

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.

Acts 5:27-32

^{5:27} When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Commentary

Tension between the apostles and the Temple authorities had been increasing from the beginning of Acts. The authorities had finally made their move, imprisoning the apostles. An angel (whether a supernatural power or a human accomplice we do not know) freed them from prison and sent them back to preaching. When the priests sent for the apostles, the prison was found empty; and the apostles were brought in again from the court. The high priest was amazed that his authority had been so openly flouted, but Peter spoke what our lesson from Revelation will also proclaim—it is God who demands our first and complete allegiance. Peter concluded boldly by proclaiming his message even to the Sanhedrin. The priest was aware that, by decrying injustice and publicly exposing a legalized murder on trumped-up charges, the apostles were provoking unseen powers or the wrath of a fickle populace to bring retribution down on the guilty ones. Oppressive regimes depend on the silence and collusion of their frightened people and apathetic neighbors. We can easily remember the horrifying situations of Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa, and others in history. Silence is not, however, the way of the Jewish and Christian prophets. The same powers that protect themselves by killing dissidents will also try to silence the prophets. The call of God, however, is to speak up for spilled blood, to keep crying for justice.

Reflection

The apostles understood that they must obey God rather than people. When have you been confronted with the choice between serving God's purpose and fulfilling human expectations? How did you respond, and what were the results?

Revelation 1:4-8

^{1:4} John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. ⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Commentary

This strong emphasis on the imminent coming of Christ is part of John's strategy for helping these congregations make faithful choices in their varied circumstances. He set before them the crisis of God's judgment in the world through Christ and then called them to weigh all their options and make their choices that they would not be found among those who suffer on that day. He reminded them that they do not belong to the secular order, but instead that they are citizens of heaven. The second contribution of this reading concerns the character and work of Jesus. First, strong political claims are made about Jesus. He is named the ruler of secular kings, and they would be made accountable to him. Christians are emboldened to resist the tyranny of a worldly ruler where yielding would compromise their commitment to the one God. Also, Jesus has fulfilled God's promise by bringing together a Kingdom for God—people set apart as priests (consecrated for God's service). Finally, John calls his followers to bear witness to the truth of God's reign and Rome's oppression—exposing that the emperor is *not* the channel of divine favor for the world and that Rome is *not* God's only instrument of peace and security. It is, instead, the Body of Christ.

Reflection

Revelation calls Christians to live fully and faithfully in the light of Christ's coming. How real is that expectation for you?

John 20:19-31

^{20:19} When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." ²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Commentary

Thomas had missed the first appearance of Jesus, and the testimony of his friends had not been enough to persuade him that Jesus was indeed alive again. Jesus appeared, and without needing to touch Jesus, Thomas made the climatic confession of the gospel, acclaiming Jesus as "my Lord and my God." In so doing, he accepted the truth of Jesus' claim to be one with the Father. This confession had political overtones for the first readers of the gospel, for at the end of the first century the emperor Domitian was frequently addressed as "my lord and god," according to some historians. John was reminding his readers in this way that only one has the power over life, death, and life beyond death—and that is Christ.

Reflection

What doubts have you had about the faith claims of the Christian gospel? How have these been resolved? How is believing something different than knowing something of the basis of reading or observation?

- ^{150:1} Praise the LORD!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
- ² Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
- ³ Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
- ⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
- ⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
- ⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

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.