

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 58:1-9a (9b-12)

^{58:1} Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. ² Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. ³ "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ^{9a} Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. ^{9b} If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹ The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. ¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Commentary

Written after the Exile, this passage speaks of fasting, but its implications are wider: it encompasses the whole of the people's attitude towards God. Through the prophet, God issues a legal summons to "my people" for "their rebellion", for "their sins". They go to the Temple daily ("seek me", v. 2) and "delight" (in a sense) to know God's ways – but their "righteousness" (keeping the Law and seeking godly judgments) are purely ritual, external. Why, they ask, are you ignoring us, God? (v. 3a) He begins to explain in v. 3b: "you serve your own interest" (delight yourselves, not me) and (as slave masters did in Egypt) "oppress all your workers": there is a gulf between the rich and the poor. Because your lives outside the Temple are

inconsistent with your worship (v. 4a), God will not hear your pleas. You kid yourselves if you think an insincere show of fasting is “acceptable” (v. 5). (“Sackcloth” was worn by mourners and the penitent.) God demands a proper relationship with others, one free from “injustice” (v. 6) and servitude (“yoke”), one in which the rich “share” (v. 7) with the “hungry”, forming one community, giving to the less fortunate. When you do this, God will hear you (“light”, v. 8) “healing” you (restoring you to well-being), and protect you (both before and behind). He will be present with you. Verses 9-12 continue this theme, adding that contempt (“pointing” “the finger”) and slander (“speaking of evil”) are unacceptable. God will be present with his people, guiding them, strengthening them when they find their trust in him waning, and making them a source of good/godliness for others (“a spring of water”, v. 11). From v. 12, we learn that Jerusalem is still not yet fully rebuilt: God will help them mend the “breach” in the walls, and restore their heritage.

Reflection

Isaiah points up a glaring inconsistency in Israel’s service of God: the people worship him with sacrifices and festivals, but they fail the Lord in the way that they treat the poor, the homeless, the hungry. We cannot say we love God unless we act with love towards the less fortunate.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16)

^{2:1} When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. ⁶ Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷ But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³ And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. ¹⁶ "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Commentary

Paul has decried divisions in the church at Corinth: people have attached themselves to particular leaders because of their eloquence (and other personal traits). Now he says that

when he first “came to you”, he purposely avoided eloquence (“lofty words”) and gave the Spirit full reign in bringing people to Christ. To avoid a Pauline personality cult, he came neither promoting his own qualities (v. 3) nor using erudite (“plausible”, v. 4) rational arguments. What has happened at Corinth bespeaks *immaturity* in the faith.

While with “mature” (v. 6) Christians, he does speak “wisdom” (i.e. a total God-centered view of the cosmos – not popular wisdom, and not that of political and religious “rulers”), with the immature Christians at Corinth he speaks only basics of the good news: God’s plan of salvation, decreed by God before creation. He does so in order that they may reflect God’s power (“glory”, v. 8). (Had the “rulers” understood this plan, they would have let Jesus live.) But they are so immature (indeed “unspiritual”, v. 14) that even the basics are beyond them, (“secret and hidden”, v. 7). God has revealed to the mature “through the Spirit” (v. 10) “things” about God’s love (v. 9) that are hidden from others. Just as one person can never plumb the essence of another completely, so only the Spirit can know God comprehensively. Through the Spirit, *we* (the mature) understand God’s gifts to us (v. 12), which can only be described in spiritual terms. But most of you have never received such gifts, so they make no sense to you (“are foolishness”, v. 14); they are only discernable in a spiritual way. The mature do discern such gifts – and you should not doubt it (“scrutiny”, v. 15). You should refrain from *instructing them* – for they are one with Christ, of his “mind” (v. 16).

Reflection

Paul draws a distinction between “worldly wisdom” and God’s wisdom, and between the spiritually mature and those who have not been instructed by the Spirit of God. How do you recognize a spiritually-mature person when you meet one?

Matthew 5:13-20

^{5:13} "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. ¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Commentary

On a hill in Galilee, Jesus has described the qualities and rewards of the “blessed” (the Beatitudes, verses 3-11). Now Jesus uses homely metaphors to teach essential lessons about being disciples. “Salt” does not really lose its taste, but in Judaism it can become ritually unclean and need to be “thrown out”. (It was used to season incense and offerings to God.)

Jesus may also be thinking of the salt deposits around the Dead Sea: when heavily rained upon, they still look like salt but no longer are. A follower who loses his faith is useless, and will be discarded.

Jesus calls on disciples to be examples to others – of God’s ability to change lives (vv. 14-16). In so being, they will spread and make known God’s power (“glory”). (A Palestinian house had only one room and a sole opening: the door.) The life of disciples must be visible and attractive: as a “city” is. Now vv. 17-20: the “scribes and the Pharisees” were “righteous” for they kept the Law scrupulously, but Jesus says that such meritorious conduct is inadequate for admission to the Kingdom. As vv. 21-48 show, he preaches a religion that goes beyond the Law: one of the heart, of love and compassion. The gospel fulfills the Law, and exceeds it by adding grace. One of the ways he fulfills the Law is by looking at its intent, and not just the words used to express it. (For example, the Law says you shall not murder but Jesus says, in effect, you shall attempt never to impair your relations with another person.) Whoever regards the Law as he does, even if he or she fails sometimes, will gain entry into the Kingdom.

Reflection

“She is the salt of the earth.” “Don’t hide your light under a bushel.” Both of those phrases – derived from this passage – refer to honesty and forthrightness in how we present ourselves to the world. How do you interpret Jesus’ famous metaphors? How salty and luminous is your life?

Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 112:1-10

- ^{112:1} Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments.
- ² **Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.**
- ³ Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever.
- ⁴ **They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.**
- ⁵ It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice.
- ⁶ **For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever.**
- ⁷ They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.
- ⁸ **Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.**
- ⁹ They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor.
- ¹⁰ **The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.**

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.