

Comments **Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 11, 2007**

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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Haggai 2:1-9

NRSV

King Cyrus of Persia decreed, and King Darius brought to reality, the return of exiles from Babylon to Judah. The foundation of a new Temple was laid in 536 BC; however, little more was done on it for years. Judah now has three kinds of leadership: “Zerubbabel” (2:2) the administrator, “Joshua” the high priest, and Haggai the prophet. The people insisted that priority be given to building houses for themselves (1:2), that rebuilding the Temple could wait. They live at subsistence level (1:6). Through Haggai, God has told them that this is a punishment for ignoring the Temple. So expedite the rebuilding, so God will have an earthly dwelling place again, where he can be honoured! (1:8) This is where the priority should be. If they don't God will send a “drought” (1:11). The three leaders, together with all the people (both those who returned from Babylon and those who never left Judah), then set to work on reconstruction (1:14). The people's change in attitude is echoed in God's; his message is “I am with you” (1:13).

Now Haggai, on God's behalf, asks: who remembers Solomon's Temple, destroyed almost 70 years ago? (2:3). Do you remember “its former glory”, when God in his transcendence dwelt there? It probably has no significance for you. Yet God maintains “I am with you” (2:4), as you rebuild, as he was during the Exodus. His “spirit” (2:5), then seen as pillars of cloud and fire, “abides among you”. Using terminology descriptive of the end times (2:6), he says he will intervene in earthly affairs, and fill the Temple “with splendour” (2:7). The new Temple lacks the fine decorations of the old, but “the silver” (2:8), his “treasure” (2:7) will be people of all nations who come to him. The new Temple will be even more filled with God's presence, his “splendour” (2:9); there God will “give prosperity”, well-being, blessing and peace. (The Hebrew word is *shalom*.)

Psalms 145:1-5,17-21

NRSV

This is a hymn summarizing the characteristics of God. It is in acrostic form, making it easy to memorize: each verse in Hebrew begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. Vv. 1-3 are the psalmist's personal expression of praise. In v. 4, he expands to speaking of descendants, of passing on knowledge and experience of God. God is known for his “wondrous works” (v. 5). In vv. 8-20, he expands still further, to “all people” (v. 12). Vv. 8-9 mention his love, vv. 10-13a his kingship over all, vv. 14-20 of his care of all in need. Responsiveness to his call brings protection (v. 20a) but those who oppose his ways will be destroyed. Finally, v. 21 combines the personal commitment to God with that of “all flesh”.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17

NRSV

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul has stated that, when Christ comes again, both the

faithful who have died and those still alive will be “gathered together to him”, i.e. Christ. But it seems that a person thinking himself inspired by God (“spirit”, v. 2) or by just saying it (“word”), or in a letter supposedly from Paul (“as though from us”) claims that the new era (“the day of the Lord”) has already dawned, that the future is already here. The author of this book insists that this is not so, that God's kingdom is still in the formative stage, for certain events must first occur: first there will be “rebellion”, (v. 3, a general revolt against God), and then the “lawless one”, the Devil, the full extent of evil, will be fully seen. But, says v. 6, the forces of evil are held partly in check, although they are active in the world, via false teaching (“power, signs, lying wonders”, v. 9). When the Devil does show himself fully, Christ will annihilate him and all who “refused to love the truth” (v. 10). God sends the current trials to separate out the unfaithful (v. 11) so that these people will be “condemned” (v. 12).

But the author thanks God for those who are faithful at Thessalonica, because “God chose you” (v. 13) for admission to his kingdom (“salvation”, v. 13, “the glory of ... Christ”, v. 14), to be forerunners (the “first fruits”, v. 13, of the harvest were God's) of other faithful who will come later, through being set apart for him (“sanctification”) through the Holy Spirit and through their faith. They will share with Christ in union with God. So, readers, remain faithful to the doctrines (“traditions”, v. 15) you received verbally and via authentic letters.

Luke 20:27-38

NRSV

19:47-48 says that Jesus taught daily in the Temple. The religious authorities “kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do ...”. The Sadducees held that only the first five books of the Old Testament, the *Pentateuch*, were authoritative. Not finding mention of life after death in these books, they rejected its existence.

In vv. 28-33, seeking to trap Jesus into speaking against the Law, they ask a question about *levirate* marriage (*levir* is Latin for *brother-in-law*): a man *lived on* (in a sense) in his son, so if a man died without issue, his brother was required to marry his widow and give her a son, thus continuing his lineage. “This age” (v. 34) is the current era; “that age” (v. 35) is the era to come, when Christ returns. In God's kingdom, marriage will no longer exist; those who are admitted into eternal life for their faith (“considered worthy of a place ...”, v. 35) will all be “children of God” (v. 36): this will be their family relationship. They will be immortal (“cannot die anymore”) and will be like “angels” (considered sexless in Jesus' time).

In vv. 37-38, Jesus argues for life after death (and resurrection) from the *Pentateuch*. In the story of the burning “bush”, God tells Moses: “I am the God of Abraham ...”. Because God says *is* (not *was*), Abraham is alive now. He died, so he must have been brought back to life, resurrected. God is truly “God ... of the living” (v. 38). In v. 39, some scribes, believers in resurrection, are pleased with Jesus' argument. V. 40 says that the Sadducees “no longer dared to ask ... [Jesus] another question”: Jesus has evaded the trap.