

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.

Lamentations 1:1-6

¹ How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. ² She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies. ³ Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. ⁴ The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.

⁵ Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the LORD has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions; her children have gone away, captives before the foe. ⁶ From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty. Her princes have become like stags that find no pasture; they fled without strength before the pursuer.

Commentary

In 587 BC, the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple, and deported many of the inhabitants, leaving only the poor and weak. The five poems which make up this book were almost certainly written in Palestine at this time of political, social and religious crisis. Perhaps these laments were recited at the site of the Temple.

The Babylonians first invaded Judah and occupied Jerusalem in 597 BC. They deported King Jehoiakim, Ezekiel and many leading citizens to Babylon and installed Zedekiah as puppet king. Judah rebelled, thus gaining a degree of freedom until 587, when Nebuchadnezzar attacked again; this time he destroyed Jerusalem (including the Temple) and other fortified Judean towns. Many people were deported. The five poems of Lamentations were written as communal laments. A scholar has written: *When we hurt physically, we cry out in pain; when we hurt religiously, we lament.* Jerusalem is depicted as a “widow”, a person open to mistreatment because she lacks protection in law. Her “lovers” (v. 2) and “friends” are Judah’s former allies (e.g. Egypt); now she is a “vassal” (v. 1) of Babylon, they have become “enemies” (v. 2). The invasion is seen as God’s punishment for Judah’s sins; he now acts through Babylon, not Judah. God, speaking through Nathan, promised David (as Israel’s representative) “I will

give you rest from all your enemies” (2 Samuel 7:11). Now Judah, the true Israel, “finds no resting place” (v. 3): God appears to have withdrawn his promise. No longer does anyone come to “Zion” (v. 4, Jerusalem) to celebrate “festivals”, for the Temple lies in ruins. Moses told the Israelites that, if they obey the Sinai covenant and live by God’s word, God “will make you the head, and not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13); now, because of her disobedience, Israel has her “foes” (v. 5) as her “masters”. A covenant included *curses*, the consequences of a party not keeping the pact. A curse mentioned by Moses is: “You shall have sons and daughters, but they shall ... go into captivity” (Deuteronomy 28:41); Israel has broken the pact, so “her children have gone away, captives” (v. 5). Finally v. 6: those of Judah’s nobility (“her majesty”), leaders of the people, who have escaped deportation have fled and now rule nothing (“no pasture”).

Reflection

We don’t often hear passages from the Book of Lamentations read aloud in worship, and rarely does a preacher choose Lamentations for his or her sermon text. Why do you think that is? Do we know how to lament before God, in the church?

2 Timothy 1:1-14

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, ² To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. ³ I am grateful to God--whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did--when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷ for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

⁸ Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

¹¹ For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹² and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. ¹³ Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Commentary

Paul was made an apostle as part of God’s plan of salvation (vv. 1, 11) to bring eternal “life”, found in the Christian community (“in Christ Jesus”), to all. Paul worships God in continuity with

his Jewish “ancestors” (v. 3). V. 4a probably recalls Paul’s departure from Timothy: may sorrow be replaced by “joy”. Timothy’s faith has been handed down from generation to generation (v. 5). He was given and received “the gift of God” (v. 6), through Paul (“my hands”) but now this gift, “a spirit of power ... love ... self-discipline” (v. 7, or ethical behavior) has become dormant through neglect. God has not withdrawn it, so, Timothy, “rekindle” (v. 6) the gift! The teaching of Jesus (or the preaching about him, “testimony ...”, v. 8) and of Paul’s servitude (“prisoner”) are not shameful; rather Timothy should emulate Paul in suffering for spreading the good news (“the gospel”). Our godly “calling” (v. 9) is based on God’s plan and his gift of love (“grace”). Grace, in Jesus’ becoming human, was part of the plan since “before” God’s creative act. In his “appearing” (v. 10, in taking on human form) Christ brought eternal life (“abolished death ... immortality”). The body of faith (Christian doctrine) has been entrusted to Paul until “that day” (v. 12) when Christ comes again. So, Timothy, faithfully hand on the valuable teachings you have received from me, with the help of the “Holy Spirit” (v. 14), which is present and active in us.

Reflection

“Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord,” Paul writes to Timothy. Have you ever been “ashamed” – or embarrassed, or hesitant – to testify to your faith in Jesus Christ?

Luke 17:5-10

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

⁶ The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. ⁷ "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? ⁸ Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Commentary

Jesus has told his followers that:

- there will be times when you lose your faith, but if you cause another to do so, your fate will be worse than death! (vv. 1-2) and
- if a fellow Christian sins, rebuke him;
- if he repents, forgive him – however often he sins and repents (vv. 3-4).

The twelve (“the apostles”, v. 5) now speak to him, asking him to give them enough faith to remain faithful. (The “mustard seed”, v. 6, is very small. The “mulberry tree” is large with an extensive root system, making it hard to uproot. It would not normally take root in the sea.) Jesus tells them that with genuine faith, however small, anything is possible. *Quality* of faith matters more than *quantity*.

Jesus now tells a parable (vv. 7-10). Slaves were expected to do their duties, and no master would absolve a slave of them, so the disciples would answer *of course not!* to the question in v. 7: should a slave eat before his master? The master stands for God and the slave for his people. The Greek word translated “worthless” (v. 10) means *those to whom nothing is owed, to whom no favor is due*, so God’s people should never presume that their obedience to God’s commands has earned them his favor. (The Revised English Bible translates v. 10b as *We are servants and deserve no credit; we have only done our duty.*) However, as 12:35-38 says, God will reward those who are prepared when Christ comes again.

Reflection

Do we seek credit for the good deeds we do, forgetting Jesus’ admonition in the Gospel of Matthew about alms-giving: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”? How does the idea of living as “one to whom no favor is owed” (another way of translating “worthless”) strike you?

Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 137: 1-6

- ¹ By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
- ² **On the willows there
we hung up our harps.**
- ³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- ⁴ **How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?**
- ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- ⁶ **Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.**

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.