

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 42:1-9

^{42:1} Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ² He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. ⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Commentary

In 41:1, God speaks to Israelites scattered around the Mediterranean (“coastlands”, also in 42:4) in courtroom language, calling them together “for judgment”. God has “roused a victor from the east” (41:2, Cyrus) to serve him by conquering nations. God has acted in the past (“first”, 41:4) and will prophesy a coming revelation of himself (“last”). Other nations, and the gods they choose, are powerless, for they seek “courage” in what humans make (41:5-7). God demands: “set forth your case” (41:21): prove that you can foretell the future based on the past (“former things”, 41:22)! They cannot (41:28), but God can.

42:1-4 is one of four Servant Songs, poems about God’s special agent who will fulfill his purpose for the faithful community; though innocent, he will suffer for his people. People of other nations choose their gods, but God will select his “servant”, his “chosen”; he has anointed this person (or Israel) with his “spirit”. When the agent comes, he will be unobtrusive and quiet (42:2, unlike Cyrus), gentle, respectful of others, and patient (v. 3). He will “bring forth justice”, i.e. take legal decisions ratifying and executing God’s will. He will not fail (“faint”, 42:4) nor be discouraged (“crushed”) until he has achieved God’s purposes; he will win over people to God’s ways (“teaching”). He will continue to do what God did in the past (42:5): he, the creator, is the source of life for his people (as he was in Adam); he will give his “spirit” to those who follow him. God called Israel as his people, led and “kept” (42:6, Revised English Bible: “formed”, as he *formed* Adam) them, and swore a pact with them. They are to

bring enlightenment to others (“as ... a light to the nations”, [42:6](#)), to set them free. [42:8-9](#) returns to the courtroom: God’s name is *Yahweh* (“the LORD”); he alone is God. Having seen his integrity in his acts in the past, his people can be sure that the “new things” he announces will indeed happen. He will bring his integrity to all ([42:1](#)).

Reflection

As the New Year begins, we need reminding that God will be faithful to the promises that God has made to us in the past. Isaiah tells us that the same One who made the heavens and the earth is capable of doing a new thing in our lives - even there! In what areas of your life would you welcome God's re-creating touch, this January?

Acts 10:34-43

^{10:34} Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. ³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Commentary

The Book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel according to Luke. Beginning with Jesus' ascension, Luke tells the story of the beginnings of the church. By no means a comprehensive history, it does however describe the spread of the church from Jerusalem to all of Palestine, and as far as Greece.

Peter is visiting Cornelius, an officer of the occupying Roman army and already a believer in God. Peter breaks Jewish law by visiting a Gentile. The Greek here is rough, full of grammatical errors, unlike the rest of Acts, so we may well have Peter's unedited words. He tells the assembled company that God does not favor Jews over others: anyone, whatever his nationality, who reveres God and lives in unison with him “is acceptable to him” (v. [35](#)). In vv. [36-38](#), Peter summarizes Jesus’ earthly ministry; he applies prophecies found in Isaiah [52:7](#) and [61:1](#) to Christ. (Psalm [107:20](#) says “... he sent out his word ...”) Christ is *Kyrios*, “Lord of all” (v. [36](#)). In baptism, the Father “anointed” (v. [38](#)) Jesus “with the Holy Spirit” and with the “power” of God (but he was already integral with God’s very being.) The good news (“message”, v. [37](#)) spread throughout Palestine (“Judea”); he “went about” (v. [38](#)) “doing good” and combating evil, doing deeds so powerful that it is clear that he was God’s agent: he is a model for all to follow.

He suffered death as one guilty of a capital offence, per Deuteronomy 21:23: he hung on a “tree” (v. 39) and was cursed. (By Jesus’ time, the “tree”, a pole, had acquired a cross-arm.) But, although cursed, the Father “raised him” (v. 40) and “allowed him to appear” to those chosen by God – to be “witnesses” (v. 41). In Luke 24:41-43, Jesus eats broiled fish with them, so he was clearly humanly alive again, i.e. physically brought back from death, resurrected. Jesus, the *Kyrios*, is the one appointed by God to set up the Kingdom and to judge both those who are alive, and those who have died, at Judgment Day (v. 42). Then v. 43: he fulfills many Old Testament prophecies: he is the one through whom sins are forgiven. Forgiveness is now available to “everyone who believes”, not just to Jews.

Reflection

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality." It must have been very difficult for Peter to utter those words - for he had believed that God was partial to his Chosen People, the Jews. To admit the pagan peoples of the ancient world, the "Gentiles," into the embrace of God's favor was truly radical. As always, God is much further along the path of inclusion than we are.

Matthew 3:13-17

^{3:13} Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Commentary

John the Baptist has appeared, calling people to repentance, to turning back to God’s ways, to the way of life to which Israel committed itself at Sinai. He tells of the nearness of God’s kingdom, the time of complete fulfillment of God’s promises to humans. A new era, in which God rules, is almost here! John seeks to dissuade Jesus from seeking baptism but (in words that we do not fully understand) Jesus insists: for the present, being baptized by you is to perfectly fulfill the Father’s will. In being baptized, Jesus joins the community now walking in God’s ways. His baptism shows his continuity with God’s will seen in the Old Testament:

- the coming of the “Spirit of God” (v. 16), an Old Testament term, shows he is the Messiah;
- the words spoken by the heavenly “voice” (v. 17) are much like Isaiah 42:1: Jesus is the agent of God who will suffer for others – not the kind of Messiah people expected.

“Beloved” is not sentiment; rather it indicates God’s will. The “voice” (v. 17) says three things:

- Jesus really is God’s “Son”;
- he is chosen for ministry to God’s people, and
- God approves his coming for baptism and his joining with his people in preparing for the coming crisis.

Reflection

"... suddenly the heavens were opened." The voice of God, and the appearance of God's Spirit as a dove, constitute what is called a "theophany" - a revelation of God to human beings. Sometimes God does give us these insights into his nature. Have you ever experienced a theophany? Those who have, say it is an experience like no other.

Responsive Psalter

from **Psalm 29**

29:1 Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.

3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"

10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.

11 May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

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.