

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.

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

^{34:11} For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.

¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

²⁰ Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²² I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

²⁴ And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

Commentary

In the church year, the last Sunday before Advent is called the Festival of Christ the King (the Reign of Christ). This text deals with one key dimension of Christ's reign—judgment. Ezekiel was a prophet of the Exile. Part of the first deportation of the Judean elite in 598 BC, he delivered the message of God near Babylon. Here, we see part of God's answer to the news of Ezekiel 33:21—Jerusalem had fallen. This chapter is a turning point for the book, which now turns to promises of restoration, including plans for a restored temple. The fulfillment of this prophecy would begin the restoration of the Davidic line of kings, particularly a king whose heart would be after God, like David's, and not after self-interest. In this time, God would bring

peace, which is described as the freedom from fear, from want, and from violence. Such peace would only come from justice and the abolition of exploitation.

Reflection

The Bible consistently depicts God as taking up the cause of those unable to defend themselves. Liberation theologians call this the “preferential option for the poor,” which is the basis for calling Christians to join the struggle of the dispossessed for justice and equality. Does God really take sides?

Ephesians 1:15-23

^{1:15} I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Commentary

Ephesians appears to have been written and dispatched (through Tychicus and Onesimus) along with letters to the Colossians and Philemon. While the last two letters addressed a specific situation, Ephesians was written as a general, edifying letter intended for circulation among different churches in Asia Minor. This letter expands the people’s vision from their inheritance in God to their inheritance in and among the world. The writer’s words about the calling together of Jew and Gentile into one church expanded Ezekiel’s vision of God’s gathering the scattered together and making a people for God’s own possession. He prayed that each Christian, including Gentiles, would gain a sense of the grand scheme of God’s work in ordinary events. Stronger than death, God’s power had brought Christ to his appointed destiny, just as it would bring those “in Christ” to theirs.

Reflection

How can we discern God’s work in ordinary events?

Matthew 25:31-46

^{25:31} "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Commentary

This parable of the Last Judgment emphasizes the necessity of being prepared when the Son of Man comes. This passage makes up for any vagueness in the moral exhortations of the three parables that precede it. Interpreting the passage depends largely on whom one understands to be included in "all the nations" and who constitutes the "least" of Jesus' sisters or brothers. According to one reading, the Gentile nations will be judged based on how they treat the Jews (Jesus' ethnic kin) in their midst. Other Jewish texts (such as Second Baruch) do articulate such a vision, but identifications are more explicit. A second reading identifies the "least" with Christian missionaries. A third reading suggests that all people will be held accountable based on how they respond to the needs of the poor in their midst, with whom Jesus so closely identifies.

Reflection

How have we been attentive to the needs of Jesus' family? How have we shut our ears to their cries for help?

Psalm 100

^{100:1} Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.

² **Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.**

³ Know that the LORD is God.
**It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people,
and the sheep of his pasture.**

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

⁵ For the LORD is good;
**his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.**

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.