

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.

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

^{4:11} At that time it will be said to this people and to Jerusalem: A hot wind comes from me out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse-- ¹² a wind too strong for that. Now it is I who speak in judgment against them. ²² "For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good." ²³ I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. ²⁴ I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. ²⁵ I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. ²⁶ I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. ²⁷ For thus says the LORD: The whole land shall be a desolation; yet I will not make a full end. ²⁸ Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.

Commentary

Our reading is verses selected from a poem. God, speaking through Jeremiah, warns that a foe "from the north" (v. 6, probably the Babylonian army) is approaching. The people of Judah have not heeded God's call for conversion, so God expresses his anger through invasion. False prophets have deceived Judah into complacency (v. 10), but the enemy marauds like a "lion" (v. 7) in the north of the land. The political leaders will lack courage and the religious ones will be "appalled" (v. 9) when the army arrives. God's judgement will sweep over the land like a "hot wind" (v. 11, a sirocco). (A normal wind was used to "winnow or cleanse", v. 11, to separate the wheat from the chaff.) The enemy, with his chariots and cavalry, will come like a "whirlwind" (v. 13) and "swifter than eagles". There is still a chance for conversion but the people, stubbornly set in their ways, will not heed God's call (v. 14). Judah will be besieged, for she "has rebelled against me, says the LORD" (v. 17). The people's conduct has brought "doom" (v. 18) upon them. In vv. 19-21, Jeremiah tells of his mixed emotions. Even though devoted to his people, God has called him to announce destruction and punishment. May the disaster be as short as possible! How "foolish" (v. 22) and "stupid" his people are! They may have intellectual knowledge of God, but true "understanding" is living lives inspired by his truths.

Vv. 23-28 present another picture of the coming devastation. It will be as though the earth has returned to its primordial un-ordered (chaotic) state, “waste and void”; the scene will be shocking to “the heavens”. The “fruitful” (v. 26) land of Israel will be utter “desolation” (v. 27), incapable of supporting a population (“there was no one at all”, v. 25), and unable to feed even the “birds”. But this will not be the complete “end” (v. 27c) of life on earth, for some (not necessarily people of Judah) will see the disaster and “mourn” (v. 28). Those remaining will see the darkening of the skies (“the heavens above [will] grow black”) as though the end times have come. In the final images (vv. 30-31), Jerusalem is personified – as a prostitute dressed to seduce the enemy – but the city will suffer great anguish, like a woman in childbirth.

Reflection

Today’s reading is a case of “crime and punishment”: God’s punishment for Israel’s crimes of unfaithfulness and apostasy. Does the Lord’s punishment fit the nation’s crimes, in your view? Where is the hope in this passage?

1 Timothy 1:12-17

^{1:12} I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, ¹³ even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Commentary

The author has warned against false teachers (“teachers of the law”, v. 7) who indulge in elaborations on, and deviations from, the faith (in the sense of the *facts* of Christianity) rather than living the kind of life these truths demand. “Love” (v. 5) should be the basis for Christian conduct – through personal integrity, “a good conscience” and “sincere faith”. Mosaic “law is good” (v. 8) but those who have “understanding” (v. 9), who lead Christ-like lives, have no need of it.

Now, in vv. 12-17, the author speaks as Paul. God has given his free gift of love to Paul, even though he previously distorted God’s message (“blasphemer”, v. 13) and persecuted Christians. God showed him mercy because he did not know Christ, “had acted ignorantly in unbelief”. The doctrine that “Christ ... came into the world to save sinners” (v. 15) is found in the gospels; it is worthy of belief (“sure”). Paul is the greatest of sinners (“foremost”) for his pre-conversion activities, but God pardoned even him. (God did seek out Paul.) As such, he is a prime

“example” (v. 16) for all who come to believe, who are converted. As “King of the [earthly] ages” (v. 17) and yet “immortal, invisible”, God is transcendent.

Reflection

If we recall that Paul – the “apostle to the Gentiles” had a former life as Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of Christians, this passage may take on a special significance. Do you have a sense of gratitude to God for the pardon you’ve received, as a sinner?

Luke 15:1-10

^{15:1} Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Commentary

Jesus is keeping company with “tax collectors and sinners”, people avoided and despised by apparently godly people like “the Pharisees and the scribes” (v. 2). Their observation (v. 2) begs the question: *are any beyond God’s mercy?* Tax collectors were known for their unethical behaviors. The Roman authorities contracted out collection of taxes; how a tax collector got the money was up to him. Usury, fraud and excessive profits were common. Tax collectors worked for tax farmers, who were usually foreigners. As such, they were ritually unclean.

Now Jesus defends associating with these people, using parables. Our reading includes two: vv. 4-6 and 8-9. Jesus asks *if you had many and lost one, wouldn’t you search until you found it?* expecting the answer *of course I would!* He explains the parables in v. 7 and v. 10: God is shepherd/housewife; the lost sheep/coin are people who repent, who turn to God. God willingly accepts them; in fact, he rejoices, as does the community (“friends and neighbors”, vv. 6, 9)! Neither the sheep nor the coin can find their owner; God cares about those unable to find him; he seeks them. But, as so often in a parable, there are twists to them which helps people remember them: what shepherd would leave his flock “in the wilderness” (v. 4)? The Pharisees would find God symbolized by a woman as outrageous, and first-century shepherds were

considered lawless and dishonest. (The *coin*, v. 8 was a *drachmas*, a day's wage.) Would a shepherd really care about one sheep out of 100? God is like that!

Reflection

"Jesus came to seek and save the lost," the Epistles tell us. These parables of Jesus' are prime examples of God as champion and savior of the least, the last, and the lost. In our society today, in September of 2013, whom do YOU believe are "the least, the last, and the lost"? What is our role in saving them?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 14

^{14:1} Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.

² **The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.**

³ They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.

⁴ **Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the LORD?**

⁵ There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the company of the righteous.

⁶ **You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.**

⁷ O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob will rejoice; Israel will be glad.

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.