Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
ACNA Readings – Ecclesiasticus 27:30-28:7; Psalm 103; Romans 14:5-12; Mathew 18:21-35

Introduction. Shimon Ben Azzai – a Tanna[1] during the 2nd Century – said run to perform even the smallest mitzvah and flee from sin; for one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah and one sin leads to another sin; for the reward of a good deed is the opportunity to do another good deed, and the reward of a sin is only yet more sin (Pirke Avot 4:2). Ben Azzai is describing the biblical concept of reaping what you sow, in which we acknowledge there are always consequences to actions. Bad decisions produce bad results, and to break the chain of sinful activity we must turn to doing good; often that process will begin with forgiveness.

Common Theme. Forgiveness is a central theme from the readings that we are to meditate on this week. Forgiveness might be something we ask or plead for but is not something earned, rather it is something given and received. C.S. Lewis commented that "forgiveness is a lovely idea, right up until the moment we have someone to forgive."[2] Forgiveness isn't easy either, but the Gospel tells us it's essential. Forgiveness is not a one-off thing we do, but something that has to be done over and over again.

Exodus 14:19-31. To guide and protect the Israelites during the exodus from Egypt, the Lord sent a mysterious heavenly being called the Angel of God. The angel appears to have operated within the form of a pillar of cloud and fire. The cloud intervenes to keep the Egyptian pursuers away from the Israelites as they prepare to cross the Red Sea. Exactly who is this angel and who is in the cloud is ambiguous; later in verse 24, it is God himself who peers out from the pillar to observe the Egyptian forces.

Both Jewish and Christian commentators describe this as a *theophany* – θεοφάνεια *theophaneia* – the Greek word for 'appearance of a deity'. It's a mystery that is never solved textually in Scripture – the manner in which the Lord involves himself in his creation. God delights to partner in and through angelic and human beings. Why does he do this? The only explanation I can offer for this phenomenon is pure, undeserved, and freely given love from the Lord!

In verse 21, Moses stretches out his hands over the sea without a direct command from God to do so. God then causes a wind to divide the waters producing dry land. Then in verse 26, the Lord instructs Moses to stretch his hands a second time and the waters return to their place and swallow the Egyptian army. God works with Moses to perform these signs and wonders, sometimes commanding Moses to do something and other times seemingly following his lead.

[1] A Tanna was an important member of the synagogue and was someone who had a very good memory who could recite Scripture verbatim, retain and recall sermons and Bible discussions for the community.

[2] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ch. 7.

Exodus is clear to inform us that God is the source of the miracle. Moses is not the prime cause of the powerful wind, however, his participation demonstrates that he is intimately involved in the event. God does not *need* Moses to perform any action for his power to manifest over the waters, but Moses' presence and involvement reveal that God delights in associating and engaging humans in his work of redemption.

Verse 30 reminds us that ultimately it was the Lord who saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. And who exactly was the recipient of this salvation? A mixed multitude also joined with the Hebrews during the Exodus. God's redemptive activity has been freely available to everyone – both Jewish and Gentile – irrespective of age, wisdom, social status, and level of faith. All have passed through the sea, and they all have a reason to praise the Lord. No one has been required to fulfil any part of the Torah, as the Torah has yet to be given on Mount Sinai.

The greatest act of redemption in the Hebrew Bible preceded the Torah; showing salvation was never based on works of righteousness. God demonstrated his faithfulness to Israel and to all the people present. The result is stated in verse 31 in which *all the people* – not just Israel – feared the Lord and believed in God and his servant Moses. Through his participation, Moses is exalted by the Lord and favoured in the eyes of the people. This completes the question that challenged Moses way back in Egypt, "who made you a prince and a judge over us?" (Exod 2:14). Well, the Lord did!

Psalm 114. Psalm 114 is part of a Jewish prayer called the *Hallel* – or the Egyptian Hallel – which includes psalms 113 to 118. The *Hallel* is recited in full on the first night of Passover as part of the Seder liturgy. No individual author is attributed to its creation, and it is probably a literary product of the community. The main subjects of these psalms are deliverance, salvation, and the Exodus from Egypt.

The greatest act of redemption in the Hebrew Scriptures – Old Testament – is the redemption from Egypt. The most common command in the Bible is *to remember,* and so this psalm joins in that action of remembering. Here we see the memory of sacred history preserved in sacred liturgy. There is no mention of status, wealth, or rank in the psalm. Everyone can pray this prayer together. Since the word *liturgy* means *the work of the people*. Liturgy is something that can unite the community because liturgy does not care for socioeconomic status or ethnic background.

Verse two notes that one of the highlights of the act of redemption was that the people became the dwelling place of God. The Lord himself left Egypt and guided his people as a pillar of cloud and fire – with the Tabernacle being symbolic of his presence amongst them.

As in many other places in the Psalms, nature is personified and responds to the presence and power of God. The sea flees before the Lord, and the mountains skip like rams. Verses like these are literary devices to describe wondrous events in nature proclaiming God as king over creation. The earth is told

to tremble before the Lord – a subtle but firm reminder that God is not some local deity – he is not only the king of Israel but ruler of the whole world.

Romans 14:1-12. The Christian walk is not an individualistic way of life; for we are not called to be alone, rather we are called to a community. That community – which we often simply name as the church – consists of different members from all walks of life and diverse backgrounds.

The apostle Paul describes how this diverse community should relate to each other in regards to what he termed as *doubtful things* – διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν, *diakrisis dialogismon*. Many of these *doubtful things* were internal issues of the early church that revolved around what was considered permissible food for consumption and which holy days should or should not be observed. Paul reminds the community, and by extension ourselves, that we are not in the place for passing judgment on our fellow believers. That role belongs to the Lord, who is the king and master of all of us.

The history of the church is replete with controversies and arguments – not just on simple disagreements over food or sacred time but also on essential theological doctrines like the Trinity and Arianism. This is to say that wisdom and discernment are required to decide what is essential theology and what is a *doubtful thing*. We have a responsibility to guard the *faith once received*.

However, the issue here in Romans is regarding internal community behaviour. Paul does not want us to put up stumbling blocks to the newer members and cause our fellow believers to trip over our judgmental or condescending attitudes regarding things that are perhaps unessential to salvation. Instead, we all should understand that there is an ultimate judge to whom we will all give an account. And so we should seek to appear before the Lord in humility having only love towards our brothers and sisters.

Matthew 18:21-35. Peter approaches Jesus with a question, which for the rabbi-student relationship is common practice. There is a Jewish saying, that states "You are closer to God when you are asking questions than when you think you have answers."

While the Gospel of Matthew places this discussion immediately following the event of Peter's pronouncement at Caesarea Philippi, we are far from certain of the timing in between these narratives. Its deliberate placement in the context of Caesarea Philippi provides nuance and insight into the discussion, answer, and learning.

While the question comes from Peter, the parable in response is applicable to all the disciples. Peter asks Jesus, concerning forgiveness and repentance, how long should we suffer the unrepentant? Peter suggests an answer to his own question; do we forgive seven times? The number seven has much biblical significance; it appears during the Creation week and implies completion and perfection. Jesus responds with seventy times seven, which is not to be taken literally as 490 times but is illustrative of the

need to have a lifestyle of forgiveness and to keep on forgiving. Jesus provides a parable to illuminate the true nature and character of forgiveness. This story is unique to Matthew and is commonly entitled the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

Parables are a specific teaching device found only in the Gospels and Rabbinic literature. Yet, despite the obvious Jewish context, they display no internal ethnic markers. There are a king and servants; however, they are not necessarily Jewish kings or Hebrew servants. Parables are essentially universal in application.

The parable begins with the usual phrase: "the kingdom of heaven is like." For Jewish people of the first century, the kingdom of heaven was a present reality. It was the terminology used to describe the rule and reign of God in the world and through his people. At the beginning of this parable, a king is settling financial accounts. Probably a reference to the final divine judgment of God in which all peoples are to give an account of their deeds and receive punishments or rewards.

Parables usually contain some sort of shock in the story to get and retain your attention. A series of servants are found to owe monetary debts of one degree or another, with one servant who cannot fulfil their surprisingly large financial obligation. How did this servant obtain such a large debt and what sort of king would have loaned so much money to a servant in the first place? The servant himself is likewise owed a debt from another fellow servant, of a much smaller amount. The master demonstrates an unbelievable amount of charity and compassion, forgiving the debt of the servant.

Outrageously, the servant fails to show the same level of compassion as his king when dealing with the debt owed to him by his fellow servant, who uses the same plea for mercy verbatim. It is the fellow servants who recognize the hypocrisy and inform the king who promptly enacts justice. The debt is restored and will be paid back while in prison. There is no precedent in scripture for a debtor paying his debts from prison; however, it is enshrined in Roman Law, reflecting the historical context of Jesus in the first century.

In conclusion, Jesus returns to the nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness, as Jesus says, should come from the heart. It should be part of our lifestyle and ingrained in our character. From the beginning, it has always been about the heart and not the head. Moses commands us to write the Torah – law – on our hearts; we are to love God with all our hearts; the prophets call on us to circumcise our hearts; David prays for a clean heart; and ultimately the Lord says he will remove our hearts of stone and introduce a heart of flesh.

Our faith is relational, not intellectual. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus proclaims that he is building a community – called the ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*. This parable of the kingdom describes how the followers of Jesus are required to behave within that community. They are to engage in a lifestyle of forgiveness.

ACNA Readings

Ecclesiasticus 27:30-28:7. Ecclesiasticus – known as Sirach in Latin and as the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirah in Hebrew – is a deuterocanonical book written several centuries prior to Jesus. It was quite popular in the first century with several direct quotes and allusions in the New Testament. As a genre, Ecclesiasticus is counted as part of the biblical wisdom literature alongside Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Job. Books of this genre in the Bible present important principles that have a universal quality; that is they hold true for all people – whether Jewish or Gentile. Their wisdom is not unique to Judaism.

This passage pairs well with the teaching of Jesus in this week's Gospel reading on forgiveness. The opening verse describes the emotions of anger and wrath as abominations in the possession of the sinful man. Those emotions are often the source of acts of violence in the name of vengeance, with the end result being further vengeance enacted by God on the sinful man. Simply put, you reap what you sow, thus the wisdom is to keep anger and wrath far from yourself and avoid vengeance altogether. This wisdom is applicable to all people and cultures and demonstrates the universal aspect of the genre.

Ecclesiasticus suggests that the opposite of vengeance is forgiveness. The writer urges us to forgive our neighbour (v. 2) in order that our own sins are forgiven. There is a reciprocal relationship between vengeance and forgiveness. Jesus teaches us the exact same thing in the Lord's Prayer; if we do not forgive others then how can we expect the Lord to forgive us?

The writer offers a final thought in the last verse (v. 7) to help us control our emotions and practice the action of forgiveness. We are encouraged to remember the commandments and the covenant of the Lord and, while doing that, to overlook ignorance. Sinful activity, while intentional, is all too often done in ignorance. On the cross, Jesus pleaded to his Father for forgiveness for his executioners for they "don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Psalm 103. The Scriptures record that David – the man after God's own heart – had quite an eventful life. No one is sure at which point in David's career he penned this psalm of praise for the mercy of God. Was it during or after his various battles with the Philistines, during the civil war with Saul, or perhaps after the adulterous incident with Bathsheba? It doesn't really matter because we can learn that at each point during David's life – the good times and the bad times – he blesses the Lord; this shows us that we can and should bless the Lord at all times and in all places.

The opening sentence is imperative; David commands his own soul to bless the Lord! Blessings are not simply pleasant words of encouragement and honour. Blessings, in the Bible, are powerful. Children in Scripture sought after their parents' blessing and would do almost anything for it – including deception as was in the case of Jacob with Isaac's blessing.

Today, we rarely cherish a parental blessing with many more children seeking dad's car keys than their father's benedictions. God blesses us and we acknowledge that those blessings are tangible, powerful, and real. We also get to bless each other, although I suspect we might not see them as being as powerful as the Lord's. Interestingly, we also get to bless the Lord! The psalm is a good reminder of why we should bless God.

Verse two admonishes us not to forget the good things that God has done for us. Now, that's not always an easy thing to do when events in life are going poorly. We are to remind ourselves that God forgives iniquity; he heals, redeems, and displays his loving-kindness towards us. This does not mean that we will not go through difficult times, simply that when we do pass through dark times we should remember that we are indeed still forgiven. Verse ten reminds us that the Lord has not dealt with us according to our sins, and that will always be a good reason to bless the Lord. If we are indeed forgiven, how then should we behave?

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.