

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 61:10-62:3

NRSV

The prophet identifies himself with Jerusalem, with the people of Israel now back in their homeland. The people rejoice greatly, for God will save the city and its inhabitants. “Garments of salvation” and “robe of righteousness” probably refer to the garb of priests, so are reminders that Jerusalem is a holy city. The bridegroom’s “garland” is a symbol of strength, and the bride’s “jewels” symbolize beauty. Israel will be married to God. Once adulterous, she is restored to the state God intended. That God will rescue his people is as certain as new growth in the Spring, but God will continue to be the source of good (godly) life (“righteousness and praise”, 61:11). Either “all the nations” will see God’s action, or will all have the opportunity to join in receiving it.

After a silence of many years, a time when the people heard nothing from him, God will speak (62:1). He will establish the merit (“vindication”) of Israel as suddenly as “the dawn” comes in the desert. Her redemption will come rapidly. All peoples will see the reinstatement of Israel to God’s favour; all rulers will see the power of God (“glory”), (62:2); God will call Israel by a “new name”, indicating her change in status. To God, Israel shall be a “crown” (62:3) and a “royal diadem”: a royal house, a kingdom under him.

Psalms 148

NRSV

The psalter ends with five hallelujah (“Praise the LORD”) psalms, of which this is one. In vv. 1-6 the psalmist invites the heavens to praise God, then in vv. 7-12 he bids all on the earth to do so. Even inanimate objects (e.g. “sun and moon”, v. 3) are to praise him. (Ancient cosmology held that the sun, moon and stars travelled on concentric hemispheres above the earth, and above them was God’s storehouse of “waters above the heavens” (v. 4), the source of rain and snow.) God commanded that the heavens be created (v. 5). The movement of the celestial bodies are per an everlasting law (v. 6). The heavens shall praise him for creating them and making their existence permanent. In vv. 7-12, the list of created *things* proceeds from the lowest forms (“sea monsters”) to the highest, humans. The “wind” (v. 8, Hebrew: *ruah*) does God’s will; *ruah* also means *spirit*. In v. 11, “all peoples” are invited to praise the Lord.

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.

For Jewish Christians, that date has come: 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”, v. 6, is Aramaic for *father*. Jesus prayed “Abba, ...” in the Garden of Gethsemane: see Mark 14:36.) 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.

In vv. 8-9, Paul questions how, now that God has chosen them to know him, can they go back to *spiritual elements*. (Contemporary Jewish belief was that at Mount Sinai the Law was spoken by angels, celestial beings, *spiritual elements*.) How can they want to be enslaved again?

Luke 2:22-40

NRSV

Jesus has been circumcised, marking him as a member of God’s chosen people, Israel, through whom world salvation was to be achieved. After childbirth, it was 40 days before a mother could be purified before a priest in the Temple, so it is at least that long since Jesus’ birth. She was expected to offer a lamb, along with a turtledove or a pigeon; if she were poor (as Mary is), two turtledoves or pigeons sufficed. Exodus 13:1-2 required that every firstborn boy be consecrated to God. Jesus’ presentation in the Temple is like Samuel’s. Jesus and his family fulfil the requirements of Mosaic law.

Simeon looks forward to the coming of the Messiah to restore Israel to favour with God (“the consolation of Israel”, v. 25). The Spirit has told him that he will see the Christ before he dies (v. 26). Simeon’s words in vv. 29-32 are known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, from the first words in Latin. He begins by saying that God is setting him free, as a slave is granted liberty. He is now free to die (for the Spirit’s revelation to him is now fulfilled), and Israel is free of bondage. God has saved Israel, as he promised to “all peoples”; his salvation is for Gentiles too. In v. 33, Joseph is Jesus’ legal father. Simeon prophesies in vv. 34-35 through the Spirit (v. 25). Jesus is destined for the death and resurrection (“falling” and “rising”) of many; he will meet opposition, and will cause many to think deeply about him. Mary too will need to decide for or against Christ (“own soul”, v. 35). Simeon and Anna together stand before God; to Luke, men and women are equal in God’s eyes. Anna praises God, and tells many the meaning of Jesus, as Simeon has prophesied. Like Samuel, “the favour of God was upon him” (v. 40).

