

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 49:1-7

^{49:1} Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. ² He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. ³ And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." ⁵ And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength- ⁶ he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." ⁷ Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

Commentary

Background: *This book can be divided into two (and possibly three) parts. Chapters 1 to 39 were written before the exile, from about 740 BC to about 700 BC. Chapters 40 to 66 were written during and after the Exile in Babylon. They are filled with a message of trust and confident hope that God will soon end the Exile.*

This is the second Servant Song. The servant speaks to Israelites scattered around the Mediterranean ("coastlands"); he identifies himself as chosen before he was born (like Jeremiah, Paul and John the Baptist) and even named (like Jesus). Further, God made him an effective instrument in proclaiming his message ("sharp sword", v. 2). Perhaps God hid him for protection or in preparation for his mission. V. 3 may tell us who the servant is: "Israel", the community of the faithful, led by the prophet. They will show God's power to others ("glorified"). But the servant retorts (v. 4): despite all our/my efforts, no one listens! Surely I minister on God's behalf and God will "reward" me for it (even if people don't). The servant's "strength" (v. 5) is from God; he is to turn "Jacob" (Israel) back to God. God (not the prophet) will gather "Israel" to him. But his mission is to all peoples, not only wayward Israelites and the faithful ("survivors", v. 6). God continues to speak to the servant, "one deeply despised" (v. 7),

hated by many and “the slave of rulers”: God’s fidelity is his surety that all, even rulers, will hold him in awe.

Reflection

We may sometimes feel, in our walk of faith, as though we have “labored in vain,” and “spent (our) strength for nothing and vanity.” Perhaps it seems that no one is listening to our message; maybe we even doubt, ourselves, the truth of what we have believed. But as servants, we are called upon only to plant; it is God who gives the increase. A good word for the New Year!

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

^{1:1} Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,
² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commentary

Background: Corinth was a major port which also commanded the land route from the Peloponnesus peninsula to central Greece. An industrial and ship-building center, it was also a centre for the arts. Its inhabitants came from far and wide. In this epistle, Paul answers two letters he has received concerning lack of harmony and internal strife in the Corinthian church, a church he had founded. Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus (now in Turkey), probably in 57 AD.

Paul uses the schema of Greek letters of the time, expanding it to include specifically Christian notions. He is an “apostle”, one sent out by Christ to perform a special mission. (“Sosthenes” may be the “official of the synagogue” beaten in Acts 18:17.) The church at Corinth is made up of ordinary people “called to be saints” (v. 2), set apart for God’s work in the world, “sanctified” in baptism. Perhaps Paul reminds them that there are Christians elsewhere too. V. 3 is his greeting: he wishes them “grace” (God’s freely given gift of love) and “peace” (the total state of well-being to which we are admitted through Christ): both come from the Father (as source) and the Son (as means or agent). In later chapters, Paul cautions his readers against misuse of *spiritual gifts* (v. 7), so in v. 5 he may be damning them with faint praise. He praises their eloquence (“speech”) and understanding (“knowledge”) but not (as in other letters) their faith, hope and love for each other and for Christ. In v. 6, “testimony” is *bearing witness*: God has strengthened them through their telling of the good news. They are indeed richly blessed (v. 7), but (as mentioned later), they tend to dwell on the excitement of the present rather than looking forward to “the revealing of ... Christ”, his second coming. God will help them prepare

for that day, so that they may be among those judged worthy of eternal life ("blameless", v. 8). "God is faithful" (v. 9): he will not abandon what he has begun. He has called them into "fellowship", union with other believers which is union with Christ.

Reflection

Paul often refers to the members of his churches as "saints," as he does here. What does it mean to you to be a "saint"? Do you think of yourself as one? Why or why not?

John 1:29-42

^{1:29} The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." ³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Commentary

Background: *John is the fourth gospel. Its author makes no attempt to give a chronological account of the life of Jesus (which the other gospels do, to a degree), but rather "...these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John includes what he calls signs, stories of miracles, to help in this process.*

John the Baptist has denied that he is any of the figures expected by Jews to inaugurate a new era: he is neither the Messiah, Elijah, nor the prophet like Moses; rather he prepares people for the coming of the Lord. He has also told some religious authorities that one is already among them who is far more worthy than he.

"The next day" John acclaims Jesus as "Lamb of God". He is probably thinking of the fourth Servant Song: there the servant is "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter". John recognizes that Jesus outranks him ("ranks ahead", v. 30) and "was" (existed) before him. In vv. 31-33 he recalls

his experience of Jesus' baptism, and justifies what he has proclaimed. He says: I didn't recognize him as Messiah ("know him"), but I now realize that I baptized with water in order that Jesus might be shown to Jews. The coming of the Spirit showed me that Jesus is the one chosen by God. I am convinced that he is, and I have told others (v. 34). (Later on, on the lips of Martha, "Son of God" and "Messiah" are synonymous.)

In vv. 35-42, two of John's disciples begin to follow Jesus. First, they are curious about Jesus when John tells them who he is. They follow him, recognizing that he is an authority ("Teacher", v. 38). Jesus invites them to "Come and see" (v. 39), to investigate what he teaches. "Staying" and "remained" are technical terms in this gospel: the two begin to understand the way of life Jesus offers and expects. V. 40 tells us that one of the two is "Andrew"; the other is unnamed. Andrew tells "Simon" (v. 41) the good news and introduces him to Jesus. (The Greek word translated "Anointed" is *Christos*.) Jesus prophesies that Simon will be nicknamed "Cephas," the Aramaic word for *rock*. *Petros*, the Greek word for "Peter", also means *rock*.

Reflection

These verses offer John's account of the calling of the first disciples. These three followers did not require much persuasion to begin their discipleship with Jesus. How did Jesus call YOU into his service? Were you at first a reluctant or an enthusiastic follower?

Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 40:1-6

^{40:1} I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

2 He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

3 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.

4 Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

5 You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

6 Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

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.