

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.

Exodus 17:1-7

^{17:1} From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

Commentary

Nothing had changed. The people had been fed, and they had been traveling through the wilderness, as God had commanded. But they still complained incessantly, this time about water. This was no small problem. There were a lot of people with flocks and herds, and the water supplies in Sinai were very limited. This was not Moses' first, nor his last, moment of frustration. He did a little complaining, but God was in the conversation and wrestled water from the rock, and thereby, life from death. The ending of the story says the encounter had been about lack of faith. They even named the places "Test" and "Quarrel" because the people tested Moses and God. So the story is also a critique of the kind of religion that judges God on the basis of how well God satisfies our wants.

Reflection

Do our prayers consist mostly of asking for things? Do we lose heart if they are not answered as we want? What else do we pray about? How does God respond?

Philippians 2:1-13

^{2:1} If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 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. ¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Commentary

This lection begins with admonitions about how to live a Christian life, then moves into a great hymn about Christ's incarnation, servanthood, and exaltation. We don't know what situation in the Philippian church called for this response. We do know that many situations in our churches today—mission projects, crises, building campaigns—call for us to work together harmoniously. What does it mean to be a Christian? Here Paul says all Christians, however different, desire to know and serve God. We sometimes think that emphasizing our differences is the way to serve God. Paul implies that our common wish to know and serve God overcomes those differences. That's the point of working together. To make this point, Paul cites the example of Christ. Verses 5-11 are one of the earliest Christian hymns, written ten or fifteen years after Jesus' resurrection and already familiar at the time of Paul's writing about AD 56.

Reflection

What situations in our congregation today call for working together? Is there unity or friction in those situations? What is God calling YOU to do to help change discord into harmony?

Matthew 21:23-32

^{21:23} When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴ Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶ But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷ So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁸ "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹ He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰ The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³² For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Commentary

The conversation in today's lection is both a trap and a discussion of the main issue—who has the authority to speak in God's name? The discussion began here: Where did Jesus get his authority? By what right was he teaching in the temple? Jesus answered his own question: Where did John get his authority? If they would answer that, then Jesus would answer their question. Then the priest's strategy caved in. No matter what they might say, it would offend someone. If they said John's authority was from God, they would have to deal with the next question—"Then why didn't you listen to him?" But, if they said he was not a prophet, they would turn the people against them, because the people were sure John was a prophet. Public opinion might be fickle, but it is also powerful. Better to appear ignorant than to get in trouble. So they answered, "We don't know." But the answer was a dodge. Jesus answered, "If you can't say, I won't say either." Then he apparently changed the subject.

Reflection

"We don't know" is a legitimate religious response. Think of situations in which "we don't know" might be the best response possible. Now think of some places in which it is a cop-out. Why do we sometimes fear to be straightforward?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

^{78:1} Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,

³ things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.

⁴ We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

^{78:12} In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

¹³ He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap.

¹⁴ In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light.

¹⁵ He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

¹⁶ He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

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.