

Comments **Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost** **October 25, 2020**

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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Deuteronomy 34:1-12

NRSV

Today's reading is the final chapter of Deuteronomy and of the Pentateuch, the Law, the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible. The wandering is over; the people of Israel look forward to the future; they are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses has prepared them for this new life. In 32:48-52, God has told him that he will die outside the Land because Moses "broke faith" with him when the people demanded water and God provided (see Numbers 20:1-13).

God shows him the whole Land from a mountain near the northern end of the Dead Sea: from the Sea of Galilee region ("Dan ... Manasseh", vv. 1-2) in the north to the "Negeb" (v. 3) desert in the south and from the "Western Sea" (v. 2, the Mediterranean) in the west to the Jordan in the east. "Judah" (v. 2) is in the centre of the country. ("Zoar", v. 3, was at the south end of the Dead Sea.) Moses, an old man, dies suddenly in "Moab" (v. 6, now Jordan), across the Jordan from Israel; he dies as he lived: "at the LORD's command" (v. 5). The "burial place" (v. 6) may be unknown to avoid worship of the dead, an Egyptian practice. The story of Moses *laying hands* (v. 9) on Joshua, his successor, is in Numbers. The "spirit" is passed on to him; he is commissioned; he receives authority – as Elisha did later from Elijah. Vv. 10-12 eulogize Moses. For "terrifying displays of power" (v. 12) a scholar offers *awe-inspiring acts*.

Psalms 90:1-6,13-17

NRSV

Vv. 1-6 contrast God's eternity with the short and troubled span of human life. God pre-existed creation (v. 2a) and he continues to live for ever ("from everlasting to everlasting you are God"). In the Garden of Eden creation story, "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground" (Genesis 2:7); here (v. 3), the writer laments that in death this process is reversed. A human lifetime is infinitesimally short compared to God's (v. 4). The Hebrew of v. 5 is unclear; it too speaks of the brevity of life, as does v. 6. To the psalmist, human life simply ends. Vv. 13-17 are more hopeful; they seek God's intervention. "Have compassion", Lord; after the *night* of suffering, be merciful to us "in the morning" (v. 14), so we may rejoice. V. 15 probably speaks of the value of discipline. In v. 16, the writer recognizes that God is active in creation: he intervenes on behalf of people: "your work" may well be "your glorious power". May God give us grace so that our efforts may be productive.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

NRSV

Paul picks up on 1:5, read last Sunday: "... you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake." The Christians at Thessalonica are well aware that Paul's founding visit there was very fruitful ("was not in vain", 2:1);

"we" (v. 2, perhaps including Silvanus and Timothy), in spite of physical and moral *mistreatment* at Philippi, and in spite of "opposition", had the "courage", confidence, to preach the good news. This was possible, he says (v. 3) because "we" (v. 4) were authorized by God ("approved") to preach the gospel, in accord with God's will rather than seeking popularity, i.e. motivated (as popular philosophers and charlatans were) by "deceit" (v. 3, erroneous thinking) or "impure motives" (including deviant sexual practices) or "trickery" (cunning extraction of money from people); *our* objective was not to give people short-term pleasure. Further (v. 5), "we" did not resort to making people feel self-important ("flattery") nor to the kind of egotism that seeks to turn everything to our own advantage ("pretext for greed") – God, who alone is able to detect such deceits, is "our witness".

Then v. 7: as "apostles" (messengers or emissaries) of Christ, "we" could have insisted on the dignity and authority due to our office, but rather we were "gentle", as your equals, like a "nurse" (or *nursing mother*) giving of her self without expectation of repayment, and not coercing you. Our care went even further (v. 8): we shared everything we had and are, not just the good news. Religious and philosophical charlatans were common in the city. Paul may be defending himself against a whispering campaign by such people; perhaps they claimed he was a quack. His conduct among the Thessalonians clearly shows that he is genuine.

Matthew 22:34-46

NRSV

Some Sadducees (who believed that life ended with physical death) have argued with Jesus; they have tried to show him, by quoting from the Pentateuch, the absurdity of belief in resurrection. He has told them that they neither understand the "power of God" (v. 29, to transform us into a new way of being alive when risen) nor the purpose of the Scriptures.

The Pharisees now "test" (v. 35) Jesus by asking him a question often debated (v. 36): of the 613 laws in the *Torah*, which is most important? Jesus' answer would not have surprised them, but his "second" (v. 39) of equal weight ("like it") would, for it was considered unimportant. Developing a right relationship of actively loving God and fellow humans is the key to the Scriptures.

Now Jesus asks the Pharisees (who considered themselves experts in biblical interpretation) some questions (v. 42). People expected a political "Messiah" descended from David, "the son of David". In vv. 43-44 Jesus asks: "How is ... that David" (inspired "by the Spirit" to write Psalms – as was then thought) refers to "him" (the Messiah) as "Lord" (overlord), in writing "The Lord" God (Yahweh) "said to my Lord" (i.e. David's overlord, whom Jesus takes to be the Messiah) "sit ...". So (v. 45) how can the Messiah be both David's son and his overlord? (While in English and Greek, "Lord", *kurios*, occurs twice, Jesus would have quoted Psalm 110:1 in Hebrew; there the words are different. He was probably not unique in taking "my lord" there to be the Messiah, for a political Messiah would defeat his "enemies".) The Pharisees too do not understand the Scriptures.

