

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 21:8-21

NRSV

Isaac has been born to Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, and has been circumcised, a sign of being one of God's people. Sarah has said, "God has brought laughter for me" (v. 6). Now aged three, Isaac is weaned: an occasion for a religious feast. 16:11 and 16:16 identify Ishmael as "the son of Hagar" (v. 9), but he is not named in today's reading – an indication that he ranks lower than Isaac. (When Sarah was unable to bear Abraham a son, he exercised the legal option of producing an heir through a slave woman.) Sarah sees Ishmael "playing" (v. 9, or *laughing*) with Isaac (meaning *he laughs*). She sees a real threat to her own life so she asks Abraham to "cast out" (v. 10) Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham hesitates, for he loves Ishmael and ancient law forbade such a deed. God says to Abraham: go ahead, do as she asks, I will solve the problem; your line will continue through Isaac, and Ishmael will also become father of a nation (vv. 12-13). Abraham is obedient to God: he provides Hagar with provisions, and throws her and her son out. When the water is exhausted, Hagar realizes that death is near (vv. 15-16). God hears Ishmael's cry (Ishmael means *God harkens*); Hagar sees a well. "God was with the boy" (v. 20): he grows up and becomes a nomad ("expert with the bow"), lives in northern Sinai ("Paran", v. 21) and marries an Egyptian – all points which indicate his exclusion from God's specific plan. Genesis continues with the story of Isaac.

Psalms 86:1-10, 16-17

NRSV

That the speaker is "poor and needy" (two equivalent terms) suggests that he is a king, for such repetition is found in royal inscriptions from the ancient Near East. He cries (prays) continually for God to *preserve his life* (v. 2). He presents his very being to God (v. 4), who is "good and forgiving" (v. 5) and gives love to all who ask. He is confident that God will hear him (vv. 6-7). He prays that God will "teach me your way ... that I may walk in your truth" (v. 11). In vv. 13-15, he contrasts God's love for him (as seen in rescuing him from grave illness) with his enemies' attitude towards God: one of *insolence*, of ignoring God's ways. He confesses his faith (v. 15) in words God spoke to Moses. He seeks God's support, considering himself without any right to ask. (A girl born of a slave had no rights of any kind.) He prays for a "sign" (v. 17) of his continuing esteem in God's eyes: that this may show his enemies that their cause is hopeless. For us, vv. 8-10 are special: "all the nations" will come to God's ways, realizing that God is greater and more powerful than any god they have now.

Romans 6:1b-11

NRSV

Paul has written of life before Christ: death was final, and "where sin increased,

grace abounded all the more" (5:20). He now asks rhetorically: are we to go on sinning in order to receive even more grace? (Is this the basis for Christian morality?) His answer is *definitely not!*, and another question (v. 2). Baptism makes the difference for Christians. In baptism, we die to sin. We are baptised into Christ's death, as well as into his resurrection. We too are raised from death by the Father, so that we may "walk" (v. 4) in the new life. *Walking* implies conscience-based ethical conduct. There is no room for wanton sin in such a life.

Just as we have been grafted on to Christ in his death, so we too will share with him through a resurrection like his (v. 5). We know that we ceased to be dominated by sin and divine wrath ("our old self", v. 6) when we were baptised. This removed the effects of our waywardness, our *enslavement to sin*, but makes us ethically responsible for our actions. This is what baptism does (v. 7). Dying with Christ also includes living with him. Because Christ has risen, he will "never die again" (v. 9) – this is unique, once-for-all-time act, an anticipation of the age to come. And then the answer to the question in v. 2: Christ "died to sin" in the sense that sinless, he died rather than disobey the Father, and in the context of a sinful world. He was raised by the Father (v. 4) in order that he might live "to God" (v. 10, as he has always done.) So, as Christ is the model for our lives, and it is he upon whom our lives are grafted, we too must leave sin behind and be "alive to God" (v. 11) in Christ.

Matthew 10:24-39

NRSV

Jesus continues to prepare the twelve for the continuation of his mission. He is both "teacher" and "master". His *disciples* are students. There is so much to learn that they should never set themselves up as authorities independent of him. He has been called "Beelzebul", (v. 25, the prince of demons); his disciples will be called worse. Do not be intimidated. At the end of the era, all ungodly and godly behaviour, now hidden, will be *made known* (v. 26). Now is the time to proclaim all that Jesus has told his disciples privately (v. 27). Do not fear your persecutors for they can only end your physical life; rather hold God in awe, for he can "destroy" (v. 28) you totally if you do not do his will. God cares for the life of even a *sparrow* (v. 29, sold as food in the market), so "do not be afraid" (v. 31) of losing the real life. Honest and forthright witness – and outright refusal to do so – will have eternal consequences (vv. 32-33). At the Last Day, Jesus will testify to the Father for those who have witnessed faithfully; he will declare those who turn against the gospel unworthy of life in the Kingdom.

Jesus gives a new interpretation to Micah 7:6, a verse thought to foretell the breakdown of society as the end-times approach (vv. 34-36). Spreading the gospel will have unfortunate side-effects. There will be tension and division (even within families) between those who accept Jesus' message, and the demands it makes, and those who oppose his way. Christians must put loyalty to him above family loyalties (v. 37). Following Jesus involves the risk of death ("cross", v. 38). Finally, a paradox: if one aims to preserve one's earthly life, one will lose all ("life", v. 39), but one who dies for Jesus will find true life, eternal life.

