

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 18:1-11

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²“Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.” ³So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. ⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. ⁷At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. ⁹And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Commentary

When Babylon captured Jerusalem in 587, Jeremiah emigrated to Egypt. God called him to be a prophet to Judah and surrounding nations, amid these political and religious convulsions He was a witness to the return to worship of the Lord (instituted by the Judean king Josiah), and then (after Josiah's death in battle in 609), the return of many of the people to paganism. Jeremiah, inspired by God, uses an example story, an allegory involving a potter and his wheel, to try to teach the people and rulers of Judah a lesson. A potter's "wheel" (v. 3) consisted of two stones on a vertical axis. He turned the lower wheel with his feet and placed a lump of clay on the upper wheel. Thus, he formed a vessel with his hands as the wheels turned. During the Israelite period, great skill was required because the wheels had little momentum. As today, if the vessel distorted during turning, the potter collapsed the clay back into a lump and began again. Jeremiah explains the symbolism in v. 6. God is the potter and humanity the clay. Verses 7-8 say that if a people who have done "evil" turn from it, God will listen and will change their fate: he will refrain from bringing "disaster" on them, just as a potter can re-make a failed vessel. But the opposite is also true of God: In verses 9-10, God says through Jeremiah that even though he nurtures a nation, if it deviates from his ways and fails to listen to his reproof, its fate will be bad. Verses 11-12 apply this to Judah. Undergo conversion, ("turn now ..."), end

your state of evil-ness, or suffer the consequences! God the almighty Potter can un-make his earthly vessels as easily as he'd made them! But in v. 12 Jeremiah sees no hope of salvation for Judah; her people choose to continue in their ungodly ways.

Reflection

Returning to the analogy of the potter and his clay: does this image of God as Maker and Shaper of the lives of people and nations resonate with you? How much do you believe that we – the lumps of clay on the wheel – can do to shape our own destinies?

Philemon 1-21

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. ⁸ For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Commentary

This is the Letter to Philemon in its entirety. It is the shortest of the epistles written by Paul. He sends Onesimus, a run-away slave and recent convert to Christianity, back to his master carrying this letter. Paul does not address the general question of slavery as a social institution, but he does plead with Philemon, on the basis of love, to take Onesimus back and treat him as a fellow Christian. This appears to be a personal letter to Philemon, a slave owner, but it is also addressed to "the church in your house" (v. 2). In the first century, the Christian community gathered at a member's house. It is likely that the letter was read during worship. "Onesimus" – whose name means "useful" in Greek - is a slave who's has run away

from Philemon's house. While visiting Paul, he has been converted to Christianity: he is Paul's "child". A penalty for leaving a master was death, so Paul is in a delicate position, pleading for the man's life. Paul did not argue against the evil of slavery, because he had higher priorities; rather he pleads for *this one slave*. Rather than "command" (v. 8), he *appeals* "on the basis of love" (v. 9), the very foundation of the faith. The slave's fate is in his master's hands; Philemon can choose to preserve his life. May his "good deed" (v. 14) be "voluntary", of his own free will. Onesimus the slave has been changed from "useless" (v. 11) to "useful" – both to Philemon and to Paul; in v. 20, Paul speaks of "benefit". Paul sends him back to his master (v. 13), bearing this letter, although he would have preferred to "keep him with me". May Philemon take him "back forever" (v. 15) as a slave and as a "beloved brother" (v. 16) in Christ. May Philemon treat Onesimus as he would Paul (v. 17). Paul offers to take on himself any and all punishment that may be in store for the slave (v. 18). May he be treated as a fellow Christian. V. 19b may indicate that Philemon came to Christ through Paul. Paul is "confident" (v. 21) of Philemon's "obedience" to Christ.

Reflection

What do you think Philemon decided to do with his former slave? Would Paul's arguments have persuaded you?

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Commentary

The lectionary remains in the Gospel of Luke once again this week. Luke is interested in stories about Jesus and his family. It's the only Gospel that tells us that John the Baptist and Jesus were related, probably cousins (v. 1:36). And, it's the only Gospel to provide a story about the young twelve-year-old Jesus (Verses. 2:41-52). Family is important to Luke – but today's reading shows us a Jesus who is unafraid to challenge first-century "family values."

In verses 13-24, Jesus has told the "crowds" that even outsiders, the poor and the disabled are called to God's kingdom. Now he tells what is required to become a follower. The word "hate" (v. 26) is surprising, until we recall that exaggeration was a common linguistic trait in Hebrew, as Jesus does here: "hate" means *love less*, be less attached to. The disciple must find his prime security in Jesus, not in his or her family, nor in preserving one's "life". One must be

prepared to suffer, as Jesus did on the “cross” (v. 27). In verses 28-32, Jesus uses two examples to advise full realization of the cost of being a follower, before *enlisting*. You must be so dedicated to the cause that you are willing to forfeit all that you have. Then come verses 34-35: don’t allow your allegiance to Christ to deteriorate and so become ineffectual. If you do, God will throw you away as useless! If you are prepared for the challenge, grasp it!

Reflection

Have you ever had to “count the cost” of being a disciple of Christ? How so?

Responsive Psalter

From Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

- ¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
² **You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.**
³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ **Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.**
⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
⁶ **Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.**
- ¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴ **I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.**
¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
¹⁶ **Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.**
¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
¹⁸ **I try to count them -- they are more than the sand;
I come to the end -- I am still with 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.