

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.

Genesis 32:22-31

^{32:22} The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Penuel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Commentary

The Old Testament passages for the last few weeks have brought Jacob's life nearly full circle. Now he is coming back home with wives, children, servants – outwardly a prosperous man, but inwardly troubled. Soon he would meet Esau. A clear identity for the man who attacked Jacob that night is not given. Verse 24 says it was "a man"; Hosea (12:3-4) says an angel. But most interpreters have understood this to be God in the form of a man. Jacob was wrestling with God: and since both possessed great strength, neither prevailed. His new name, Israel, meaning "one who struggles with God," represented a new identity, one which came to characterize not only him but the people who came after him. Jacob was wrestling with himself as well. His past was catching up with him. His past, his conscience, and his fears were battling within him. Some have referred to this as Jacob's "dark night of the soul."

Reflection

Can we ever get beyond the effects of our past sins and mistakes? Even though forgiven, does the residue still take its toll? How do we come to terms with our past in order to have peace in the present and hope for the future?

Romans 9:1-5

^{9:1} I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Commentary

Verse 1 seems to be a reaction to some criticism Paul had received – that is, that he seemed to be uncaring of his own Jewish people. Did this criticism come from Christians or Jews or both? We don't know. One can only imagine what Paul went through soon after his conversion. Before that he had been by his own words more zealous for the law than any Pharisee. But now he had joined the very movement that once he had so vigorously opposed. His Jewish friends could not have held him in too high of esteem for that. Paul makes a solemn oath here – calling on Christ, his own conscience, and the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the truth of what he's about to say – that he loves his people with all his heart.

Reflection

Have you ever been in a situation in which lies (or partial truths) had been told about you? How did you feel? What did you do? What insights can you glean from Paul and the psalmist in dealing with this if it should happen again?

Matthew 14:13-21

^{14:13} Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring

them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Commentary

Put yourself in the place of the disciples. Here they were out in the wilderness. They barely had enough for themselves. How could they possibly feed five thousand men, plus women and children? Perhaps a revered prophet like Elisha or Elijah could pull off a miracle (during another famine, Elisha fed one hundred persons; this miracle story was part of the oral tradition of Jesus and his disciples), but for them it seemed like an impossible task. In fact, in Mark one of the disciples replies sarcastically, "What do you want us to do, Jesus, take two hundred denarii (over nine months' wages for a laborer) and buy them food?" We do not know exactly what happened that day. Regardless of how this was done or where they got the baskets, the point is that the people were fed! In the hands of Jesus even the most limited of resources can be multiplied.

Reflection

When have you faced an enormous task with meager resources, only to see your fish and loaves made more than adequate for the need?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 17:1-7, 15

- ^{17:1} Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
- ² From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right.
- ³ If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
- ⁴ As for what others do,
by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
- ⁵ **My steps have held fast to your paths;**
my feet have not slipped.
- ⁶ I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
- ⁷ Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O savior of those who seek refuge

from their adversaries at your right hand.

**¹⁵ As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.**

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.**