

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.

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

^{7:1} So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ² On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." ³ Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people -- that is my request. ⁴ For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." ⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" ⁶ Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. ⁹ Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." ¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. ^{9:20} Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹ enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²² as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Commentary

Esther is unique among biblical books, being the only one not to mention God. Its purpose was to demonstrate the resiliency of the Jews and the vengeance due to those who oppose them. Today's lection is set in the middle of Esther's second banquet. After disposing of Queen Vashti, who dared oppose him, King Ahasuerus chose Esther as his queen.

Unbeknownst to him, she was of Jewish decent. Mordecai, cousin and guardian of the orphaned Esther, refused to bow to Haman, an honoree of the king. Enraged, Haman arranged the execution of Mordecai as well as the genocide of all other Jews, which would

include Esther. Learning of the subversive plan, Esther designs a series of banquets to expose Haman and his scheme, thus saving the Jews from certain slaughter. Rather than go against the traditions of her time—the very act that led to Vashti’s downfall—Esther used these traditions to secure her request. Esther petitioned Ahasuerus for her own life and the life of her Jewish people to be spared. Mordecai himself recorded the events of Esther’s action to save her people, and to this day, the Jews keep the Feast of Purim in honor of her.

Reflection

When do you as an individual and we as a church need to intercede for “our” people? Who might these people be? What happens if we do not have Esther’s courage?

James 5:13-20

^{5:13} Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. ¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰ you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Commentary

James uses the word *ekklesia* (church) for the first time in this letter (v. 14). He reminds readers that sickness affects not only the individual, but the entire community as well. James suggests that healing needs to take place in the life of the community—physical, moral, and spiritual healing are intricately woven together here. Moreover, all healing comes from God. Should one doubt the healing power of prayer, James offers an example in the prophet Elijah. Elijah opened and closed the heavens with prayer, and if his faithful prayer could accomplish such a feat, the prayers of the church can do the same. James concludes his letter by exhorting the community to faithfulness and accountability.

Reflection

How do/can we fulfill these responsibilities? How do we treat those who are weak/sick? How does the anointing of the sick provide healing?

Mark 9:38-50

9:38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. 42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another."

Commentary

The disciples give us hope that, despite numerous blunders, we can still become faithful followers of Jesus Christ. In the first few verses of this passage, the disciples make the same error of judgment that many contemporary Christians make. They attempted to keep the ministry of Jesus within their own hands—possess it, own it. Jesus patiently explained that they must not stop anyone who heals in His name. Indeed, such people would benefit His ministry, for if they did good in his name, they would not be able to speak against Him, “for whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus stretched the scope of His ministry to include as many people as possible. Jesus then calls believers to sacrifice anything that might cause them to fall away. Ending these exhortations, Jesus reminded hearers that the strength to embrace total faith comes from within the community. Believers are to “have salt.” Salt was used as a part of the sacrificial offerings required by law as well to season and to preserve. It was not enough to look like salt; salt was useful when it possessed its proper chemical properties.

Reflection

What are the ways in which someone might cause another to fall away from God? What sacrifice do you make to be faithful? How can we as a community gently lead others into right relationship with God without using shame or judgment? How are we as Christians accountable to one another?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 124

- ¹ If it had not been the LORD who was on our side –
let Israel now say –
- ² **if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,**
- ³ **then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;**
- ⁴ then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
- ⁵ **then over us would have gone
the raging waters.**
- ⁶ Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.
- ⁷ **We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;**
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.
- ⁸ **Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.**

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.**