

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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Hosea 11:1-11

NRSV

In the first three chapters of the book, Hosea uses symbolism to tell of the deviation of the people of the northern kingdom (Israel) from God's ways: they have deserted God and their covenant with him. Much of the rest of the book warns of the consequences they will suffer for their waywardness. They have insisted on worshipping pagan gods ("kept sacrificing to the Baals", v. 2). (Baal was a god in the religions of both Canaan and Tyre.) Of all the books of the Bible, Hosea has suffered most in transmission down to us, so the meaning of some phrases remains obscure, in spite of the efforts of scholars to understand them.

God, through Hosea, recalls the Exodus from Egypt (vv. 1-4). He compares God's loving leadership of the Israelites with a parent nurturing a child. Off worshipping other gods, they are unaware that God cared for them, healed them, and fed them. (A wise man was often called *father* by his students; in this sense, Israel is God's "son", v. 1. "Ephraim", v. 3, means *Israel*: this tribal territory was a particularly important part of the north.) Vv. 5-7 tell of the punishment: the people will be exiled to "Assyria"; not having returned to God, they will be in bondage, as they were in "Egypt". There will be fighting "in their cities" (v. 6); their priests will be killed. Even though they will call upon God for help, he will not hear them (v. 7). Vv. 8-9 are in a different tone. God speaks in a human, emotional way, but his anger (unlike human anger) does not last; he will again be compassionate. He will not cause the utter destruction of the cities and their inhabitants. ("Admah" and "Zeboiim" were destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah.) The people will return from exile to the land, "to their homes" (v. 11).

Psalm 107:1-9,43

NRSV

As it now exists, this psalm is a group thanksgiving, perhaps sung by pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival. They thank God for escape from various dangers. There are two refrains: here vv. 6 and 8. V. 1 is a summons to praise. The themes of *redemption* and *gathering* suggest that vv. 2-3 were written after the Exile; they may have been added (with vv. 33-43) to change the psalm from an individual thanksgiving to one suited to communal use. V. 3 pictures the people as coming from all points of the compass, although most came from the east (Babylon). Vv. 4-9 tell of the Israelites wandering in the desert during the Exodus. When they were "hungry and thirsty" (v. 5), physically and spiritually, God came to their aid. The next four stanzas also tell of God's help to them in troubled times; the pilgrims thank him for his fidelity to the covenant he made at Sinai. Vv. 33-43 are part of a hymn praising God for his bounty. May people who know God, ("wise", v. 43) people, recall God's actions on behalf of all his people, his loyalty to the covenant ("steadfast love").

The author has described baptism as being raised with Christ and becoming sharers in his suffering and death. In the early Church, those to be baptised removed their clothes before the rite and donned new ones after it, symbolizing the casting aside of their old ways and their new life in Christ. Vv. 1-4 summarize this teaching. The author tells us that we already have close fellowship with Christ, but that this is not yet fully revealed; our lives are still "hidden with Christ in God" (v. 3). When Christ's glory is "revealed" (v. 4) at the end of time, our complete union with him will also be seen. (Early Christians saw Psalm 110:1, "... Sit at my right hand ...", see v. 1, as showing that Jewish messianic hopes are realized in Christ.)

Being baptised, we are expected to conduct ourselves ethically (vv. 5-17): we are to cast aside both sins of the body (v. 5) and of the mind (v. 8). "Fornication" (v. 5), *porneia* in Greek, means *all forms of sexual immorality*; the "impurity" is sexual; "passion" is *lust*; *evil desire* is self-centred covetousness; "greed" motivates a person to set up a god besides God. Because people still commit these sins wilfully and without seeking forgiveness, "the wrath of God is coming" (v. 6) on them – at the end of time. ("Image of its creator", v. 10, recalls that God makes humans in his own image.) In the baptised community, racial and social barriers no longer exist, for "Christ is all and in all" (v. 11).

Luke 12:13-21

NRSV

As v. 1 tells us, Jesus has drawn a large crowd; the Parable of the Rich Fool is a lesson for the disciples too (v. 22). As he often does, Jesus speaks to his disciples with others present. The Mishnah, a Jewish book of laws, guided rabbis in how to handle questions of inheritance. (It must have been galling at times that Mosaic law prescribed that an elder son receive twice the inheritance of a younger.) Jesus wants no part in sorting out such issues: the word translated "friend" (v. 14) literally means *human*, a stern salutation. Jesus explains: "all kinds of greed" (v. 15) have no place in anyone's life; true being (real and meaningful "life") is more than "possessions".

Jesus' story of the farmer is particularly apt for a rural crowd. The farmer's land "yielded a good harvest" (v. 16, Revised English Bible). As the frequent use of "I" in vv. 17-19 shows, he thinks only of himself, of his material well-being. He fools himself into thinking that materiality satisfies his inner being ("soul", v. 19). This example story (unusual because God is a character) does not attack wealth *per se*, but rather amassing wealth solely for one's own enjoyment. Purely selfish accumulation of wealth is incompatible with discipleship. God calls the farmer a "fool" (v. 20) for ignoring his relationship with him. Earthly riches are transient, but a time of reckoning is coming, when we will all be judged by God. This *time* may be when we die or at the end of time, or both. We must trust in God, leaving the future in his hands. Jesus makes his point by providing an absurd example: materialism can get in the way of godliness. (The crowd would recall that, in the Old Testament and in the Apocrypha, foolishness often has overtones of immorality, of deviating from God's ways.)

