

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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Numbers 21:4b-9

NRSV

The people of Israel are now in the desert in the Sinai peninsula, probably near its northeastern edge (southwest of the Dead Sea.) During their journey from Egypt to Palestine, the Bible tells us of eight rebellions: six of the people against their leaders and God, and two of their leaders against God. In today's reading, the people rebel against Moses and God.

The people are "impatient" (v. 4) or *short-tempered* because Moses has refused to engage Edom in battle and, (after being attacked) Israel, with God's help, has won a military victory over the local Canaanites. In criticizing "this miserable food" (v. 5), i.e. manna, they are resenting what God gives them freely. So God sends "poisonous" (v. 6, or *fiery*) "serpents" – fiery possibly because the bites become inflamed before the victims die. The people do repent, and ask Moses to intercede for them ("pray to the LORD", v. 7). God replies that he will heal through a symbol, a bronze snake on a pole. Those who believe in God will be healed. The rebellion stories tell of a lack of trust in God – which led to all those of the generation that left Egypt (including Moses) dying before Israel entered the Promised Land – a punishment for lack of faith, and an example for later generations.

These stories also tell, very frankly, of the issues of human leadership: its qualifications, manifestations and limitations. Moses really has to struggle to be an effective leader. The bronze serpent was preserved and worshipped until, because it had become a symbol of worship separate from the worship of God, it was smashed to bits during the reign of King Hezekiah, in the late 700s BC (see 2 Kings 18:4).

Psalm 78:1-2,34-38

NRSV

This psalm, probably written for use at a major festival, recites the history of God's dealings with Israel; it tells of "the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done" (v. 4), but also of his people's lack of trust in him, their deviations from his ways.

The word translated "parable" (v. 2) here means *wise instruction*. The gift of manna is mentioned in v. 25 ("bread of angels") and of quail in v. 27 ("rained flesh"). Even though the people were "well filled" (v. 29), they wanted more. God gets angry (v. 31): he apparently sends poisonous snakes (as his agents) who "killed" (v. 34) people. Being thus punished, they *repent*, seek him out, and *remember* (v. 35) him as saviour. God forgives them, delivers them from the snakes, but again they deviate from his ways (v. 37). Were it not for his compassion, he would utterly destroy them (v. 38). Rarely does he get angry.

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

NRSV

In the preceding verses, Paul has urged the Christian community at Corinth to be "in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." (v. 10) He has heard from members of Chloe's household that there are "quarrels" (v. 11, or *contentions*) "among you". Some claim that they "belong to Paul" (v. 12); others that they belong to Apollos, to Cephas, or to Christ. Paul is thankful that he baptised very few members of the community, because "no one can say that you were baptised in my name" (v. 15), for Christ sent him to Corinth to "proclaim the gospel ... so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power" (v. 17). You can't have a community in which Christians are at cross-purposes with each other.

Then v. 18: the message of the cross makes sense to the faithful: to us, it is the revelation of God's power, but to others, it is nonsense ("foolishness", vv. 18, 21). In v. 19, Paul recalls a verse from Isaiah referring to events that occurred when Assyria was threatening Judah. The king's counsellor (a "wise" man, one versed in popular philosophy) advised alliance with Egypt, but Isaiah told the king to do nothing but trust in the Lord: God would save Israel and bring to nothing the "wisdom of the wise" and the "discernment" (intelligence) "of the discerning". From other sources, we know that there were many "wise" citizens of Corinth, each of whom had their own solutions to the world's problems. The Greek philosopher and the Jewish scribe count as nothing before God; Paul says: God's wisdom is different: you can't "know" (v. 21) it in a philosophical way. Knowing God is an experiential matter in which one renders him homage and obeys his will. Jews and Greeks seek knowledge in their cultural ways (v. 22), but we proclaim something different: to those Jews and Greeks who are called, the cross makes a lot of sense. In v. 31, Paul tells his readers: "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord". Paul is speaking of the cross as a symbol of our faith in our hearts rather than a physical symbol, e.g. one carried in procession.

John 3:13-17

NRSV

John intersperses stories about Jesus with teaching material. In the preceding verses, he has told us about Nicodemus, a powerful and wealthy man, and "a teacher of Israel" (v. 10). Nicodemus is eager to understand this man from God, but to be "born from above" (v. 3) of "water and Spirit" (v. 5) is beyond his comprehension. (This is probably a reference to baptism.) Jesus tells him that some things cannot be understood in human, natural, terms. He continues: if you can't comprehend things that happen on earth, how can you possibly understand "heavenly things" (v. 12), super-natural truths.

In v. 13, Jesus says: he who comes down from heaven has gone up again. Moses' bronze serpent preserved from death those who trusted, through this symbol, in God. Note "lifted up" (v. 14): Jesus foreshadows the Crucifixion. In a similar way, whoever believes in Christ will have "eternal life" (v. 15), life in the age to come. Those who willfully refuse to believe will "perish" (v. 16). That's the whole point of Jesus' coming: through him, we have salvation, not condemnation.

