

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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Acts 2:42-47

NRSV

The apostles and the Jerusalem crowd have witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter, on behalf of the apostles, has interpreted the event. Based on Joel, he has shown that the final age is here, and that salvation for all whom God calls and who call on him is happening now. He tells the crowd that Jesus, the Messiah, is our access point to salvation. To be saved from adverse judgement, repent and be baptised in Jesus' name! Tell the good news to all who will hear, so that they too may have new life in Christ. Many do turn to Christ and are baptised.

The first part of Acts is made up of example stories and summaries. Our reading is the first summary; it gives us a glimpse of the very early church, of the response of the newly baptised. In accepting the good news, they whole-heartedly embrace learning about the faith, responsibility and love for fellow Christians, "breaking of bread" (an extension of Jewish festive meals to re-presentation of the Lord's Supper) and "prayers". God predicted through Joel that "many wonders and signs" (v. 43) would be seen in the end times; an example is Peter healing a lame man (3:1-11). In these early days, they have "all things in common" (v. 44), but a little later such sharing was not the universal rule: see 5:4. As faithful Jews, they visit the Temple daily (a forum Jesus had used) and share in the Eucharist "at home" (v. 46). As God has already increased their numbers (v. 41), so he continues to do. Later animosity developed with adherents to Judaism.

Psalms 23

NRSV

In the ancient Near East, the king was seen as shepherd (vv. 1-4) and as host (vv. 5-6). God faithfully provides for his sheep, and constantly cares for them. He revives our very lives ("soul", v. 3), and guides us in godly ways ("right paths"). Even when beset by evil ("darkest valley", v. 4), we have nothing to fear. God's "rod" (a defence against wolves and lions) protects us; his "staff" (v. 4, for rescuing sheep from thickets) guides us. The feast (v. 5) is even more impressive, for it is in the presence of his foes. Kings were plenteously anointed with oil (a symbol of power and dedication to a holy purpose). May God's "goodness and mercy" (v. 6, steadfast love) follow (or *pursue*) him (as do his enemies) throughout his life. He will continue to worship ("dwell ...") in the Temple as long as he lives.

1 Peter 2:19-25

NRSV

It seems that the first readers were seen as inferior socially by their pagan neighbours. The author has exhorted them to "conduct yourselves honourably" (v. 12), even when maligned (as they are), for God wills that they live blameless, ethical lives – thus inviting their neighbours to examine the Christian way. Being "ser-

vants of God" (v. 16), they are "free" from the burden of sin; they should use this freedom for good. The Greek word translated as "servants" also means *slaves*, so what the author says now applies equally to Christian slaves and other Christians. (The early church saw no inherent evil in slavery. All Christians were free spiritually and members of "the family of believers", v. 17.)

"Slaves" (v. 18) are to obey their masters, whether they are considerate or "harsh". Being beaten for wrong-doing is to be expected, but God notices when slaves endure wrongfully inflicted "pain" (v. 19). Of this, Christ is the great "example" (v. 21): accept it as he did, as predicted in Isaiah. Christians see the Servant Songs of Isaiah as predicting the events of Jesus' life. Isaiah 53:5-9, part of the fourth Servant Song (quoted in part in vv. 22-25), foretells his suffering and death: when "abused" (v. 23) he entrusted himself to God's care, "the one who judges justly". Jesus carried our sins on the cross, thereby enabling us to live "free from sins" (v. 24) and to attain union with God ("righteousness"). Through Jesus' suffering they have access to eternal life.

The addressees have turned their lives around by accepting Christ (v. 25a). The "shepherd"-flock image of God and his people is found in today's psalm and elsewhere in the Old Testament; in the gospels, Jesus is the shepherd. In this book, the image is applied to Christian leaders and those in their care. Later the Greek word *episkopos* ("guardian") came to mean *bishop*.

John 10:1-10

NRSV

In Chapter 9, Jesus has raised the ire of some religious leaders by giving sight to a blind man on the Sabbath. Some of them have heard Jesus say "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (9:39). Some have asked him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" (9:40), to which he has replied. "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains." (9:41) Thinking themselves worthy makes them unworthy in God's eyes.

Now Jesus uses a metaphor to expand on his point (but no metaphor works perfectly). In Palestine, sheep belonging to villagers roamed freely during the day but were confined to a common enclosure at night, to protect them from predators. Each morning, each shepherd called his sheep who followed him to pasture.

While "this figure of speech" (v. 6) is hard for us to understand in detail (as it was for those who heard Jesus), we can get the *drift*. So irate does the metaphor make the leaders that they try to stone him (in v. 31) and, in v. 40, Jesus flees across the Jordan. As he explains (v. 7), he is the "gate" of v. 2, so presumably the *thieves and bandits* are the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus, both the "gatekeeper" (v. 3) and the "shepherd" (v. 2) is the true leader. He calls the faithful to follow him (v. 4); they don't follow a "stranger" (v. 5). The people listen to him and not to the "Pharisees" (9:40), "all who came before me" (v. 8). He is the only "gate" (v. 9) to eternal "life" (v. 10), to freedom ("come in and go out", v. 9, a Jewish idiom), and to nourishment beyond measure ("find pasture ... abundantly").