

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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Genesis 22:1-14

NRSV

God has given Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. Ishmael, born of a slave woman, has been banished, with his mother, Hagar. While Abraham's line will continue through Isaac, Ishmael too will be the father of a nation. Rabbis pointed out long ago that Abraham is tested ten times by God; our reading tells of the tenth.

We know that Abraham is being tested, but he does not. When God calls him, he is ready and available to do as God asks ("Here I am", v. 1). Isaac is his "only [remaining] son" (v. 2), the one through whom he will become "a great nation" (12:2). God asks much of Abraham: offer Isaac to him as a sacrificial offering – accept that God may *undo* his promise of descendants. Abraham travels from Beer-sheba (in southern Palestine) to a mountain God will show him – later known as Mount Zion. He is a man of action (v. 3). Part way there, "on the third day" (v. 4), he and Isaac leave their retainers behind. Isaac is naturally curious: where is the sacrificial animal? (v. 7). His father's answer (v. 8) is not a ruse; rather it shows Abraham's trust in God: he will "provide".

Abraham follows the normal procedure for a sacrifice; he even takes out his knife to slay Isaac, as an animal was slain. But at this moment "the angel" (v. 11, a messenger from God, perhaps the one who had called to Hagar from heaven, showing her the life-saving well during her flight with Ishmael, 21:17-19), calls; he is God's life-preserving agent here too (v. 12). Abraham has shown himself totally obedient to God; he has shown that he holds God in proper respect ("fear"). A "ram" (v. 13) is sacrificed instead. V. 14 tells us how Mount "Moriah" (v. 2) got its name. In vv. 15-18, through the angel, God renews his promise to Abraham: he will bless him with many descendants (v. 17), and make them politically and militarily powerful; Abraham will be the source of oneness with God for "all the nations of the earth" (v. 18) – as God promised him, in 12:8, if he would leave Haran and settle in Palestine.

Psalms 13

NRSV

The psalmist appears to be frustrated by waiting for God: four times he asks "how long ...?". When, he asks, will God care for him again and return to taking an interest in him ("face"). How long must he, in his very being ("soul", v. 2), feel alienated from God? How long will his "enemy" (one who ignores God's ways), be able to insist that his trust in God is foolishness? In vv. 3-4, he prays for God's help: strengthen me, give me the will to continue living – else my "enemy" will claim that the *victory* is his. ("Death" here is alienation from God.) The psalmist has trusted in God's absolutely reliable ("steadfast", v. 5) love and generosity. He hopes to thank God for saving him – by singing his praises.

Romans 6:12-23

NRSV

Paul has told his readers that baptism has changed their way of being *from* one in which God responded to their continual contravention of the Law by loving them more *to* one in which sin is no more. But freedom from sin is not yet definitive: they can still be tempted and can succumb to the "passions" of their "bodies". So take care to avoid using any of your faculties and functions ("members", v. 13) to advance the cause of evil, but rather work actively to advance God's benevolence ("righteousness"). At the end of time, sin will not be your master, and you will fully live the *baptised life*, "under grace" (v. 14), in God's free gift of love. In v. 15 Paul asks again the rhetorical question he posed in v. 1: are we now free to behave as we like, no longer being subject to the Law?; he again answers *no!*

He now uses the analogy of slavery (or servanthood) to explain the two ways of being. You cannot serve two masters (v. 16). If sin is your master, you will face spiritual (as well as physical) death; death will be final. However if you serve God, your *end* is oneness with him ("righteousness"). Through baptism you have ceased to be *under sin*; you have committed yourselves willingly ("from the heart", v. 17) to obedience to the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection ("form of teaching ..."). You have attained Christian liberty and have become servants of God (v. 18). He explains a divine truth "in human terms" (v. 19).

In the old way, you were slaves to licentiousness and accumulation of sin (for only some sins could be forgiven); in the new way, you work towards "sanctification" (v. 19, consecration to God and dedication to him). Before conversion, you thought yourselves free from God's demands (v. 20), but the end-point of that life was "death" (v. 21). In the new way, the goal ("end", v. 22) is sharing in God himself, "eternal life". Now v. 23: "wages" are regular, recurrent. In the old way, you regularly deserved spiritual "death", but God's gift is *pro gratia*, without expectation of repayment.

Matthew 10:40-42

NRSV

Our reading is Jesus' final instructions to his disciples as he prepares them to continue his mission. Earlier he has told them that being his followers will, at times, be difficult: they will be persecuted. Now he tells them the nature of the authority they will have, and will hand on to future disciples.

Jewish law considered that one's agent is like oneself. Jesus goes beyond this: to welcome a disciple is to welcome both him and the Father. Prophecy (v. 41) continues into the era of the risen Christ. If one "welcomes a prophet", recognizing his office and actions ("name"), one will "receive a prophet's reward", i.e. a place in the Kingdom. A "righteous person" is probably a Christian. A person who welcomes him or her, recognizing what being a Christian means, will attain union with God. Then v. 42: one who, "in the name of a disciple" (and through him, of God), helps someone on the fringe of society (or the Church) even in a simple, kindly way will be rewarded in heaven.

