

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Luke 12:32-40

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

Luke 12: 32 - 40

This passage is a continuation of an address that Jesus made only to his disciples (Luke 12:22). These verses have parallels in Matthew 6: 19 - 21 (where they are spoken to a crowd in the Sermon on the Mount) and Matthew 24: 42 - 51 (where they are addressed to the disciples on the Mount of Olives just before Jesus' arrest).

Rather than our usual background material on this text, this week we are offering an illustration of a sharp contrast with Jesus' words. We hope it will be useful to you.

Although some debate lingers as to the exact identification of the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the inhabitants of Qumran, there are many things known about them. They were Jews who lived in the site from the second century B.C. until about A.D. 72 when the site was destroyed by the Roman army. (Apparently, the site was abandoned following an earthquake in the late first century B.C. but was re-established about the turn of the era.)

These Jews lived in opposition to the Temple authorities in Jerusalem. They considered themselves to be the true Israelites who were uncorrupted by wealth, power, and contact with the Roman Gentiles. Under the leadership of a high priest, they lived communally and were required to turn over all of their possessions to the community as a condition of membership. They also expected God to re-insert himself into human history to purify Israel and that this event was imminent.

The Community (which is how they referred to themselves) considered themselves to be exiled from Jerusalem and to be an encampment. Turning to the Hebrew Scriptures - which they did in all things - they used this passage to be a guide: *You shall have a designated area outside the camp to which you shall go. With your utensils you shall have a trowel; when you relieve yourself outside, you shall dig a hole with it and then cover up your excrement. Because the LORD your God travels along with your camp, to save you and to hand over your enemies to you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.* -- Deuteronomy 23: 12 - 14

There are two different scrolls describing where latrines should be located. The Temple Scroll (11QT 46) requires that the latrines should be located to the northwest at a distance of 3000 cubits. (A cubit is approximately 1.5 feet.) The War Scroll (1QM 7) marks the distance as 2000 cubits. In 2006 it was announced that an Israeli archaeologist and an American textual scholar had in fact located latrines 2000 cubits to the northwest of Qumran. (For more information, see http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2006-11/uonc-rlr110306.php)

Another scroll - the Damascus Document (4Q 265) - lists some of the regulations for keeping the Sabbath. In this document, the maximum distance for walking on the Sabbath was 1000 cubits. According to first century Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, the Qumran Community handled this logistical contradiction by simply forbidding any of its members to use the latrine on the Sabbath.

While on the one hand we can admire the devotion of the Qumran Community, they took their commitment to ritual purity farther than many of us would wish to go. Fortunately we have the gospel; the “good news” from Jesus himself: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”. Rather than strict adherence to a series of minute rules and regulations, Jesus says it gives God pleasure to give us his kingdom. It makes for a stark contrast and gives us cause for both gratitude and joy!