

FIRST READING: Jeremiah 7:23-28

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: This is what I commanded my people: Listen to my voice; then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in all the ways that I command you, so that you may prosper. But they obeyed not, nor did they pay heed. They walked in the hardness of their evil hearts and turned their backs, not their faces, to me. From the day that your fathers left the land of Egypt even to this day, I have sent you untiringly all my servants the prophets. Yet they have not obeyed me nor paid heed; they have stiffened their necks and done worse than their fathers. When you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you either; when you call to them, they will not answer you. Say to them: This is the nation that does not listen to the voice of the LORD, its God, or take correction. Faithfulness has disappeared; the word itself is banished from their speech.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD; let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us joyfully sing PSALM s to him.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us bow down in worship; let us kneel before the LORD who made us. For he is our God, and we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the desert, Where your fathers tempted me; they tested me though they had seen my works."

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

GOSPEL: Luke 11:14-23

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke and the crowds were amazed. Some of them said, "By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons." Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. But he knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Thursday of Lent

Jeremiah, as a prophet, preached God's Word and shared God's faith in service of God's people. He experienced success, failure, resistance, persecution and near death as a result. Was he the only faithful one alive in Jerusalem? He lamented, often, his pain, rejection and doubt in his writing. God never left him. When he was thrown into the dry cistern to die, there were good, faithful people who went to pull him out and save him. God worked through those people on Jeremiah's behalf. Sometimes even God's prophet could be blind and deaf to God's Word and saving grace. He was human and he, too, was a sinner who needed God's saving grace.

The point is that God is always faithful even when God's people are not. Jeremiah predicted the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the end of the Davidic kingship and the deportation of the Jewish people into Diaspora. As the Babylonian Empire grew in strength, size and influence, this may have been inevitable. Empires have always behaved in this manner; they still do. Yet, when the people seemed to have lost all, in losing, especially, the Promised Land, God went with them. The faith of Israel remained the mainstay of Jewish life in exile. The faith of the Jewish people remains strong to this day. God remains faithful even in human sin. God seeks, finds and forgives sinners even when none of us deserve it. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional love, the perk of being God in mystery. God saved Jeremiah from death in the cistern and forgave and forgives God's people.

What is hard heartedness? When people get evicted for not being able to pay rent or mortgage, we can envision whole families on the street with nowhere to go. Are the land lords and banks hard hearted? Don't they have any compassion? What of us who judge them? It's always easier to see hard heartedness in others than to know it in ourselves. Our judgments of others, in Jesus own warnings of it, makes us as bad if not worse than those we judge. For in our judgments we take on God's role as judge too. That's a form of idolatry. We may hate the sin, but we must love the sinner as does God. It's not the hardness in others that is our concern, but our own hardness of heart to whom God speaks. Jesus has commanded us, as believers, to love God and neighbor. He's also commanded us to love ourselves too. We are sinners who receive, undeservedly, God's compassion. Can we also have it for our flaws, failures and sin? We can if we know that God loves and forgives us first.

Jesus faced these same themes himself. We know Jesus to be fully God and fully human like us in all but sin. He faced the judgment of others for his actions and teaching. A divided Satan will fall. Jesus is clever in his statement of the obvious. Of whom did Jesus speak as the "one stronger?" Jesus' mission was to die on the cross to destroy sin and death. Easter was the witness that Jesus succeeded; he rose from death and redeemed us through the forgiveness of our sins. He described himself and his mission. Satan was divided and Jesus triumphed. This passage, written after Easter, Pentecost and the spread of the gospel within Christ's Church, is presented as a prophecy of what Jesus was yet to accomplish.

We read this passage with eyes of faith. The players in this story did not have our perspective. Jesus had no "glorified body," no nail marks, no hole in his side and definitely no halo. He was a first century Jewish preacher who was not much unlike his cousin John the Baptist. When people saw Jesus healing and performing exorcisms, there were others, at that time, who performed the same kind of deeds. A few could make the leap of faith to be his followers and believe. God's had not yet given those who wondered about Jesus' credentials the gift of faith. I have compassion for them. People have been reading Luke's gospel as believers for millennia now. Could the familiarity of this story as read from our perspective of faith blind us to Luke's purpose? Jesus had a rough climb on his ascent to Jerusalem. He faced unbelieving opposition before he was lifted up on the cross to die. He died for those who opposed him as he died for us. We are all sinners who need God's mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Having been so gifted by God, can we share the gifts with other sinners? Without Jesus at our center we will scatter. Jesus' strength to forgive is now part of us.

Who has benefitted in God's fidelity? Jeremiah lived as God's faithful prophet despite his doubt and pain. God's chosen people, the Jews, live today in fidelity to God. We as Jesus' followers are faithful too. We are sinners, all, who need and receive God's forgiveness of sin. We are human and flawed, blessed with God's presence through God's gift of faith.

May we see in ourselves what God sees and loves in us.

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