

Comments **Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost** **October 31, 2010**

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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Habakkuk 1:1-4;2:1-4

NRSV

An “oracle” is a message of doom, usually pronounced against foreign nations, but here it includes the judgement that awaits God’s people. 1:1-2:5 is a dialogue between the prophet and God. From the text, it seems that Habakkuk wrote when Babylonian armies were ravaging Judah, before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, but the problem is universal.

In vv. 1-4, Habakkuk asks God: *why do you neither listen nor act?* “Violence” is being done to us; our basic human rights are being violated. The state is in confusion and near anarchy (“law becomes slack ... justice never prevails ...”, v. 4). The “wicked”, fellow Jews or foreigners, have taken over! God answers in vv. 5-11: rather than promising stability, he says he is working through the “Chaldeans” (v. 6, Babylonians), a people known for their ferocity and savagery! “Their justice” (v. 7) is their own (not God’s); “their own might is their god!” (v. 11). The prophet now asks: aren’t you Israel’s God? Surely you have marked this enemy for judgement, so why allow this misery to happen to your people? Doesn’t using such wicked people as your agents go against your very essence? (v. 13) The enemy is merciless and self-serving, like someone who catches helpless fish (v. 15); he worships his own achievement, in immense pride (v. 16). Are you and the enemy intent on “destroying nations”? (v. 17) Like a sentinel on a city wall, Habakkuk awaits God’s reply (2:1). God responds: make my message “plain” (2:2) so all hear it: my justice will come at “the appointed time” (2:3), in the “end” times. But God’s time may not be human time, so “wait for it”. “The proud” (2:4, the enemy), those who are self-sufficient, don’t endure (“their spirit is not right”), but those who trust in God, “the righteous”, continue to “live”, to keep the faith, even in these difficult times. God has a plan for the future: the faithful will be rewarded, the wicked punished.

Psalms 119:137-144

NRSV

This is the 18th stanza of the longest psalm in the Psalter; in Hebrew, each verse begins with *tsadhe*, the 18th letter in the alphabet. As in each of the other stanzas, the emphasis is on the Law; a synonym for it occurs in each verse. The psalmist’s “foes” (v. 139) are probably fellow Israelites who do not keep the Law, for foreign enemies would not even know it. The psalmist is “despised” (v. 141), in “trouble and anguish” (v. 143). Only the wicked would despise one who keeps the Law. To the psalmist, understanding the God-given Law is the key to living.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4,11-12

NRSV

V. 1 indicates that “Paul” is the principal author of this letter; “Silvanus, and Timothy” share in writing it. (“Silvanus”, called *Silas* in Acts, worked with Paul in

Thessalonica and Corinth. “Timothy” joined him at Lystra, in central Asia Minor.) Paul’s wishes for the “church”, the community of people of God called to intimate fellowship with Christ, are both Greek (“grace”, v. 2) and Jewish (“peace”); they are from the Father and the Son.

Paul gives thanks for the Christians at Thessalonica on two counts: (1) their growth in “faith” (v. 3, trust) and love – for faith works itself out in love; and (2) their example to other churches of remaining faithful in spite of sufferings (probably ostracism) (v. 4). That they do *endure* is an indication (“evidence”, v. 5) that, at the end of the era, God will find them worthy of eternal life. (Suffering is not a prerequisite for entry into the Kingdom.) When Christ comes again (“is revealed ...”, v. 7), God will cause those who hurt you to suffer (v. 6); he will grant “relief” (v. 7, rest) to those who have suffered. (God’s appearing to people is accompanied by “fire”, v. 8, in Isaiah 66:15-16.)

In general, those who have never heard of God, and those who have heard but refused to accept the gospel, will suffer “eternal [unending] destruction” (v. 9, the opposite of eternal life), forever separated from Christ. When Christ comes again, he will raise the faithful (“saints”, v. 10) to be with him. With this objective (“to this end”, v. 11), Paul continually petitions God in prayer (1) to make the Christians at Thessalonica worthy of being called by God, and (2) to support to completion (through the power of, “the name of our Lord Jesus”, v. 12) whatever intentions (“resolve”, v. 11) and acts of trust in God they initiate. Thus Christ’s godliness (goodness) will be seen in them, and theirs in Christ. This will be achieved through the Father’s and the Son’s “grace” (v. 12), his gift of love.

Luke 19:1-10

NRSV

Jesus has been asked by a rich “ruler” (18:18) what he must do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus has told him to keep the Ten Commandments, he has said that he has done so since his youth. Jesus then adds: “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (18:22). He finds it hard to give up his wealth.

Now we meet Zacchaeus, a *tax farmer* working for the Romans and therefore also rich – a despised person and an outcast from Jewish society. He is curious about Jesus (v. 3). Jesus senses his presence up in a “sycamore tree” (v. 4). He even invites himself to Zacchaeus’ home! (God extends hospitality to all people.) The crowd grumbles (v. 7), for Jesus has crossed social and religious barriers: good people don’t associate with sinners. Zacchaeus, unlike the rich ruler, is prepared to give generously, and to recompense anyone he has defrauded, as the Law requires. (The Law required that a stolen sheep be replaced by “four”, v. 8, sheep.) “Salvation has come” (v. 9) to Zacchaeus’ house, indeed to his whole household: Jesus chose to stay with him, Zacchaeus accepted him and has changed his life. *Being saved* is the same spiritual experience as *inheriting eternal life* and *entering the kingdom of God*. In spite of the crowd’s grumbling, thinking him “lost” (v. 10), the tax (or toll) collector is a “son of Abraham” (v. 9), a true member of God’s people.