

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 2:42-47

^{2:42} They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Commentary

The early believers did not separate from the Temple in Jerusalem until it was destroyed. In fact, they went there together at designated times throughout the day for prayers, teaching and worship. Most likely what the apostles taught was what they remembered from Jesus' teachings (see John 14:26). The Greek word for this is *didache* (teaching). They also congregated in their homes, eating together and also most likely serving Holy Communion. Christians have always found strength and a renewed sense of unity by sitting in fellowship around the table. There was a sense of awe and expectation as the growing community worshipped God together. Some point out that Luke's snapshots of the early church are idealistic. Maybe that's true. We know from reading the rest of Acts that the church would soon have problems and challenges. There can be no doubt, however, that something profound had happened to these people. They had been transformed. And through them and those after them the world would begin to be transformed as well.

Reflection

The early believers had vigorous and gracious discipline (v. 42). Do you have a personal rule of life and faith? What can we learn from this early Christian community about ways the church must contribute to nurturing our spiritual lives?

1 Peter 2:19-25

^{2:19} For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. ²² "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." ²³ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Commentary

Today's verses from First Peter are set in the larger context of an emphasis on submission to and respect for authority—political, societal, familial, and, ultimately, divine authority. Peter was urging his readers to use their freedom responsibly and to live exemplary lives so as to make an upright witness and give no cause to their detractors for criticism or persecution. In this connection he counseled Christian slaves to respect and obey their masters, even when they are treated unfairly (2:13-18). In the stratified class system of Peter's day, slavery went largely unquestioned. Nor did Peter challenge it in this passage, probably because Christians, a tiny persecuted minority, were in no position to take on a major institution of the Roman Empire.

Reflection

When is it justified to "stick up for our rights?" How can we discern when to acquiesce and when to protest nonviolently?

John 10:1-10

^{10:1} Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Commentary

Jesus was a master at using objects and illustrations from everyday life to convey his teachings. This passage (and most of John 10) tells how he used the images of sheep and shepherd to help explain his relationship with his followers. In a society of farmers and herders, the relationship of a shepherd with his sheep would have been very familiar. Drawing upon these images, Jesus began by saying who he was not. His hearers knew well that sheep were very vulnerable animals for which the shepherd must offer extensive care. A lazy, careless or disinterested shepherd would neglect or endanger the flock (the nation). Jesus would not be like the would-be shepherds. Jesus knows his sheep by name and calls them, and they know his voice. Some who heard did not understand. Jesus' primary audience may still have been the Pharisees addressed in John 9. Their failure to understand was not just a matter of intellect but of the heart. These images Jesus used have a movement. The shepherd and gatekeeper not only protect and lead the sheep but go well beyond. They come to bring abundant life.

Reflection

There are so many would-be shepherds out there seeking us to follow them. Can you identify some? How can we discern the voice of our shepherd, Jesus, in all this noisy clamor?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 23

^{23:1} The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

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.