

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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Lamentations 3:1-9,19-24

NRSV

The Babylonians first invaded Judah and occupied Jerusalem in 597 BC. They deported King Jehoiakim, Ezekiel and many leading citizens to Babylon and installed Zedekiah as puppet king. Judah rebelled, thus gaining a degree of freedom until 587, when Nebuchadnezzar attacked again; this time he destroyed Jerusalem (including the Temple) and other fortified Judean towns. Many people were deported. The five poems of Lamentations were written as communal laments; this is the third.

Now “one” writes on behalf of a nation; the Hebrew says that he is a man. He experiences what all the people do. The Hebrew (and other translations) have *his wrath*, so the reader is in suspense: is the wrath the conqueror’s, or God’s? In v. 2, he tells of a terrifying walk in “darkness”, probably inability to comprehend what has befallen the city. At times, God used “his hand” (v. 3) to strike his people, when they were wayward. Here he seems to do so continually. “My flesh and my skin waste away” (v. 4) and bones are brittle in old age. He seems his trials like the siege of the city; he feels surrounded by “bitterness” (v. 5) and anguish. By “the dead of long ago” (v. 6) he means *those forever dead*. It was believed that, at the Last Day, the righteous dead would live, but the wicked would not. He feels like he has physically died, and then thrust into “outer darkness” (Matthew 25:30), annihilated. Vv. 7-8 speak of imprisonment; God does not hear his “cry for help” (v. 8). Further, he is truly hemmed in, with closely fitting “hewn stones” (v. 9); trying to escape, he has found himself on *crooked paths*, blind alleys. In v. 19, “wormwood” is a bitter-tasting plant and “gall” is a bitter and poisonous herb. His experience is really bitter. Despite his despair, he still has “hope” (v. 21). He truly believes that God is ever loving and merciful; “great is your faithfulness” (v. 23). Probably near starvation, he is content with “the LORD” (v. 24) being his “portion”, and his basis for hope.

Psalm 31:1-4,15-16

NRSV

In the Middle East, then and now, honour and “shame” were and are important: to lose face is horrible. The psalmist asks God to shelter him from those who think he is far from God. He asks God to “rescue” (v. 2) him from his detractors “speedily”. Being his solid reference point in life, he asks God to “lead” (v. 3) and “guide” him in difficult times. Perhaps v. 9 is a clue to his problem: “my eye wastes away ... my ... body also”; perhaps he is terminally ill, or has leprosy (“an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me”, v. 11). Good health was seen as a sign of oneness with God. He feels trapped (v. 4). His destiny (“times”, v. 15), are in God’s hands. Deliver me! May he experience God’s enduring love (v. 16)!

The author writes at a time when Christians suffered from bad neighbourly relations. They were seen as being like Jews, for some were Jews, and many read the Old Testament. Strange stories circulated about their worship practices: some thought that they worshipped an ass. They were thought to be anti-social. They were seen as unpatriotic because they refused to worship the emperor, and avoided Roman spectacles and festivals. Neighbourly relations are important; without good ones, you suffer. The author continues to give new Christians, many converts from paganism, guidance on being, and living as, Christians.

3:18 has told of Christ’s suffering and death. He endured bodily suffering, so be prepared to suffer bodily too: “arm yourselves ...”, v. 1. In Romans 6:2-14, Paul links Christ’s death with baptism. You who are baptized are no longer eternally encumbered by sin; you are able to live as God wills, rather than satisfying your own “desires” (v. 2). 1 Peter calls Christians “a chosen people” in 2:9 and “people of God” in 2:10, so “Gentiles” (v. 3) means pagans. “Lawless idolatry” is worship of idols, a practice forbidden to Christians. They don’t understand why you abstain from loose living, so they abuse you verbally (“blaspheme”, v. 4). But they will have their immorality judged when Christ (“him”, v. 5) comes again. To be “judged in the flesh” (v. 6) means *to die*; we all die. Jesus, after his death “made a proclamation to the spirits in prison” (3:19). So Christ will judge all, including those who have died, when he comes again – so they too can live eternally (“in the spirit”, v. 6), as God lives.

The author expects Judgement Day to be soon (v. 7) so he counsels his readers: (1) calmness and self-control will help you pray better; (2) be fervent in brotherly love, for love overwhelms sin (v. 8); (3) exercise hospitality (v. 9) to fellow Christians, especially those travelling; (4) manage the various gifts given to you, using each to help others (v. 10); (5) if you *speak* in tongues, ensure that the utterance is truly from God (v. 11); and (6) if you serve others (or are a slave), do so to your best ability. “In all things” may God be honoured by how you live.

Matthew 27:57-66

NRSV

Joseph of Arimathea, a man of means, asks the Roman authorities to release Jesus’ body. Here the burial shroud is a “clean linen cloth” (v. 59), the tomb is “new” (v. 60) and the stone door is “great”. Mark lacks these details. Joseph lays the body in a tomb presumably intended for himself. He rolls a disk-shaped rock “to [against] the door” (v. 60); “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” (v. 61) witness this. (A body was normally washed and then anointed with oil before burial, but in Jesus’ case, there was no time to do this.)

Vv. 62-66 prepare for the resurrection. The religious authorities wish to ensure that the faithful do not steal Jesus’ body and falsely claim that he has risen from the dead. A false rumour of resurrection (“the last deception”) would be worse than the “first” (Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah). The tomb is “made secure” (vv. 64, 66) and is guarded by soldiers.