

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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Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

NRSV

In v. 1, the author introduces a reflection on life: everything has its opportune time, determined by God (“under heaven”). Vv. 2-8 are a beautiful, carefully structured poem. In each half verse, he presents two events; those in the second half-verse are related to those in the first half verse. We do not know what is meant by v. 5a. Perhaps, given “embrace” in v. 5b, *throwing away* and *gathering stones* are sexual euphemisms.

This poem is often read as an affirmation of the life that God has given to humans but, because the book is at best neutral about the value of living, reading the whole of the book suggests that the poem is about the lack of freedom humans have in their lives – we do not control them, external forces do. The actions are inevitable, beyond the control of the individual.

Now v. 9: why work hard? Does it guarantee success? (In Chapter 2 he has told us how successful he has been.) God expects people “to be busy” (v. 10). However hard we work, we have no idea where we fit in God’s overall plan (v. 11).

In v. 12 he asserts that it is better to balance happiness and enjoyment with being industrious. He does not advise being a workaholic. Writing in prosperous times, he sees God as providing all the necessities of life (v. 13). It is God, he says in v. 11, that orders events. The author cannot see a wider purpose in life. We cannot know when (and, for some, if) these events will occur; only God knows, so hold him in awe (v. 14).

In v. 16, he mentions the corruption and oppression of the poor in his day. He does not see anything he can do about it; rather, he leaves it to God “who will judge the righteous and the wicked” (v. 17). There is no thought of an afterlife here; indeed he writes “All go to one place; all are from dust, and all turn to dust again”.

Psalms 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.

Revelation 21:1-6a

NRSV

This book is “the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1) made known through John. It is

prophecy which reveals secrets of heaven and earth. Our reading is from John’s record of his vision of the end-times. He has told of the destruction of the old city, Babylon (code name for Rome) and of the old heaven and earth (20:11); the ungodly have been driven off to punishment (20:15). Only the godly, a remnant, remain. Isaiah 65:17-25 and 66:22 predict that all creation will be renewed, freed from imperfections and transformed by the glory of God.

Now John sees the new creation. The “sea” (21:1), a symbol of turbulence, unrest and chaos, is no more. He sees “the new Jerusalem” (21:2), probably not made with bricks and mortar, “holy”, of divine origin, beautiful and lovely as a “bride”. (Marriage is a symbol of the intimate union between the exalted Christ and the godly remnant. Some see the city as the church, set apart for God’s use in the world.)

John hears “a loud voice” (21:3) interpreting 21:2: God again comes to “dwell” (be present spiritually) with “his peoples”. Sorrow, death and pain – characteristics that made the old earth appear to be enslaved to sin – will disappear (21:4).

God, “seated on the throne”, speaks in vv. 5-6: he will do everything described in 21:1-4; he is sovereign over all that happens in human history. (“Alpha” and “Omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, so God encompasses all.) God will give the gift of eternal life (“water”, 21:6b) to all who seek him.

Matthew 25:31-46

NRSV

Vv. 14-30 are the Parable of the Talents. Jesus has used it to stress the importance of fidelity to him and his mission while he is away with the Father. Here Jesus tells us the kind of conduct, of morality, towards others expected of the faithful – and the consequences of not caring for others.

Sheep and goats behave differently but in Palestine they were fed together. At the end of the era, when Christ comes again, he will act for the Father (“sit on ... [his] throne”, v. 31). He will separate the “sheep” (v. 32) from the “goats”, assigning the former to a place of honour (“at his right hand”, v. 33) and the latter to dishonour. He, as “king” (v. 34) will invite the godly (or faithful), those whom the Father has pre-ordained for this, to live with him (“the kingdom”), a state that existed before creation (“from the foundation of the world”).

Why? Because the godly have fulfilled God’s expectation: in reaching out to the disadvantaged they have, in fact, been reaching out to him (v. 40). We are all part of his family. But the “goats”, those who have ignored the needy, will be permanently separated from God, be unhappy, and be punished, for they have failed to see Christ in people. The “righteous” (v. 46) are the faithful, the godly, those who understand that to serve humanity is to serve Christ – and do so.