

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 11:1-10

NRSV

In 745 BC, Tiglath-pileser III became king of Assyria; he was bent on conquering all of the west, including Israel. Isaiah wrote these words soon after. In the preceding verses, he has used *tree imagery*; he continues to do so here. “Jesse” was David’s father. A new “branch” will grow, a king descended from Jesse and David, but of a new kind. God’s “spirit” (v. 2) rested on Moses, David and other leaders, enabling them to do the seemingly impossible. Six *gifts of the spirit* which God will give this king are listed here (v. 2): “wisdom”, “understanding” and “counsel” will make him independent of foolish advisers; he will have “might” to defend his people, “knowledge” of God’s ways and “fear” (awe), i.e. proper respect for God. This ideal future king will both be able to understand God’s purposes for his people and have the power to bring them to effect. He will also exercise justice, thus aiding the underdog and those who hold God in awe (“the meek”, v. 4). He will use his chastening “rod” and hot lethal “breath” to destroy the ungodly. In v. 5 “belt” appears twice; both are underwear. This king will hold justice and fidelity to his people as close to him as his underwear!

In vv. 6-8, the images of peace among animals speak of the restoration of the ideal state of harmony God originally intended, before humans revolted against him. (The “asp”, v. 8, and the “adder” are poisonous snakes.) Harmony will also be restored between animals and humans. No one in the whole of (“all”) God’s domain (not just Jerusalem, “my holy mountain”, v. 9) will be in danger, because all will know God, i.e. observe his will, as surely as “the waters cover the sea”. This king (“root of Jesse”, v. 10) will be a rallying point not just for Judah but for all peoples: they will see his achievements and “inquire” of God’s glory as reflected in him.

Psalms 72:1-7,18-19

NRSV

This is a prayer for God’s blessing on a king – perhaps used at his coronation or at an annual liturgy on its anniversary. It either confirms the king as legitimate and not a usurper (“king’s son”) or it seeks that his dynasty may continue. May he be a guarantor of justice (have the ability to determine what is right) especially for the helpless “poor” (vv. 2, 4) and “crush” those who harm them; may his reign be marked with “prosperity” (v. 3). Ancient people saw the king as almost divine (v. 5) and the health, fertility, right living and peace of the nation as bound up with those of the monarch. (“Rain”, v. 6, and “showers” led to abundant produce.) May his empire be universal, with other kings “fall[ing] down [to worship] before him” (v. 11). This king is the champion of the underdog (vv. 11-12). May his dynasty “endure forever” (v. 17) – thus ensuring political stability.

Paul has told his readers that “We who are strong” (v. 1) are to help the “weak” to come to terms with their consciences; we are to endure, pleasantly, their “failings” – thus building up the Christian community. Jesus is our great example.

Now Paul tells us the value of the Old Testament for us, “written in former days” (v. 4). When Jesus’ suffering is seen as part of God’s plan (which began with Abraham and other patriarchs) “the scriptures” take on a greater meaning: towards the “hope” of eternal life. Vv. 5-6 are a prayer for harmony in the community, so that it may reflect God’s glory. In 14:1, Paul has written: “Welcome those who are weak in faith”. In v. 7 he combines this with Jesus’ command to “love one another as I have loved you”. Why? “For the glory of God”, the reason Jesus came to us. Jesus was a Jew and ministered to Jews (“a servant of the circumcised”, v. 8) in order to demonstrate that the “promises ... to the patriarchs” are reliable (“confirm”) and to open up God’s promises to other cultural communities (“Gentiles”, v. 9, Greek: *ethne*). Paul’s quotations in vv. 9-12 – from Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah – all show that others besides Jews were envisioned in God’s plan. Paul ends by asking God, the one in whom all cultures centre their “hope” (v. 13), to fill his readers with “joy”, “peace” and “hope” – the key concepts in his quotations.

Matthew 3:1-12

NRSV

Matthew has told us of Jesus’ descent from King David, his birth and infancy, and the coming of the wise men. Now he leaps forward to about 26 AD. John appears in the “wilderness”, the arid region south and east of Jerusalem, an area where only hermits lived. His call to repentance, to turning back to the way of life to which Israel committed herself in its covenant with God, is like that of Old Testament prophets. His message about the nearness of God’s kingdom, of the time of complete fulfilment of God’s promises for humans, is a central message of Jesus. A new era, in which God rules, is almost here! Originally applied to the exiles returning from Babylon, Isaiah’s words in v. 3 also fit John. He is dressed like a hermit (“camel’s hair”, v. 4) and he eats off the arid land (“locusts”, “wild honey”), as did Elijah. People came to him from both sides of the Jordan (v. 5) and were baptised by him with water, in recognition of, and confession of, sin – with complete acceptance of God’s judgement and forgiveness. “Vipers” (v. 7) are poisonous snakes, a danger in the wilderness. John doubts the sincerity of “Pharisees and Sadducees”, thinking they are trying to avoid God’s adverse judgement (“wrath”); he challenges them to show their return to God in their lives (v. 8). He warns that being ethnically Jewish, a member of God’s people, is no guarantee of entry to the Kingdom; God shows no partiality (v. 9); he can have other “children”. Those who do not show in their lives that they have returned to God will be destroyed (v. 10). In v. 11, John foretells Jesus’s mission: giving people power to reshape the world (“with the Holy Spirit”) but also judging the ungodly, and purging them (“fire”). V. 12 puts this in farming terms: “wheat” was separated from “chaff” on a “threshing floor”; the wind blew away the “chaff”.