

Sunday between October 9 and 15 inclusive

Proper 23, Ordinary/Lectionary 28

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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Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

NRSV

Our reading is part of a letter Jeremiah wrote from Jerusalem to the leaders of the exiles in Babylon, deported when Babylon occupied Judah for the first time (597 BC). Perhaps Jeremiah tries to enhance Zedekiah's relations with the Babylonian court. "Elasah ... and Gemariah" (v. 3) carried the letter to Nebuchadnezzar as Zedekiah's envoys. To people who believed that only in Israel could God be worshipped, the letter would be shocking and revolutionary: God can be worshipped outside the holy land! Having sent people "into exile" (v. 4), he now commands them, through Jeremiah, to establish permanent homes in Babylon (v. 5), to have large families ("multiply there", v. 6), and even to pray for the welfare of the Babylonian state (v. 7). Why? Because they will be there for an indefinite period ("seventy years", v. 10). Only after this will God "fulfill [his] ... promise" (v. 10) and bring them back to Palestine. He does plan for the future, "a future with hope" (v. 11). When they return, he will hear them (v. 12); when they search for him, he will "let you find me" (v. 14); he will "gather you from all the nations ... where I have driven you".

But there are false prophets who predict an early return (vv. 8, 9). Two of them will be killed by King Nebuchadnezzar (v. 21); they will be "roasted in the fire" (v. 22). This fate will also befall other exiles who have deserted God, led immoral lives, and foretold events that God "did not command them" (v. 23). Vv. 16-20 are probably an editor's comment to those still living in Judah. Reiterating 24:8-10, he warns that those who escaped exile, though they consider themselves to be God's elect, will suffer greatly – because they "did not heed my words" (v. 19) when God "persistently" sent prophets to them.

Psalms 66:1-12

NRSV

"All the earth" (not only Israel) is invited to join in praising God, seen as powerful in his "deeds" (v. 3). Throughout the Exodus, from crossing the Red Sea to passing through the Jordan "on foot" (v. 6) – indeed throughout history – he has done great things "among mortals" (v. 5). His rule is world-wide, over all "the nations" (v. 7) – so may those who consider rebellion think again!

Vv. 8-12 are a communal thanksgiving. God preserves us in life (v. 9a); he protects us. In past difficulties he has "tested us" (v. 10), purifying us as "silver" ore is changed to pure silver. Israel has been subjugated by other people (perhaps during the Exile), yet after enduring every kind of difficulty ("through fire and ... water", v. 12), God has brought her to freedom again. In vv. 13-20, an individual (perhaps the king) vows to offer sacrifice in the Temple in thanks. He invites the

community to hear "what [God] ... has done for me" (v. 16). He was repentant so God listened to him (v. 19) and has heeded his requests made in prayer. "Blessed be God" (v. 20) for hearing and for his covenant ("steadfast") love.

2 Timothy 2:8-15

NRSV

Timothy, we read last week, lacks the courage to hand on the good news, perhaps because he leads a Christian community subject to ostracism or persecution. He is even ashamed of being Christian. The author, writing in Paul's name, wishes that he rekindle his faith and follow Paul's example. Using three illustrations ("soldier", v. 3; "athlete", v. 5; "farmer", v. 6), Paul has told Timothy that being a Christian requires single-mindedness, self-denial and intense effort. Reflection will lead Timothy to God giving him complete understanding.

Now he is advised to recall what Paul taught: Christ, restored to God, is the kingly Messiah ("descendant of David", v. 8) long expected. Paul continues to preach this despite "hardship" (v. 9) and imprisonment. Even so, the good news is available to all and continues to spread ("not chained"). Paul is the great example of enduring for those who are already Christian and for those who will come to faith ("the elect", v. 10), enabling them to enjoy Christ's promise of eternal life.

Vv. 11-13 are rhythmical so scholars believe they are from an early Christian hymn. If we share in Christ, in his death for sin in the world, we too will have eternal life (v. 11). If we do not give up, we will share in the Kingdom with him (v. 12a), but if we "deny him" (perhaps in times of trial or suffering) he will refuse to recognize us when he judges people – when he comes again ("he will also deny us"). In spite of our desertion, his promise is always there, for he is unchangeable ("cannot deny himself", v. 13). V. 14 begins a section on how Timothy should minister in the presence of false teachers – who change or augment the body of faith handed down. These people *wrangle over words*, causing some to leave the community. Present yourself, Timothy, as a true and honourable teacher forging ahead in telling the faith as it is! (v. 15)

Luke 17:11-19

NRSV

Jesus is on the final leg of his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. He told his disciples how important genuine faith is. Lepers were outcasts from society; people considered them ritually unclean, believed the disease to be infectious by touch, and thought they were possessed by evil spirits. All ten acknowledge Jesus as who he is, "Master" (v. 13): they have faith. To be restored to society, a leper needed certification from "the priests" (v. 14) that he was free of the disease.

While all ten acknowledge Jesus as God, only one, a "Samaritan" (v. 16), a "foreigner" (v. 18), gives thanks to him (v. 16); he worships God differently. All ten are healed of leprosy but only one is wholly "made ... well" (v. 19) – for the Greek word bears with it the idea of rescue from impending destruction or from superior powers. Much earlier, Jesus has infuriated synagogue worshippers by recalling the story of Naaman, the foreigner healed of leprosy by Elisha. Then no Israelites were healed of the disease, only an alien. Now one whom Jews despised is saved. See

7:27 for cleansing of lepers being a sign of the coming of the Kingdom.