

Comments**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**

Ordinary/Lectionary 5

Year A

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 58:1-9a,(9b-12)

NRSV

Written after the Exile, this passage speaks of fasting, but its implications are wider: it encompasses the whole of the people's attitude towards God. Through the prophet, God issues a legal summons to "my people" for "their rebellion", for "their sins". They go to the Temple daily ("seek me", v. 2) and "delight" (in a sense) to know God's ways – but their "righteousness" (keeping the Law and seeking godly judgements) is purely ritual, external. Why, they ask, are you ignoring us, God? (v. 3a) He begins to explain in v. 3b: "you serve your own interest" (delight yourselves, not me) and (as slave masters did in Egypt) "oppress all your workers": there is a gulf between the rich and the poor. Because your lives outside the Temple are inconsistent with your worship (v. 4a), God will not hear your pleas. You kid yourselves if you think an insincere show of fasting is "acceptable" (v. 5). ("Sackcloth" was worn by mourners and the penitent.) God demands a proper relationship with others, one free from "injustice" (v. 6) and servitude ("yoke"), one in which the rich "share" (v. 7) with the "hungry", forming one community, giving to the less fortunate. When you do this, God will hear you ("light", v. 8) "healing" you (restoring you to well-being), and protect you (both before and behind). He will be present with you. Vv. 9-12 continue this theme, adding that contempt ("pointing" "the finger") and slander ("speaking of evil") are unacceptable. God will be present with his people, guiding them, strengthening them when they find their trust in him waning, and making them a source of good/godliness for others ("a spring of water", v. 11). From v. 12, we learn that Jerusalem is still not yet fully rebuilt: God will help them mend the "breach" in the walls, and restore their heritage.

Psalm 112:1-9,(10)

NRSV

This psalm portrays the state of well-being of godly people, who hold God in awe ("fear") and live per Mosaic law ("commandments"). They will be blessed with many powerful descendants (v. 2), wealth (v. 3), and godliness throughout their lives ("forever"). They will be examples to others ("a light", v. 4). Those who are generous and fair in business and "lend" (v. 5, to the poor, interest-free) will enjoy true happiness, for nothing will cause them to stumble in their trust in God (v. 6); they will be long "remembered". Their confidence will allow them to "triumph" (v. 8) over "their foes". (A "horn", v. 9, was a symbol of strength and power.) But (v. 10), the ungodly are "angry" at the sight of all God gives the faithful; they will perish; God will not hear their "desire".

1 Corinthians 2:1-12,(13-16)

NRSV

Paul has decried divisions in the church at Corinth: people have attached them-

selves to particular leaders because of their eloquence (and other personal traits). Now he says that when he first "came to you", he purposely avoided eloquence ("lofty words") and gave the Spirit full reign in bringing people to Christ. To avoid a Pauline personality cult, he came neither promoting his own qualities (v. 3) nor using erudite ("plausible", v. 4) rational arguments. What has happened at Corinth bespeaks *immaturity* in the faith.

While with "mature" (v. 6) Christians, he does speak "wisdom" (i.e. a total God-centred view of the cosmos – not popular wisdom, and not that of political and religious "rulers"), with the immature Christians at Corinth he speaks only basics of the good news: God's plan of salvation, decreed by God before creation. He does so in order that they may reflect God's power ("glory", v. 8). (Had the "rulers" understood this plan, they would have let Jesus live.) But they are so immature (indeed "unspiritual", v. 14) that even the basics are beyond them, ("secret and hidden", v. 7). God has revealed to the mature "through the Spirit" (v. 10) "things" about God's love (v. 9) that are hidden from others. Just as one person can never plumb the essence of another completely, so only the Spirit can know God comprehensively. Through the Spirit, *we* (the mature) understand God's gifts to us (v. 12), which can only be described in spiritual terms. But most of you have never received such gifts, so they make no sense to you ("are foolishness", v. 14); they are only discernable in a spiritual way. The mature do discern such gifts – and you should not doubt it ("scrutiny", v. 15). You should refrain from *instructing them* – for they are one with Christ, of his "mind" (v. 16).

Matthew 5:13-20

NRSV

On a mountain in Galilee, Jesus has described the qualities and rewards of the "blessed" (vv. 3-11). Now Jesus uses homely metaphors to teach essential lessons about being disciples. "Salt" does not really lose its taste, but in Judaism it can become ritually unclean and need to be "thrown out". (It was used to season incense and offerings to God.) Jesus may also be thinking of the salt deposits around the Dead Sea: when heavily rained upon, they still look like salt but no longer are. A follower who loses his faith is useless, and will be discarded.

Jesus calls on disciples to be examples to others – of God's ability to change lives (vv. 14-16). In so being, they will spread and make known God's power ("glory"). (A Palestinian house had only one room and a sole opening: the door.) The life of disciples must be visible and attractive: as a "city" is. Now vv. 17-20: the "scribes and the Pharisees" were "righteous" for they kept the Law scrupulously, but Jesus says that such meritorious conduct is inadequate for admission to the Kingdom. As vv. 21-48 show, he preaches a religion that goes beyond the Law: one of the heart, of love and compassion. The gospel fulfills the Law, and exceeds it by adding grace. One of the ways he fulfills the Law is by looking at its intent and not just the words used to express it. (For example, the Law says you shall not murder but Jesus says, in effect, you shall attempt never to impair your relations with another person.) Whoever regards the Law as he does, even if he or she fails sometimes, will gain entry into the Kingdom.