

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 31:27-34

^{31:27} The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. ²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." ³⁰ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. ³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Commentary

The Lectionary continues with readings from the Book of the prophet Jeremiah. From Chapter 1, we know that Jeremiah was either born or began his ministry in 627 BC. During his life, Babylonia succeeded Assyria as the dominant power in the Middle East. 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. 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.

The people of Judah, the southern kingdom, have failed to follow God's ways for generations. Despite Jeremiah's appeals, they have refused to return to his ways. God has sent the Babylonians to punish them for these sins by deporting many and destroying Jerusalem (including the Temple). Israel, the northern kingdom, suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Assyrians over a century earlier. Now, through Jeremiah, God tells the people that restoration of both Israel and Judah will come. V. 28 recalls God's commission to the prophet; Jeremiah now foretells the *building* and the *planting*. In early Israelite history, sin was largely *collective*: if a person sinned, it affected the whole nation. Jeremiah now explains, using a proverb (v. 29), that henceforth "all shall die for their own sins" (v. 30). The sin of one generation will no longer

be inflicted on the next. Responsibility will be personal. Verses 31-34 tell of God's "new covenant". **Like the Sinai covenant**, God will initiate it; it will be God-centered; it will be with the same people; and the people's response will be shown in obeying the same Law. **Unlike the old covenant**, it will be *written on their hearts* (v. 33, in their consciences), thus keeping it will be up to the will of each person; a person's lifestyle will reflect seeing God in every action and situation, for "they shall all know me" (v. 34); God will forgive, he will "remember their sin no more": everyone will always be faithful; and the pact will last forever: as v. 36 says, it will be as durable as the "fixed order" of the universe. God will remain the same; the change will be in humans. They will be recreated to be capable of keeping the pact. So many will the people of God be that their city, Jerusalem, will need to be enlarged (v. 38). "It shall never again be ... overthrown" (v. 40). When will this happen? Jeremiah uses the phrase "after those days" (v. 33) to speak of the end times, a time when God will directly intervene in human history.

Reflection

Jeremiah acknowledges that, as important as priest, prophet, and king are to Israel, God's people can survive without the institutions of Jerusalem in Babylon. What *does having God's law written on your heart* mean to you?

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

^{3:14} But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

^{4:1} In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.

⁵ As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Commentary

The Lectionary continues with New Testament readings from the two Letters to Timothy: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, together known as the *Pastoral Epistles*, are markedly different in vocabulary and literary style from epistles we know to be Paul's. They also present a more institutionalized church. For these reasons, most scholars believe that the *Pastorals* were written a generation or so later than the letters we are sure are Pauline. 2 Timothy is the most personal of the *Pastorals*: most of it is directed specifically to Timothy. From the Book of Acts, we know that Timothy was from Lystra in Asia Minor, and was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother who had become a Christian. He accompanied Paul on his travels.

In Palestine, based on popular books, people thought that a time of moral decay would precede the end of the world. The author of this book sees the decadence resulting from false teaching as contributing to this (3:1-9). Timothy has Paul's example to follow, particularly the "persecutions" (3:11) he endured. Suffering for Christ is part of being Christian (3:12). While true Christians will be shown to be godly, false teachers "will go from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived" (3:13) by the devil. But Timothy, "continue" (3:14), stand fast, in what Paul and your family have taught you! ("Whom" is plural in Greek.) Remember that the Old Testament ("sacred writings", 3:15), interpreted in the Christian community ("faith in Christ ...") tells you about "salvation", about Christ. "All scripture" (3:16), possibly including some New Testament books, has authority rooted in God - literally, is "God-breathed" - and so gives a basis for human conduct. It enables all who speak for God, equipping them for good works, including "teaching ..." (v. 16).

The author now begins his conclusion. Thinking ahead to Christ's second coming, "his appearing" (4:1), when he will "judge" and begin ruling all creation ("kingdom"), he now urges Timothy to "proclaim" (4:2) the good news, whether the time seems propitious or not (for God's word is always *in season*). False teachers are undermining the faith now; perhaps "the time is coming" (4:3) when no one will adhere to the true faith. ("Myths", 4:4, are probably changes or accretions to doctrine handed down from the apostles.) In 4:6-8, Paul sees his death as being close, so he hands on his ministry to Timothy and other future leaders. The ministry is now Timothy's ("your", 4:5). May he, like Paul, remain steadfast ("sober") as he evangelizes, visiting various cities – even enduring "suffering".

Reflection

There really is "nothing new under the sun": people, it seems, have always had "itching ears," which they scratch with all sorts of pseudo-religious teachings and beliefs. How do you keep your spirit grounded in "sound teaching," rather than whatever spirituality the marketplace is offering up?

Luke 18:1-8

^{18:1} Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" ⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Commentary

The Lectionary continues with readings from the Gospel of Luke. It is a gospel that emphasizes God's love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners and lepers. Women play a more prominent part than in the other gospels.

Some Pharisees have asked Jesus when the kingdom of God will come; he has answered: it is already “among you” (17:21). Using examples from the Old Testament, he has warned his disciples that its full coming will be sudden and unexpected; many people will miss it, being preoccupied with worldly affairs. In Jewish society, a “widow” (v. 3) had no legal status; she was powerless. The story tells us twice that the judge is a rogue: he neither respects God nor cares about other people (vv. 2, 4). So why would Jesus tell an absurd story? Because such stories are easily remembered and are likely to be retold, and in an oral culture, re-telling was how information was handed down. Jesus uses this incongruous story to teach the disciples a lesson. If even this rogue listens to a petition (eventually), how much more so will God, loving as he is, hear and answer the prayers of the faithful, those whom he has “chosen” (v. 7), by again sending Christ, to judge. He will grant them justice soon after he comes (“quickly”, v. 8); however, they cannot know when he will come. So do not “lose heart” (v. 1) and persist “day and night” (v. 7) in prayer, seeking the completion of the coming of the Kingdom. But, Jesus wonders, will any still be faithful then, or will they all be preoccupied by other matters?

Reflection

Do you ever feel like God is unresponsive to your prayers? Perhaps God isn't unresponsive - maybe you've erected a wall against his grace. Discuss.

Responsive Psalter

from Psalms 119:97-104

- ^{119:97} Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.
- ⁹⁸ **Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.**
- ⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.
- ¹⁰⁰ **I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.**
- ¹⁰¹ I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.
- ¹⁰² **I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.**
- ¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
- ¹⁰⁴ **Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.**

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.