

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 2:1-5

NRSV

Isaiah wrote these verses about 740 BC, a time when spirits were low in Judah: Assyrian armies were bent on conquest, and many people doubted God's power to preserve the dynasty of David in accordance with his promise; others believed themselves to be invincible in the face of enemies.

Because Chapter 1 begins with similar words, it appears that this and the next few chapters originally formed a separate document. The ideas in vv. 2-4 are also found in Micah 4. In the future ("in days to come", v. 2) God will launch a new era in which he will dwell on earth ("house"), at Jerusalem. His presence above all others on earth symbolizes his sovereignty. (Jerusalem began on the eastern hill or "mountain". By Isaiah's time it had expanded on to part of the western hill. "Zion", v. 3, was originally the name of the southern slope of the eastern hill, the site of the first settlement. The name was later used for the whole city.)

The prophet foretells a time when all peoples will make pilgrimage to Jerusalem ("let us go up", v. 3) to worship God – to learn the way of living revealed by God. The city will be the source of "instruction" in ethical living. In Chapter 30, Isaiah tells us that in his time Judah rejected God's message, but in this future time all peoples will accept it. (The Hebrew word for "instruction" is *torah* which is also a name for the first five books of the Bible, the Law.) In this future time, God will settle disputes among nations ("judge", v. 4) and between people ("arbitrate"). It will be an age of peace and plenty: warfare being a thing of the past, agriculture ("plowshares", "pruning hooks") will prosper. (Conquering armies lived off the land and farmers were needed for military service.) In v. 5, Isaiah exhorts the people to adopt God's ways now.

Psalms 122

NRSV

It seems that the psalmist has been asked to join some people making a pilgrimage to "the house of the LORD", the Temple in Jerusalem. In v. 2 they have arrived in the city. Perhaps "bound firmly together" (v. 3) means *invulnerable*: note "gates" (v. 2), "walls" (v. 7), "security", and "towers" (v. 7). The Temple is where people of all twelve "tribes" (v. 4) of Israel gather to "give thanks" for knowing God and experiencing life in his ways ("name"). It is where kings descended from David reign (as God's representatives), settling arguments (v. 5). Vv. 6-7 urge all worshippers to pray for the city's peace and prosperity. The psalmist prays to God for its peace (and that of the whole country) on behalf of those at home ("my relatives and friends", v. 8). In v. 9 he returns to speaking of himself: for the sake of the Temple, he will seek the ultimate goodness, i.e. God.

Romans 13:11-14

NRSV

In vv. 1-8, Paul has written about the obligations we Christians have to civil authorities; he has continued his instructions on ethics for Christians. The only thing we Christians "owe" others – Christians and non-Christians – is love: this sums up the obligations of the Christian in life, of Christian ethics. But as Christians, love is *part of the deal* rather than an *obligation*, and can never be completely discharged. Love among Christians is something special: it is mutual.

Then vv. 9-10: if we love our neighbours, we will treat them as the Ten Commandments ("the law") requires: this flows naturally out of our love for them, e.g. we will not offend them by adulterous behaviour, etc. This is why "one who loves another ... [fully satisfies] the law" (v. 8).

Now Paul tells us another reason why ethical behaviour is important for Christians. We know that we are living both in the present and in the age which is after the first coming of the Messiah and before the second: "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers" (v. 11). Paul expresses it in terms of night and day: we should awake, pass from darkness to light, from evil to good. The image of armour is also found in contemporary Jewish writings about the end of the age; in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul tells us that the "armour of light" (v. 12) is faith, hope, love for each other, fidelity, uprightness, etc. "Let us live" (v. 13), he says, as if the Day of the Lord is already here, "honourably", not in ways that harm ourselves and our neighbours. Rather, let Christ be our armour, and let us not give in to the temptations of the flesh. (In baptism, we have already "put on", v. 12, Christ, but life in Christ is something that grows with experience. As we grow in the faith, we are more and more able to resist sinful opportunities.)

Matthew 24:36-44

NRSV

Speaking to his followers, Jesus has foretold the destruction of the Temple; he has told them the signs of the coming of the end times (in terms used in contemporary literature.) In the suffering and trials which will precede the End, society will break down, "many will fall away" (v. 10, from the faith) but "one who endures to the end will be saved" (v. 13). After these events, the "Son of Man" (vv. 27, 30) will come "with power and great glory". This will mark the beginning of a new era, a new way of being. Followers should discern signs of the second coming of Christ (vv. 32-35).

But (v. 36), we do not know precisely when that coming will be, and neither does Jesus. The situation will be like that before the Flood: people were preoccupied with earthly matters (v. 38). When the Flood came, a small number "entered the ark" and were saved, but many drowned. The dawn of the new era will also be like this; Jesus gives two examples: of men (v. 40) and of women (v. 41). Some will be "taken" to be with Christ (because they are prepared) but others will be "left". V. 43 is another example. "Keep awake" (v. 42) to the will of God: be ready for Christ's second coming!

