

**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.**

**Genesis 21:8-21**

<sup>8</sup> The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. <sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, <sup>10</sup> and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."<sup>11</sup> The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. <sup>12</sup> But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. <sup>13</sup> I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."<sup>14</sup> Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. <sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup> Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob. <sup>17</sup> God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. <sup>18</sup> Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." <sup>19</sup> Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. <sup>20</sup> God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. <sup>21</sup> While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

**Commentary**

Isaac has been born to Abraham and Sarah, in their old age, and has been circumcised, a sign of being one of God's people. Sarah has said, "God has brought laughter for me" (v. 6). Now aged three, Isaac is weaned: an occasion for a religious feast. 16:11, 16:16 identify Ishmael as "the son of Hagar" (v. 9), but he is not named in today's reading – an indication that he ranks lower than Isaac. (When Sarah was unable to bear Abraham a son, he exercised the legal option of producing an heir through a slave woman.) Sarah sees Ishmael "playing" (v. 9, or *laughing*) with Isaac (meaning *he laughs*). She sees a real threat to her own life so she asks Abraham to "cast out" (v. 10) Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham hesitates, for he loves Ishmael and ancient law forbade such a deed. God says to Abraham: go ahead, do as she asks, I will solve the problem; your line will continue through Isaac, and Ishmael will also become father of a nation (vv. 12-

13). Abraham is obedient to God: he provides Hagar with provisions, and throws her and her son out. When the water is exhausted, Hagar realizes that death is near (vv. 15-16). God hears Ishmael's cry (Ishmael means *God harkens*); Hagar sees a well. "God was with the boy" (v. 20): he grows up and becomes a nomad ("expert with the bow"), lives in northern Sinai ("Paran", v. 21) and marries an Egyptian – all points which indicate his exclusion from God's specific plan. Genesis continues with the story of Isaac.

### Reflection

In many ways, this is a difficult reading: it is challenging to our understanding of God's goodness to read that he instructed Abraham to send Hagar and her young son off into the wilderness, presumably to perish there. But there is redemption, and is it foreshadowed in the boy's name: Ishmael, or "God listens." God listened to Hagar's desperate cry, and saved mother and child from death. When has your understanding of God's mercy and justice been challenged, and how has God redeemed the time for you?

### Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? <sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— <sup>7</sup> because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. <sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

### Commentary

Paul has written of life before Christ: death was final, and "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). He now asks rhetorically: are we to go on sinning in order to receive even more grace? (Is this the basis for Christian morality?) His answer is *definitely not!*, and another question (v. 2). Baptism makes the difference for Christians. In baptism, we die to sin. We are baptized into Christ's death, as well as into his resurrection. We too are raised from death by the Father, so that we may "walk" (v. 4) in the new life. *Walking* implies conscience-based ethical conduct. There is no room for wanton sin in such a life.

Just as we have been grafted on to Christ in his death, so we too will share with him through a resurrection like his (v. 5). We know that we ceased to be dominated by sin and divine wrath ("our old self", v. 6) when we were baptized. This removed the effects of our waywardness, our *enslavement to sin*, but makes us ethically responsible for our actions. This is what baptism does (v. 7). Dying with Christ also includes living with him. Because Christ has risen, he will

“never die again” (v. 9) – this is unique, once-for-all-time act, an anticipation of the age to come. And then the answer to the question in v. 2: Christ “died to sin” in the sense that sinless, he died rather than disobey the Father, and in the context of a sinful world. He was raised by the Father (v. 4) in order that he might live “to God” (v. 10, as he has always done.) So, as Christ is the model for our lives, and it is he upon whom our lives are grafted, we too must leave sin behind and be “alive to God” (v. 11) in Christ.

### Reflection

Dying to sin and being “alive to God”: Death and resurrection were the pattern of Jesus’ life. His Resurrection opened the doors to eternal life for us. Have you known any smaller resurrections, deaths to sin and waywardness, in your own life?

### Matthew 10:24-39

<sup>24</sup> “The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. <sup>25</sup> It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household! <sup>26</sup> So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. <sup>27</sup> What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. <sup>28</sup> Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. <sup>30</sup> And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. <sup>32</sup> “Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. <sup>34</sup> Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – <sup>36</sup> a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’ <sup>37</sup> Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. <sup>38</sup> Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”

### Commentary

Jesus continues to prepare the twelve for the continuation of his mission. He is both “teacher” and “master”. His *disciples* are students. There is so much to learn that they should never set themselves up as authorities independent of him. He has been called “Beelzebul”, (v. 25, the prince of demons); his disciples will be called worse. Do not be intimidated. At the end of the era, all ungodly and godly behavior, now hidden, will be *made known* (v. 26). Now is the time to proclaim all that Jesus has told his disciples privately (v. 27). Do not fear your persecutors for they can only end your physical life; rather hold God in awe, for he can “destroy” (v. 28) you totally if you do not do his will. God cares for the life of even a *sparrow* (v. 29, sold as food in the market), so “do not be afraid” (v. 31) of losing the real life. Honest and forthright witness – and outright refusal to do so – will have eternal consequences (vv. 32-33). At the Last Day, Jesus

will testify to the Father for those who have witnessed faithfully; he will declare those who turn against the gospel unworthy of life in the Kingdom.

Jesus gives a new interpretation to Micah 7:6, a verse thought to foretell the breakdown of society as the end-times approach (vv. 34-36). Spreading the gospel will have unfortunate side-effects. There will be tension and division (even within families) between those who accept Jesus' message, and the demands it makes, and those who oppose his way. Christians must put loyalty to him above family loyalties (v. 37). Following Jesus involves the risk of death ("cross", v. 38). Finally, a paradox: if one aims to preserve one's earthly life, one will lose all ("life", v. 39), but one who dies for Jesus will find true life, eternal life.

### Reflection

How do you feel when you hear Jesus tell you that following him will mean "taking up a cross"? Discipleship sometimes led to martyrdom in the early days of the church, but it is no longer dangerous to be a Christian. Or is it? What sort of "death" are you willing to undergo for Christ's sake?

### Responsive Psalter

### Psalms 86: 1-10, 16-17

<sup>1</sup> Hear me, LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

<sup>2</sup> **Guard my life, for I am faithful to you; save your servant who trusts in you.**

You are my God; <sup>3</sup> have mercy on me, Lord, for I call to you all day long.

<sup>4</sup> **Bring joy to your servant, Lord, for I put my trust in you.**

<sup>5</sup> You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.

<sup>6</sup> **Hear my prayer, LORD; listen to my cry for mercy.**

<sup>7</sup> When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me.

<sup>8</sup> **Among the gods there is none like you, Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.**

<sup>9</sup> All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name.

<sup>10</sup> **For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.**

<sup>16</sup> Turn to me and have mercy on me; show your strength in behalf of your servant; save me, because I serve you just as my mother did.

<sup>17</sup> **Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.**

### 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.