

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 1:4-10

^{1:4} Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." ⁶ Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." ⁷ But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." ⁹ Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Commentary

The people of Israel have strayed from God's ways. In the late 600s BC, King Josiah guided the people back to godliness by removing all traces of foreign worship and by making Jerusalem the one place of worship. The prophet Jeremiah played a key role in Josiah's reforms.

"The word of the LORD" is a characteristic expression in this book: the message Jeremiah proclaims is God's word. The Hebrew word *yashar*, "formed," is a technical term for *created*; a potter *forms* clay into pottery. God has known Jeremiah since his first moment of existence – both intellectually and in his capacity for action. Even before that, God dedicated him, separated him for his purposes ("consecrated"), to serve him. Jeremiah is but a youth (probably in his early twenties), without experience and authority, but God will give him all necessary leadership abilities and support. God commissions Jeremiah through the symbolic action of touching his mouth (v. 9). In verses. 5 and 10, the "nations" and "kingdoms" are most likely Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt and Judah: the history of Israel is intertwined with that of the whole Near East. Jeremiah's mission is to do away with corruption, and to promote ethical conduct and godliness.

Reflection

Have you ever felt unready or not quite up to a task you've been called to perform? What gave you the courage to persevere? Have you ever sensed that God was calling you to something for which you felt unready?

Hebrews 12:18-29

12:18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ²⁵ See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken--that is, created things--so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Commentary

Apart from the concluding verses (which may have been added later), this book is more a sermon than a letter. Its name comes from its approach to Christianity: it is couched in Judaic ("Hebrew") terms and was clearly written for a Jewish audience.

The clue to understanding this difficult passage is that the author is making a contrast between the old covenant given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, with the new covenant given to humanity through Jesus (the "mediator" of vs. 24). The giving of the 10 Commandments was attended by fear, signs from God ("a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest,¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice") The old covenant was made on earth, but the new is in heaven ("Mount Zion ...", v. 22). The community celebrating it includes all the Christian faithful, the dead (who "have [already] come ... to the city" - "the firstborn", v. 23) and the exemplars of the Old Testament ("spirits of the righteous") who trusted in God despite not having the promises brought by Jesus. The "sprinkled blood" (v. 24) of Jesus, his death and resurrection that established the new covenant, speaks much more definitively of forgiveness than Abel's example. In verses 26-29, the author interprets God's words spoken through the prophet

Haggai as a reference to the Last Judgment. The kingdom that Christ has brought is unshakable, permanent, but those who “reject” (v. 25) him and his message will perish, *be consumed with fire* (v. 29), at the Last Day: God will “will shake not only the earth but also the heaven” (v. 26).

Reflection

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews sets up a stark contrast between the Old Covenant (the “before”) and the New Covenant in Jesus Christ (the “after”). What before-and-after difference has believing in Christ made in YOUR life?

Luke 13:10-17

^{13:10} Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Commentary

Luke is the third of the three “Synoptic Gospels” – the Gospel accounts that offer similar portrayals of Jesus’ life and deeds. Luke emphasizes God’s love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners and the infirm.

In the story of the healing of the crippled woman, Jesus shows what it means to be a citizen of God’s kingdom – through his actions. That he heals a woman and refers to her as a “daughter of Abraham” (v. 16), a full member of Jewish society, is remarkable: the kingdom is equally open to women and the sick. In Jesus’ day, physical and mental ailments were seen as the work of evil forces (“Satan”); the very being of someone with a serious ailment was thought to be hostile to God. The woman does not ask to be cured; no one asks on her behalf; Jesus notices her (“Jesus saw her”, v. 12). Her response to his saving action is to praise God (v. 13). Anyone could speak in the synagogue: the “leader” (v. 14) speaks to the “crowd”, but his words are directed at Jesus. He is blind to God’s kingdom.

Jesus’ rebuttal is clever, for while untying an ox or a donkey on the Sabbath was forbidden in one part of the Jewish book of laws, it was permitted in another. Jesus has “set free” (v. 12),

untied, the woman who was *tied* to Satan. If you can untie animals on the Sabbath, why not humans? Honor and “shame” (v. 17) were, and are, important in Near Eastern cultures. Realizing that Jesus is right, the “leader” (v. 14) and other “opponents” (v. 17) are shamed before the crowd, who rejoice in this wonder-worker. The kingdom is open to all when they turn to God.

Reflection

Have your obligations, duties, and responsibilities ever stood in the way of your pursuit of freedom in Christ? In other words, has your “culture” ever kept you from your “call”?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 71:1-6

- ^{71:1} In you, O LORD, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.
- ² **In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.**
- ³ Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
- ⁴ **Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.**
- ⁵ For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
- ⁶ **Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.**

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.