his feet, and placed a lump of clay on the upper wheel. Thus he formed a vessel with his hands as the wheels turned. During the Israelite period, great skill was required because the wheels had little momentum. As today, if the vessel distorted during turning, the potter collapsed the clay back into a lump and began again. In several Near East cultures, the word *yasar* ("making", v. 4) meant *create* as well as *shape* or *form*.

Jeremiah explains the symbolism in v. 6. God is the potter and humanity the clay. Vv. 7-10 use phrases from God's delegation of responsibility to Jeremiah (1:10): "I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant". Vv. 7-8 say that if a people who have done "evil" turn from it, God will listen and will change their fate: he will refrain from bringing "disaster" on them. (This is like the potter.) But the opposite is also true of God (and here the parallel fails). In vv. 9-10, God says through Jeremiah that even though he nurtures a nation, if it deviates from his ways and fails to listen to his reproof, its fate will be bad. Vv. 11-12 apply this to Judah. Undergo conversion, ("turn now ..."), end your state of evil-ness, or suffer the consequences! But in v. 12 Jeremiah sees no hope of salvation for Judah; her people choose to continue in their ungodly ways.

Psalms 139:1-6, 13-18

NRSV

The part of this psalm used today is a hymn praising God for his knowledge of all (vv. 1-6) and of the psalmist (vv. 13-18). God has "searched" (v. 1) the psalmist and known him. (Knowing his *sitting down* and *rising up* is a Semitism for knowing him completely.) God knows everything he thinks and his "ways" (v. 3). God finds him wherever he goes, for God is everywhere; the psalmist couldn't escape from God even if he tried (vv. 7-12). God knows him because he created him (v. 13). In v. 14, he praises God for the wonders of his works, particularly for the mystery of the creation of humankind. The "depths of the earth" (v. 15) is a figure for the womb, perhaps reflecting the second creation story (Genesis 2:7). Then v. 16: either God knew the length of the psalmist's life before he was born, or he knew his character from the moment of conception. That God keeps a record of humankind is found in several psalms, and elsewhere. V. 17 is an exclamation of wonder. To count all God's thoughts, the psalmist would need to live for ever (v. 18).

Philemon 1-21

NRSV

This appears to be a personal letter to Philemon, a slave owner, but it is also addressed to "the church in your house" (v. 2). In the first century, the Christian community gathered at a member's house. It is likely that the letter was read during worship. Paul writes not using his authority as an apostle (as he does in other letters) but as a "prisoner" (v. 1). (Perhaps "Apphia", v. 2, was Philemon's wife and "Archippus" his son.) It opens as letters usually did: *from* Paul, *to* various addressees, followed by best wishes (v. 3). Paul wishes "grace" (the Greek greeting) and "peace" (the Jewish) as well – from God. Thanksgiving (vv. 4-7) was also customary. The "saints" (v. 5) are those set apart for God's work in the world, i.e. all Christians. Perhaps in v. 6 he says: may greater understanding of all that comes through being incorporated in Christ strengthen your sharing of faith. Philemon ("you", v. 7) has been instrumental in nurturing Paul and other Christians.

"Onesimus" (v. 10), a slave, has run away from Philemon's house. While visiting Paul, he has been converted to Christianity: he is Paul's "child". A penalty for leaving a master was death, so Paul is in a delicate position, pleading for the man's life. Paul did not try to free Greco-Roman society of slavery, because he had higher priorities; rather he pleads for one slave. Rather than "command" (v. 8), he *appeals* "on the basis of love" (v. 9), the very foundation of the faith. The slave's fate is in his master's hands; Philemon can choose to preserve his life. May his "good deed" (v. 14) be "voluntary", of his own free will. Onesimus is a Greek word for *useful* or *beneficial*. He has been changed from "useless" (v. 11) to "useful" – both to Philemon and to Paul; in v. 20, Paul speaks of "benefit". Paul sends him back to his master (v. 13), bearing this letter, although he would have preferred to "keep him with me". May Philemon take him "back forever" (v. 15) as a slave and as a "beloved brother" (v. 16) in Christ. May Philemon treat Onesimus as he would Paul (v. 17). Paul offers to take on himself any and all punishment that may be in store for the slave (v. 18). May he be treated as a fellow Christian. V. 19b may indicate that Philemon came to Christ through Paul. Paul is "confident" (v. 21) of Philemon's "obedience" to Christ.

Luke 14:25-33

NRSV

In vv. 13-24, Jesus has told the "crowds" that even outsiders, the poor and the disabled are called to God's kingdom. Now he tells what is required to become a follower. The word "hate" (v. 26) is surprising, until we recall that exaggeration was a common linguistic trait in Hebrew, as Jesus does here: "hate" means *love less*, be less attached to. The disciple must find his prime security in Jesus, not in his or her family, nor in preserving one's "life". One must be prepared to suffer, as Jesus did on the "cross" (v. 27). In vv. 28-32, Jesus uses two examples to advise full realization of the cost of being a follower, before *enlisting*. You must be so dedicated to the cause that you are willing to forfeit all that you have. Then vv. 34-35: don't allow your allegiance to Christ to deteriorate and so become ineffectual. If you do, God will throw you away as useless! If you are prepared for the challenge, grasp it!