

Comments

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 29, 2024

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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Esther 7:1-6,9-10,9:20-22

NRSV

This book is a novella set in Persia during the Exile. Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes I, 486-464 BC) the king has banished Queen Vashti for disobedience. Esther, a Jewish orphan, has been brought up by her cousin, Mordecai. When the king seeks a new queen, Mordecai offers her as a candidate, without revealing that she is Jewish. She is chosen. Mordecai then discovers a plot to assassinate the king; he tells Esther, who tips off the king. Ahasuerus' life is spared. The king makes Haman his vizier (prime minister). Custom required all to bow to the vizier, but Mordecai refuses to do so, so Haman plots to destroy Mordecai, who has now revealed that he is a Jew. Haman decides to destroy all Jews, not just Mordecai. A date for the slaughter is set by *lot* (Akkadian: *pur*). Haman gains the king's consent for his plan: Haman argues that "their laws are different from those of every other people ..." (3:8). He even offers a bribe to those who will kill Jews. A royal decree is sent out by courier to all the land. Through a servant, Esther learns of the plot. At Mordecai's urging, she risks her life by going into the presence of the king uninvited, to make a request of him. The king agrees that she may ask him at a banquet. Meanwhile, Haman prepares a gallows on which to hang Mordecai – on the date set by lot. The king recalls that Mordecai saved his life, and says that he intends to honour someone (but doesn't say whom); Haman thinks he is the one to be honoured.

Now we hear about the events at the banquet. The king is willing to grant Esther almost anything (7:2). She asks that she and her people be spared (thus admitting that she is Jewish). She would accept being in slavery (via Haman's bribe) but to be "destroyed" (7:4) causes her to risk her life. Esther names Haman as their "enemy" (7:6). Haman, in begging her for his life, by throwing himself on to Esther's couch, violates harem law; and the king takes this as sexual assault (7:7-8). Haman's face is "covered", probably as preparation for his execution. Justice is poetic, as Haman is hanged in place of Mordecai (7:9-10). Chapter 8 tells of the revocation of the edict, of Mordecai becoming vizier, and of an edict restoring the rights of Jews. 9:20-22 tell us that this story is the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim. Except for this feast and Hanukkah, all Jewish festivals are prescribed in Mosaic law. While the book appears to be non-religious fiction (God is never mentioned by name), it teaches a lesson: God does save his people in ways not found in the Law. He is with his people, even in Exile.

Psalms 124

NRSV

"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side ...", look what would have happened to us! Our enemies would have "swallowed us up" (v. 3) and the "flood would have swept us away" (v. 4) – water was always considered uncertain in an-

cient times. Then, vv. 6-8: because God was on our side, he has delivered Israel from being like a "bird", caught up in the net of the hunter ("the snare of the fowlers".) God has helped us, and does help us now!

James 5:13-20

NRSV

The author has told his readers that what they pray for they will receive, unless they ask with wrong motives. Now, in his conclusion to the book (probably a sermon), he treats prayer more extensively. Whether you *suffer* or are "cheerful" – pray! If any be seriously ill (in bed but not *in extremis*) call upon those in official positions in the church ("elders", v. 14) to "pray over them" and anoint them. (While "oil" was thought to have medicinal value, here anointing is "in the name of the Lord", so it symbolizes Christ's healing presence and power.) This prayer made in faith will restore health ("save the sick", v. 15) – as when Jesus *raised up* a boy who seems to have been epileptic. Anointing with prayer will also restore to spiritual health any who have intentionally deviated from God's ways. Sins should be mutually confessed, to attain integrity with God ("righteous", v. 16); "pray for one another". Prayer is "powerful and effective". The prayer of "Elijah" (v. 17) is an example of effective prayer. Then vv. 19-20: if anyone strays from integrity with God ("the truth") and is brought back to oneness with God through the prayer of "another" member of the community, either the "sinner" or the *rescuer* (the Greek means *his*) will be saved from spiritual "death" (damnation at the end of time) and will receive extensive forgiveness.

Mark 9:38-50

NRSV

The disciples have argued over who of them is the greatest. Jesus has told them not to seek position or prestige. Now he rebukes them for attempting to stop an exorcist curing in his name. Jesus explains his tolerance (v. 39): such a person will be slow to speak ill of him. God does work through those who are not followers of Jesus. V. 40 generalizes this, in the form of a proverb. The "reward" (v. 41) is entry into the Kingdom and the blessed state of union with God awaiting us there. Those who treat Jesus' followers with kindness will be so rewarded.

On the other hand, putting an obstacle ("stumbling block", v. 42) in the way of immature Christians ("little ones"), causing them to sin, will lead to condemnation on Judgement Day. (The "great millstone" was drawn by a donkey in grinding wheat; "the sea" was the place of chaos.) Vv. 43-47 speak of actions by members of the community, the body. Anyone who shakes the faith of others ("causes you to stumble"), however he or she does it, should be cast out, for the sake of the community. Hell was seen as the place of *unquenchable fire* and "where their worm never dies" (v. 48), per Isaiah 66:24. Discipleship is demanding. In vv. 49-50, "salt" has three meanings: (1) in v. 49, it means *purified*, as ore is purified to metal in a furnace; before Christ comes again, we will be purified through persecution and suffering; (2) In v. 50a, "salt" is a seasoning agent; the disciples are the *salt of the earth*, the agents of spirituality; if we lose our effectiveness in proclaiming God's word, what use are we? (3) In v. 50b, "salt" is distinctive character: this matters, but so does harmony in the community.