

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 40:1-11

NRSV

This is the beginning of the part of Isaiah written from exile in Babylon. In vv. 1-2, God speaks. Because “comfort” and “speak” are in the plural (in Hebrew), he speaks to a group, probably of angels, but possibly of prophets: i.e. *may you comfort ...*. Literally, they are to speak “tenderly” (to the heart, the seat of reasoning), to “Jerusalem”; but the city is in ruins, so (this passage being a vision) their audience is an idealized kingdom of his people. Tell them, he says, that their time of sorrow is over, that they have “served” their punishment for waywardness, that the Exile is about to end. Use of the word “double” (v. 2) assures that their purification from sin is finished, that difficult times are truly ended. So a new era is dawning, inaugurated by God’s Word.

In vv. 3-5, a heavenly voice (or the prophet) announces, in language reminiscent of the pomp of royal pageantry in Babylon, “prepare the way of the Lord”. (Christianity was later known as *The Way*, God’s manner of life.) God is coming; he is about to lead a new Exodus (note “wilderness”, “desert”) to a blessed land. Seeing this marvellous display of God’s presence is independent of our tendency to sin, and thus is only dependent on God’s grace and power. (The words translated “all people” mean, literally, *all flesh*.) Then “a voice” (v. 6) from heaven commands the prophet to “Cry out!”, but he asks: what should I tell them? For they are like *flowers* and “grass”: they fade and wither when God acts. (The word translated “breath” (v. 7) also means *spirit*, as in Genesis 1:2, where the wind of God sweeps over the primeval waters.) People are fickle, but God’s “word” (v. 8) endures.

Even so (v. 9), the prophet (on behalf of Jerusalem) is told to tell the “good tidings”, the good news, boldly, to tell all people “Here is your God!”. Jerusalem (“Zion”) and Judah are to be the centre for God’s activity on earth. He comes, says v. 10, as a king (“with might”, “rules”) who really cares: he brings redemption, restoration (“reward”, “recompense”). Finally, v. 11 likens him to a shepherd: one who *gathers* the weak (“the lambs”), makes people one with him, and compassionately leads. (In the ancient world, a shepherd led, rather than drove, his sheep, to protect them from lurking predators.)

Psalms 85:7-13

NRSV

Vv. 1-2 tell of God’s restoration of Israel, probably in releasing them from Exile. But 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 hears God speaking: he will impart blessings upon the faithful. They will receive “peace”, *shalom*,

godliness, well-being, including “salvation” which is “at hand”. 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. Then v. 11: human “faithfulness”, adherence to God, the ultimate truth, will be reciprocated by him. He will give prosperity, materially and spiritually. Crops will improve (v. 12) and the people’s godliness “will make a path” (v. 13) for his coming.

Acts 13:14b-26

NRSV

Paul, on his first missionary journey, has visited Cyprus with Barnabas and John Mark. After proclaiming the good news in synagogues, striking a false prophet blind, and converting the proconsul, they have sailed for Asia Minor. Paul and Barnabas are now in Antioch, the one near Pisidia (in central Asia Minor).

Now, as is Paul’s custom, he attends the synagogue on the sabbath. After two readings (“the law and the prophets”, v. 15), he is invited to speak. To both Jews and others attracted to Judaic ethics, he shows Jesus as the promised Messiah by tracing the history of Israel, with God active at every stage. Jesus is descended from David (v. 23); John the Baptist prepared the way for him (v. 25). (Deuteronomy lists “seven nations”, v. 19, as the inhabitants of Israel when the Israelites arrived. How Paul calculates “four hundred and fifty years”, v. 20, is unknown.) The good news is for all Jews and for all others who hold God in respect (v. 26).

Luke 1:57-80

NRSV

Zechariah has been struck mute upon hearing that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child in old age. She gives birth to a son, and his parents bring him to be circumcised and named (v. 59). Despite her husband’s wishes, Elizabeth insists his name be John, as the angel said (v. 13); Zechariah agrees. He can speak again, and “filled with the Holy Spirit ... spoke this prophecy” (v. 67), known as the *Benedictus* – the Latin translation of “blessed” (v. 68).

Vv. 68-69 tell of the blessing Israel’s God brings to “his people”: the Jews are the elect. (While the verbs in translations are in the past tense, the present is equally appropriate. The tense in Greek shows that they describe how God characteristically acts and what he is inaugurating in Jesus.) God gives them one who will save them from sin (“mighty saviour”, v. 69), descended from David, in fulfilment of prophecies he made through the Old Testament “prophets” (v. 70) who told of rescue from “enemies” (v. 71). God fulfils his promises, especially his pact with Abraham (vv. 72-73), so Israel may from now on hold him in proper respect but not fear his wrath. The “child” (v. 76) is John the Baptist. He will be thought to be Elijah, “the prophet ...” (although Luke sees the prophet long expected as Jesus). John’s mission will be to bring people to an ethical, godly, way of living, thus preparing the way for “the Lord”. Vv. 78-79 return to Jesus’ role: he will be the “dawn” (new light) from heaven, the one through whom God fulfills his purpose for humanity. At a time when hopes are at low ebb and people are particularly in need, he will be a beacon guiding them into “peace” (v. 79), i.e. wholeness, harmony, well-being, prosperity and security.