

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 7:10-15

NRSV

Assyria, under Tiglath-pileser III, is intent on expanding westwards. The kings of "Aram" (vv. 1, 2, 5, 8, Syria) and of Israel (also called "Ephraim") have formed a coalition to resist the advances of their common enemy. They have tried to convince "Ahaz" (v. 1), king of Judah and of the "house of David" (v. 2) to join the alliance; he has refused. Now they seek to put a puppet king on Judah's throne. God has commanded Isaiah to "meet Ahaz" (v. 3) as he inspects the water supply vital to Jerusalem's defence. Isaiah tells him: "take heed ... do not fear ... these two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (v. 4) who have "plotted evil against you" (v. 5). "If you do not stand firm in faith" (v. 9, trust in God) but rely on human counsel, you will be defeated.

God now speaks again to Ahaz: ask any "sign" (v. 11), any confirmation of my promise delivered by Isaiah – any at all in all creation. ("Sheol" was the subterranean abode of the dead.) But it seems that Ahaz has already made up his mind (v. 12) so, through Isaiah, God gives to the "house of David" (v. 13) not a "sign" (v. 11) to convince Ahaz, but one which speaks to future generations. God will keep the promise he made to David (through Nathan): "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me" (2 Samuel 7:16). "The young woman" (v. 14, most likely Ahaz's wife) is pregnant; David's line will continue; she will name her son "Immanuel" (meaning *God with us*). (This son was Hezekiah.) In a devastated land (paying heavy tribute to Assyria), where only basic food is available ("curds and honey", v. 15), he will develop moral discrimination – unlike recent kings, who were deemed wicked, ungodly people. By this time, Assyria will have conquered both Syria and Israel (v. 16).

Psalms 132:6-10, 12-13

NRSV

These are the words of a liturgy commemorating God's choice of Zion and the dynasty of David. Vv. 8-10 are quoted in 2 Chronicles as used at the dedication of the Temple, so this psalm may well have been used at the annual celebration of the dedication. Vv. 1-5 ask God to remember David's diligence in finding a proper "place" (v. 5) for God's sanctuary. Vv. 6-10 may have accompanied a dramatic ceremony reenacting David's finding the Ark ("it", v. 6) at Kiriath-Jearim ("Jaar"). ("Ephrathah" is Bethlehem, David's city.) God's "footstool" (v. 7) is the Ark. It was borne joyfully in procession to Jerusalem, preceded by godly "priests" (v. 9). V. 10 asks God to continue to favour the current king ("your anointed one"), remembering David's actions. While vv. 1-10 centre on David, vv. 11ff focus on God. He has vowed to David that a descendant of his will, if his heirs keep their side of the pact, rule "forevermore" (v. 12). David chose Jerusalem; so did God (v. 13). "Zion" will be God's earthly residence "forever" (v. 14). In the

Temple, the divine and human realms meet, so God will be able to bless the city's inhabitants (v. 15). God will give the priests power to forgive sins ("salvation", v. 16). A "horn" (v. 17) was a symbol of a king's strength; here it speaks of David's line, his seed continuing. The king's "crown" (v. 18), in its radiance, reflected the power (glory) that he possessed as a reflection of God's glory; here it is contrasted with the disgrace which will cover the king's "enemies".

Galatians 4:4-7

NRSV

Some teachers in Galatia have claimed that a Christian must first embrace Judaism, observing Mosaic law. Paul wrote this letter to rebut this argument, to insist that one comes into union with God through faith in Christ, and not through ritual observances. In vv. 1-3, he takes the example of an orphaned boy of minor age, an *heir*: although he owns his dead father's property, it remains under the control of trustees until the date his father set (per Palestinian practice.) He cannot speak or act on his own behalf. So it is with Paul and his readers: before "we" accepted Christ, we had no power to speak or act, being slaves to *spiritual elements*, celestial beings that control the physical elements of the universe. But, at the time our Father set ("fullness of time", v. 4), "God sent his Son", born a human ("of a woman"), indeed a Jew ("under the law"). God sent him so that we Jewish Christians might be adopted as God's children, be made part of him. Then v. 6: being his children, he sent the "Spirit of his Son", God's Spirit, to empower us to call him Father. (*Abba* is Aramaic for *father*. Jesus prayed "Abba, ..." in the Garden of Gethsemane.) So, v. 7, you are free from the obligations of Mosaic law, and being his child makes you an heir to God's kingdom, through Christ.

Luke 1:46-55

NRSV

Mary is visiting Elizabeth and Zechariah. God's messenger, Gabriel, has told her that she will bear Jesus, "Son of God" (v. 35), successor to David and founder of an eternal kingdom. With God, "nothing will be impossible" (v. 37). Mary now thanks God in a poem known as the *Magnificat*, the first word of its Latin translation. Speaking today, she might begin: *From the depth of my heart, I declare the Lord's greatness and rejoice in God my Saviour*. "Servant" (v. 48) can also be rendered *slave* or *handmaid*: in v. 38, she has acknowledged that she is a "servant of the Lord", i.e. obedient to him in all things. She will be hailed by people of every age ("generations", v. 48) in the new era of salvation launched by her son. Why? Because of the seemingly impossible "things" (v. 49) God has done for her. Then a reminder (v. 50): God is compassionate to all who hold him in awe throughout time. Vv. 51-53 universalize her experience, to reflect how God deals with all humanity. While the verbs are in the past tense in English, the Greek tense has the sense of how God customarily acts – as he always has and will continue to do – and what he is starting to do in the conception of Jesus. The "proud" (v. 51), the arrogant, are alienated from God by their very "thoughts"; he reverses fortunes, raising up those in need ("lowly", v. 52, "hungry", v. 53) and rejecting the "rich", those who think they don't need God. Vv. 54-55 sum up the poem: in his compassion, God has fulfilled and continues to fulfill his promises to the patriarchs.

