

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 50:4-9a

^{50:4} The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens-- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. ⁵ The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. ⁶ I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. ⁷ The Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; ⁸ he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. ^{9a} It is the Lord GOD who helps me; who will declare me guilty?

Commentary

The prophets of Israel contended with a rebellious people. Second Isaiah, written around the time of the Babylonian Exile (597-539 BCE), addressed an antagonistic community released from exile. The message was one of hope, promise, and encouragement. Yet the prophet was humiliated and rejected. His principal concern was to help those who heard his voice believe that God was still going to make a difference in their lives. He said this because he believed that God was making a difference through him.

Reflection

What empowers you to persist when you meet resistance or rejection?

Philippians 2:5-11

^{2:5} Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Commentary

Paul's ministry in Philippi began during his second missionary journey. Along with Silas and Timothy, he founded this congregation, the first European Christian community, with whom he established life-long bonds of friendship. This intimacy was based in their continued diligence in the gospel. His central concern was that they remain faithful to the gospel of freedom and not be swayed by Jewish Christians. These persons remained strict proponents of Jewish customs and beliefs and sought to persuade Gentile Christians that they must be circumcised in accordance with the law before they could be considered bona fide Christians. The letter was a rallying cry to continue "of one mind" in service to the Christ whose death had made them free.

Reflection

Is it really possible to be of the same mind as Christ? Was Paul speaking only of Christ's humility, or of other dimensions of his mentality as well? What might persons become if they had the mind of Christ?

Matthew 27:11-54

^{27:11} Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so."¹² But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer.¹³ Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?"¹⁴ But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.¹⁵ Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted.¹⁶ At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas.¹⁷ So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"¹⁸ For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.¹⁹ While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."²⁰ Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed.²¹ The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas."²² Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!"²³ Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"²⁴ So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."²⁵ Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"²⁶ So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they

gathered the whole cohort around him.²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.³¹ After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.³² As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross.³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull),³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots;³⁶ then they sat down there and kept watch over him.³⁷ Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."³⁸ Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.³⁹ Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads⁴⁰ and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross."⁴¹ In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying,⁴² "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him."⁴³ He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'"⁴⁴ The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah."⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink.⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him."⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.⁵⁴ Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Commentary

This Sunday has a dual emphasis, beginning with the celebration of Christ's triumphal entry and ending on a somber note with the Crucifixion (which we know is not the end of the story.) It is by no means clear that the rabid mob calling for crucifixion was composed of the same persons who days earlier proclaimed Jesus the Son of David. By the time they came before Pilate, they were nearing a riot. Expecting, perhaps hoping, for a moment of high drama, they conjectured about whether Elijah would appear. They believed Elijah to be a helper of the oppressed. This recounting of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice has been appreciated and celebrated by the early church, and throughout the centuries of Christendom's growth and development.

Reflection

Just about every class and category was present for some form of the Crucifixion. If you had been present, knowing only what they knew, with whom might you have allied yourself?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 31:9-16

^{31:9} Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.

¹⁰ **For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.**

¹¹ I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbors,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

¹² **I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.**

¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

¹⁴ **But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, "You are my God."**

¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

¹⁶ **Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me through your steadfast love!**

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.**