

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 9: 1-4

^{9:1} But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ^{9:2} The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined. ^{9:3} You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ^{9:4} For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Commentary

Isaiah says that a time will come (“the latter time”) when God “will make glorious”, show his power, to three northern regions of Israel made provinces of Assyria after the conquest of 733 BC: “the way of the sea” (Dor), “the land beyond the Jordan” (Gilead) and “Galilee” (Megiddo). (Galilee was known as multi-ethnic, hence “nations”). The current “anguish” inflicted by God through the Assyrian king upon the Israelites there (the tribes of “Zebulun” and “Naphtali”), will end. The tense of the verbs is mixed perfect and future, so when the “latter time” will be is hard to tell; perhaps it is in the distant future. (In biblical times, northern Israel never regained its freedom.)

As “on the day of Midian” (v. 4), when Gideon led the people of Israel to defeat a vastly superior force of Midianites with God’s help, the people will be freed from oppression. (“Yoke”, “bar” and “rod” are symbols of oppression.) But this conquest will be a holy war; in such a battle, none of the plunder can be kept, for it is God’s. God will increase the numbers of the Israelites. They will rejoice before God (“you”) as they do in times of plentiful harvest and of victory in battle (“when dividing plunder”). Vv. 6-7 are familiar to us from Christmas: “For a child has been born to us ...”. Originally written to prophesy the continuance of the house of David, we also see these words as foretelling Jesus’ birth.

Reflection

Faith is sometimes perceived as a lifelong walk through intermittent conditions of darkness and light, cloud and shadow, joy and pain. When have YOU felt like one who has walked in darkness, and yet have come to see a great light?

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

^{1:10} Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ^{1:11} For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ^{1:12} What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ^{1:13} Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ^{1:14} I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ^{1:15} so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ^{1:16} (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ^{1:17} For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ^{1:18} For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Commentary

Background: *Corinth was a major port which also commanded the land route from the Peloponnesus peninsula to central Greece. An industrial and ship-building center, it was also a center for the arts. Its population was diverse, culturally and religiously. In this epistle, Paul answers two letters he has received concerning lack of harmony and internal strife in the Corinthian church, a church he had founded. Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus (now in Turkey), probably in 57 AD.*

Last week we noted Paul's omission of faith, hope and love for each other as gifts of the Spirit prominent in the Christian community at Corinth. In this reading, we learn of divisions in the church there. Paul appeals for commonality in their thinking about the faith and in their vision for the church. He has heard from "Chloe's people" (v. 11), who are either:

- members of, and slaves in, her household, or
- the church that meets in her home, or
- those who look to her as leader,

that their factiousness has reached the level of recrimination ("quarrels"). We do not know what the three (or four) factions believed; perhaps those who "belong to Christ" (v. 12) give allegiance to him without the mediation (and the participation) of the church. ("Cephas" is Peter.)

V. 13 presents three rhetorical questions, to which Paul expects a negative answer (as the Greek shows). The sarcasm is biting! (By "Christ" he means the world-wide church.) To put loyalty to a leader above fidelity to Christ is unacceptable. While Paul probably baptized the first converts in Corinth ("Crispus", v. 14, "Gaius" and "the household of Stephanas", v. 16), his prime mission is to teach the faith (v. 17). Claims of belonging to Paul are unfounded. All are baptized in the name of Christ, so all "belong" to him. Paul teaches straight-forwardly, relying on the message, the "power" (v. 17) of the "cross of Christ" to convince people – not "eloquent wisdom", by appealing to reason with clever arguments and rhetorical prowess. To those who

hear the message and do not accept it and trust in it, it is “foolishness” about a man who died an ignominious death; they “are perishing” both now and when Christ comes again. But to the faithful it bespeaks how powerful God is.

Reflection

Many people today regard “the message about the cross” as foolishness, just as they did in Paul’s time. There is something very counter-intuitive about worshipping a God who went to a very shameful and public death, isn’t there? Where do you find the “power” in such a reversal?

Matthew 4:12-23

^{4:12} Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ^{4:13} He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ^{4:14} so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ^{4:15} “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles ^{4:16} the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” ^{4:17} From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ^{4:18} As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea for they were fishermen. ^{4:19} And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ^{4:20} Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ^{4:21} As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ^{4:22} Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ^{4:23} Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Commentary

Jesus has been tempted by the devil in the wilderness. His responses show his complete dedication to the will and purpose of God. He has refused to use his divine power to his own human ends. Now he withdraws from “Nazareth” (v. 13) to “Capernaum”, so he can begin his mission safe from government interference. (John the Baptist has been arrested. Sepphoris, near Nazareth, was a Roman administrative center. If the authorities seek to arrest him, he can escape more easily from Capernaum – by boat – than from Nazareth.) Matthew is keen to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies: he quotes Isaiah in condensed form (vv. 15-16) to show that Jesus is the future ideal king, the Messiah. (In Isaiah, the “sea” is the Mediterranean; here it is the Sea of Galilee.)

“From that time” (v. 17) marks a milestone: the launch of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus proclaims: turn back to godly ways, to making God part of your way of thinking, for the completion of God’s plan for all created beings is close! Vv. 18-22 tell of the calling of the first four disciples. (We know “Simon” as “Peter”.) Jesus the teacher invites them to follow him, speaking in their terms (“fish for people”, v. 19). They give up their trade and “immediately” (v. 20) begin a radically different way of life. Jesus expects, and receives, prompt obedience. He

proclaims the “good news” (v. 23) in both word and deed (healing). His ministry is to Jews, but people from “Syria” (v. 24), “the Decapolis” (v. 25, Hellenistic towns) and “beyond the Jordan” also come to him to hear his message.

Reflection

Evangelism – telling others the Good News – is a duty and a privilege of every one of Jesus’ disciples. This faith of ours is passed on from one person to the next. How good are you at fishing for people?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 27: 1, 4-9

¹ The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
**The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?**
⁴ One thing I asked of the Lord,
that I will seek after,
**that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in the Lord’s temple.**

⁵ The Lord will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble,
will conceal me under the cover of his tent,
and will set me high upon a rock.
⁶ **And now my head shall be lifted up
above my enemies round about me;
and I will offer sacrifices in the Lord’s tent
with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.**

⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
⁸ **“Come,” my heart said, “seek the Lord’s face.”
Your face, O Lord, I seek.**
⁹ Hide not your face from me.
turn not your servant away in anger,
for you have been my help.

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**