

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 6:22-27

NRSV

Numbers interrupts the story of preparing to leave Sinai by stating several case laws regarding maintenance of purity and, assuming that members of the Israelite community will keep these laws and others, tells us of the priestly blessing to be bestowed on all. The laws prescribe exclusion of those with skin diseases and who have touched a dead body, restitution for wrongs to others, handling of suspected adultery, and give the rules for semi-monastic service to God. Now, in words used today in Christian and Jewish liturgies, God tells Moses the blessing to be given by the priests ("Aaron and his sons", v. 23) when the Israelite community keeps these and other laws. While "you" is singular in v. 23, it is the whole community who will benefit from God's blessing and protection. May God be present ("face", v. 25) with them and grant them divine favour ("gracious"); and give them "peace" (v. 26, wholeness, well-being, both material and spiritual welfare). In so blessing them, the priests will put something of God's very self ("name", v. 27) on them. He will identify himself with them.

Psalm 8

NRSV

This is a psalm of praise of God as creator and of man as head of creation. Because of the modest means God uses ("babes and infants", v. 2), his majesty is even more evident. The "foes" may be the powers of chaos, as in Genesis 1:1. In vv. 3-4, the psalmist contrasts God's majesty with "the work of ... [his] fingers", especially humans, for whom he cares. ("Mortals" is *ben'adam*, literally *son of man*.) Vv. 7-9 recall Genesis 1:26-28: we share in God's dignity for he has conferred on us mastery of, and responsibility for, the rest of creation.

Philippians 2:5-13

NRSV

In vv. 1-4, Paul has urged the Christians at Philippi, through "encouragement in Christ", and moved by God's love for them, to "be of the same mind[set], having the same love, being in full accord ...". They are to "regard others as better than ... [themselves]", freely adopting a lowly, unassertive stance before others, replacing self-interest with concern for others.

Vv. 5-11 are an early Christian hymn to which Paul has added v. 8b. He exhorts his readers to be of the same mindset as Jesus – one that is appropriate for them, given their existence "in Christ" (v. 5). Christ was "in the form of God" (v. 6): he was already like God; he had a God-like way of being, e.g. he was not subject to death. He shared in God's very nature. Even so, he did not "regard" being like God "as something to be exploited", i.e. to be grasped and held on to for his own purposes. Rather, he "emptied himself" (v. 7), made himself powerless and ineffective – as a slave is powerless, without rights. He took on the likeness of a hu-

man being, with all which that entails (except sin), including "death" (v. 8). As a man, he lowered ("humbled") himself, and throughout his life in the world, was fully human and totally obedient to God, even to dying. (Paul now adds: even to the most debasing way of dying, crucifixion – reserved for slaves and the worst criminals.) God actively responded to this total denial of self, his complete *living and dying for others*, by placing him above all other godly people ("highly exalted him", v. 9), and bestowing on him the name, title and authority of "Lord" (v. 11) over the whole universe ("heaven", v. 10, "earth", "under the earth"). God has given him authority which, in the Old Testament, he reserved for himself. (Isaiah 45:22-23 says: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other ... 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear'"); everyone shall worship him; confessing that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (v. 11) is equivalent to proclaiming the victory and might of God. The ultimate goal is the "glory of God the Father", the reclamation of God's sovereignty, his power over, and presence in, the universe. So may the Christians at Philippi follow Jesus' example, living with due respect for each other ("fear and trembling", v. 12); God is within them, helping them in setting Christ's example as a goal and acting on it.

Luke 2:15-21

NRSV

Luke has told us of Joseph and Mary's visit to Bethlehem (his ancestral town) to register in the census, and of Jesus' birth. He lies "in a manger" (v. 12), a trough from which animals eat; he is sustenance for all peoples. Shepherds, living in the field with their flocks have heard the angel's announcement of the birth of "a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (v. 11). Many heavenly beings have appeared, praising God and pronouncing peace: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (v. 14).

Now the shepherds decide to see the glorious event for themselves (v. 15). It is appropriate that the first visitors to the newborn child be shepherds: Jesus is our shepherd. Note "with haste" in v. 16; as Mary set out to visit her cousin Elizabeth "with haste" in 1:39; Jesus will later stress the urgency of his mission. The shepherds look for, and find, the infant where the angel has told them in v. 12, "in the manger" (v. 16). They *make known*, tell Mary and Joseph – and others – the good news the angel has delivered. Mary and Zechariah have already told us something of the meaning of the birth and the destiny of Jesus in 1:31-33, 1:46-55 and 1:68-79. What the shepherds have been told provides another perspective on this event. Mary tries to understand ("pondered", v. 19) all that she has experienced and been told, especially the great news told by the angels, but she does not immediately grasp the full significance of God's action of Jesus being born into the world. Later, after Jesus as a boy has asked his parents "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (v. 49), she understands a little more. Luke does not tell us directly about Jesus' circumcision but infant boys were named on this occasion; being a Jew, he is circumcised (v. 21). As a member of God's chosen people he will bring salvation to the world. Before Jesus was conceived, an angel has said "you will name him Jesus" (1:31). His name means *God saves*. The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of *Jesus* are similar to *he will save*.