

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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Ezekiel 34:11-16

NRSV

From the third millennium on, rulers in the Near East saw themselves as shepherds of their subjects. Vv. 1-2 say: “The word of the Lord came to me: ... prophesy against the shepherds of Israel ...” Israel’s kings had mistreated their people and were responsible for scattering them. The kings had taken the plenty of the land for themselves, rather than sharing it with their subjects. Written in a time of despondency (Judah had been invaded by Babylon in 587 BC), vv. 1-10 blame the people’s sorry state on the kings: some people had dispersed around the Mediterranean; others were deported to Babylon; those left at home were no better off. In foreign lands, they have fallen prey to pagan beliefs. Rulers too are subject to God’s law: they are individually responsible for the mess.

Now God will reverse the evil done by the bad human shepherds. He will “seek ... out” (v. 11) the sheep, and “rescue” (v. 12) them from wherever they have been scattered. God will “gather them” (v. 13) and bring them back, restore them, to Palestine; he will care for them (v. 14). He will aid the “lost” (v. 16), “strayed”, “injured” and “weak” – but he will destroy the “fat and the strong”, i.e. those who rule them. God will give them justice: rulers will be accountable for their actions. God will judge, and differentiate between, the “fat sheep” (v. 20, the overfed rich oppressors, the ungodly) and the “lean” (the underfed poor oppressed, the godly). “I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged” (v. 22). The sheep must behave properly, and submit to “one shepherd” (v. 23), a descendant of “David”, whom God will place over them. He will “make with them a covenant of peace” (v. 25) and will bring prosperity and safety from attack by other nations; then Israel will truly know her God. Jesus built on this passage to express the nature of his mission.

Psalm 87

NRSV

The text of this psalm is damaged, so scholars are unsure of its full meaning; even so, it is clear that vv. 1-3 tell of God’s choice of “Zion”, Jerusalem, as his earthly home: he loves Jerusalem more than any other city in Israel (“Jacob”, v. 2). V. 4 probably says that God includes the dispersed Jews (living in Egypt: “Rahab”, “Babylon”, etc.) among the citizens of Jerusalem, but it may include non-Jews who acknowledge God as their god. Then v. 6: God keeps a record of those who follow his ways; he take special pleasure in the citizens of “Zion” (v. 5). V. 7 is a fragment of the rest of the psalm. All the godly find “springs”, their sources of well-being, in God.

2 Timothy 4:1-8

NRSV

To understand this letter, it helps to know that, while it appears to be written by

Paul, it was actually written by one of his followers (in his name) some time later: it reflects the Church’s situation about 100 AD, so we contend with a *time warp*. The author speaks to his readers “in the presence of God” and (in particular) of Christ who, when he comes again (“appearing”) to inaugurate his “kingdom”, will judge both those who are still alive (“living”) and those who have already died; he urges them to “proclaim the message” (v. 2), the traditions handed down to them about Jesus’ life and mission; to use every opportunity to preach – whether the time seems propitious (“favourable”) or not; to convince, and to “rebuke”, those who distort this tradition, this *deposit of faith*, etc. Why? Because (from Paul’s viewpoint), “the time is coming” (v. 3) when people will listen to teachers who say what they want to hear (rather than the Truth). (From the first readers’ viewpoint, this is happening now, in 100 AD.) People will/do “wander away to myths” (v. 4), distortions of the gospel. Rather, be “sober” (v. 5, wise, prudent) about the faith, keeping to “sound doctrine” (v. 3), enduring “suffering” (v. 5, in this time of persecution), evangelize, etc. (Paul is the example of suffering for this new generation.)

In the Temple, both a lamb and drink (a “libation”, v. 6) were offered daily to God; Paul (and those martyred now) offer their blood. Their time to depart from this life and return to Christ “has come”. The metaphors in v. 7 are ones Paul used: the Christian is like a prize boxer and a runner. A winner in Greek games was adorned with a “crown” (v. 8) of laurel, pine or olive; such a crown is “reserved for me”, to be presented by Christ on Judgement Day (“on that day”). All who have lived the Christian life, who look forward to Christ’s “appearing”, his second coming, will also be crowned. Paul’s death is pictured as being close; his legacy is handed on to Timothy and other future leaders of the Church.

John 21:15-19

NRSV

Our reading is from the epilogue, the chapter after the first conclusion of the gospel. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to six disciples near the Sea of Galilee (vv. 1-2). Led by Peter, they go fishing but catch nothing (v. 3). When they return to the shore in the morning, Jesus is there. When he invites them to cast their net again, they catch many fish. One (probably John) recognizes him; the others do shortly. When Peter hears it is Jesus, he is so excited that he jumps into the sea, in his haste to get to shore. On shore, a charcoal fire is burning. Jesus invites them to share a breakfast of bread and fish (v. 13).

Jesus now asks Peter about his love for him (v. 15). Peter avoids comparisons with “these”, the other disciples. Jesus asks him three times (earlier Peter denied knowing him three times); each time Jesus tells him: *feed/tend my lambs/sheep*. V. 18 begins with a proverbial saying: in old age, we lack the mobility and freedom of movement we had when young. But Peter’s life will be cut short: he will either be bound a prisoner or crucified (“stretch out ...”). In 13:37-38, when Peter offers to follow Jesus even to laying down his life for him, Jesus answers: “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward”. Now Jesus says: “Follow me” (v. 19).