

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 23:1-6

^{23:1} Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD.

² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. ⁵ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Commentary

Background: *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) the return of many to paganism. When Babylon captured Jerusalem in 587, Jeremiah emigrated to Egypt. God called him to be a prophet to Judah and surrounding nations, in the midst of these political and religious convulsions.*

In Chapters 21-22, Jeremiah has made prophecies about four of the five last kings of Judah. Three of these he considers bad, for siding with foreigners. Rather than predicting the fate of the last one, Zedekiah, God now speaks (through Jeremiah) about an ideal future king. God blames Judah's kings ("shepherds") for scattering his "sheep"; they will be punished "for your evil doings" (v. 2). But God will bring the people together again, to perfect safety, and will set good kings ("shepherds", v. 4) over them. Their state will be as God originally intended: in the first creation story, God commanded humans to "be fruitful and multiply" (v. 3). God makes a formal pronouncement ("the days are surely coming", v. 5) when God will "raise up" a godly "Branch" (shoot, descendant) of David's line who will be wise, just and godly, ruling over both "Judah" (v. 6) and "Israel". Later prophets, in dark times of unfaithful kings, recalled this ideal rule and promised its realization in the future. This led to expecting a new era, when God would himself rule the faithful.

Reflection

The lectionary readings are starting to anticipate Advent when we wait for the coming of the Savior. “I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,” says the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah. That Branch, for Christians, is Jesus Christ, who was of the House of David. Of whose House are you a “righteous branch”? Reflect for a moment on some of those – family or friends – who have helped to form you as a Christian.

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Commentary

The author has heard of the trust in Christ his readers have because of their hope of eternal life. “This hope ... is bearing fruit and growing ... from the day you ... truly comprehended the grace of God” (his freely given gift of love expressed in Christ, vv. 5-6). So he prays for them that they may experience God’s ways to the full, leading the ethical lives God expects, and growing in knowledge of him (v. 10). Faced with deviant teaching, may God make them “strong” (v. 11) and “prepared to endure everything”. God (in Christ) has “rescued us” (v. 13) from the power of evil (“darkness”) and moved us to Christ’s realm, enabling us to share with others in the “inheritance” (v. 12, in being God’s children).

Vv. 15-20 is a hymn about Christ (“He”); he is how we see (and access) God. The whole of creation, both heavenly and earthly, were created “through him” (v. 16), with his participation. He is the “firstborn” (v. 18), the inheritor from the Father, of *created-ness*; he governs it and is the cohesive power of the universe (v. 17). He existed “before all things”, before the first creative act. Greeks saw the “head” (v. 18) as the body’s source of life and growth. Christ is this to the Church, and “head” of it in the modern sense. He is “the beginning”, the nucleus of restoration of humanity to union with God, of the new *created-ness*. In his death (“blood of his cross”, v. 20), resurrection, and ascension to the Father, he is the *forerunner* (“firstborn”, v. 18) of our elevation to being with the Father, of our *reconciliation* with the Father (v. 20). Christians at Colossae tried to find ultimate power and truth in various deities, but in Christ all power and ultimate truth is present (v. 19).

Reflection

The writer of this Letter – probably not the apostle Paul, but someone writing under his name – has composed a beautiful love-song to Christ. The Atonement is referred to in the phrase, “making peace through the blood of his cross.” What do you believe happened on the cross?

Luke 23:33-43

^{23:33} When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." ³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?" ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Commentary

The lectionary has reached the end of its journey through the Gospel of Luke: Jesus' final hour has arrived. He has been betrayed, arrested, mocked, beaten, and sentenced to death. He, Simon of Cyrene (carrying the crossbar), two criminals and a few police have walked to Calvary, "the place that is called The Skull" (v. 33).

Jesus continues his ministry of giving forgiveness to those who have not heard the Good News (v. 34). The division of his clothing fulfills the prophecy in Psalm 22:18; to be deprived of one's clothing was to lose one's identity. (Biblical examples are prisoners, slaves, prostitutes and damned people.) The mob contemplates what is happening, but the "leaders" (v. 35) taunt Jesus: they blaspheme against God. In accord with Psalm 69:21, a psalm of the innocently suffering godly one, Jesus is offered "sour wine" (v. 36) - to revive him, and to prolong his ordeal. Ironically, "Messiah of God, his chosen one" (v. 35) and "King of the Jews" (v. 38) are all true. Jesus refuses to subvert God's plan by saving himself from a horrible death. A placard was placed around the criminal's neck, bearing an "inscription" (v. 38) stating his crime. One criminal joins with the mob (v. 39) but the other responds positively to Jesus (vv. 40-41). For him there is salvation; Jesus pronounces him free of sin. Only a king can give pardon. ("Paradise", v. 43, was the Jewish name for the temporary resting place of the godly dead.)

Reflection

A person being put to death on a cross was not elevated high over the heads of those nearby, as artists have often depicted crucifixion, but was only a foot or two off the ground (wood was expensive and hard to come by in ancient Palestine.) Jesus' mother and the few friends who did

not desert him at the end could have reached up to touch him. Does this knowledge change your emotional connection to Christ's last hours?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 46

46:1 God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

46:2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

46:3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah

46:4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

46:5 God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

46:6 The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts.

46:7 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

46:8 Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

46:9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.

46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth."

46:11 The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

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.