

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

**ACNA Readings** – Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145: (1-13) 14-21; Philippians 1:21-27; Matthew 21:28-32

**Introduction.** This period in the Jewish calendar is the high point of the annual festivals, called the High Holy Days. The Feast of Trumpets – or Rosh Hashanah – began at sundown on 15 September and called Israel to a ten-day period of introspection and repentance, which are called the Days of Awe. Leading up to Yom Kippur – or the Day of Atonement – which begins the evening of 24 September. These High Holy Days are then followed by the seven-day Feast of Tabernacles – Sukkot – beginning at sundown on 29 September.

**Common Theme.** Our readings do not specifically refer to these festivals, but it is good for us to be aware of them, especially if we have links with local Jewish believers. Church ministers may wish to recognise them in appropriate ways in church or on the dates concerned.

Our readings this Sunday challenge all of God's people to recognise his gift of grace and salvation – whatever our earthly status – and to walk in fellowship with God, trusting him for his sustaining provision, his “bread from heaven,” and our daily needs, until we enter his promised land. To quote the apostle Paul, in our Epistle reading: “For to me, to live is Christ-Messiah” (Phil 1:21).

**Exodus 16:2-15. Bread and Proving.** Our reading is the second in a series of three *provings*, or testings, in which Israel complained about their lot and blamed their leaders and the LORD. Alter advises that the translation *grumble* is not best here, but suggests *complain*, *express resentment*, or *murmur against* and he adds that the complaint of Israel in verse three implies “the LORD is about to kill them in the wilderness, so he might as well have done the job back in Egypt, where at least they would have died on a full stomach!” (Alter). Fox points out that the endings of the five clauses containing Israel's complaint show a stark contrast: the first three clauses end glowingly: “Egypt ... fleshpots ... satisfied” but the last two clauses end very negatively: “wilderness ... starvation.” What pointed language against the leaders and the LORD here!

The three *testing* stories are about daily necessities: 1) *bitter water*, when the people complained against Moses, “What shall we drink?” (Exod 15:22-27); 2) *bread to eat*, so they complained against Moses, “Why bring us out of Egypt to die of hunger in this wilderness?” (Exod 16:1-36); and 3) *water to drink*, so they complained against Moses, “Why bring us out of Egypt to die of thirst?” (Exod 17:1-7).

The issue from Israel's standpoint is: *Is the LORD able to provide us with our daily necessities*; really these tests are from the LORD to *prove* if they will trust him and his promises. The repeating response by the people in each test is to complain rather than to trust. “The issue is not between Israel and its human leaders, but really between them and God” (Fox). How relevant this is for God's people in all generations.

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In fact, Israel had left Egypt with “large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds” (Exod 12:38) and now, about a month later (cp. v.1 with Num 33:3), they are complaining that they are without food. Clearly, the unleavened bread they prepared before leaving has now run out, and maybe they are not keen to use their herds as food, as these represent their wealth. Maybe, as slaves, they have been so used to their masters providing them with food every day from large cauldrons – fleshpots – that they are now panicking in the wilderness landscape.

As Moses reminded them later, before they entered the land they lacked nothing (Deut 8:1-20), and his comment, looking back on this incident, was: “So [the LORD] humbled you by making you hungry and then feeding you with unfamiliar manna. He did this to teach you that humankind cannot live by bread alone, but also by everything that comes from the LORD’s mouth” (Deut 8:3). Listening to and obeying God’s voice is key in our relationship with him (note vv. 19–20 and 25–29). God makes it clear that his instructions regarding collecting the manna are to be a test of their obedience: “I will test them. Will they walk in my instruction [Torah] or not” (v. 4). And we should note that these life-test experiences come before Sinai – almost as if the LORD is testing to see whether they will obey him as his Sinai covenant will require.

We may ask, why were the people told they should gather twice as much on the sixth day – our Friday – as the Sinai law about Sabbath-keeping had not yet been given? Maybe Moses had already encouraged the people to live in the good of the Sabbath, based on the Genesis creation story (2:2-3), resting on the seventh – Sabbath – day, as God did. But either way, the idea of ceasing from bread-gathering on the Sabbath day is legislated for the nation at this point (v. 23), before the formal covenant. The Sabbath was to be devoted as holy to the LORD; so they learn that they don’t live by bread-gathering alone but by looking to the LORD for sustenance, which is the focus of the Sabbath day.

The verb used in verse five can have different meanings; usually, the meaning is *to prepare*, but it can also mean *to determine* or *apportion*. So are they being commanded to prepare the portions for both days on the sixth day or simply to divide up the two portions for the two days? JSB explains that Halakhic exegesis takes the former meaning and so “infers a general rule that cooked food for the Sabbath must be prepared before the Sabbath” (b. Shab 117b; b. Pes 47b; b. Betzah 2b; see also v. 23). Based on this, devout Jews do no food preparation or cooking on the Sabbath. “The mention of ‘double the bread’ (lekhem mishneh) on the Sabbath in v. 22 is also the source of the Jewish custom of placing two loaves of bread on the table at the main Sabbath and festival meals” (JSB).

The *glory* (*cavōd*) of the LORD appears in the cloud that led Israel out of Egypt and through the Reed Sea (Exod 13:21–22; 14:19–24) and is picked up in our Psalm reading (see Ps 105:39 later). The cloud was probably over the tent of meeting which at this stage was in the wilderness outside the camp (Exod 33:7-11). Samuel R. Driver says, “A brilliant glow of fire...symbolizing Jehovah’s presence, gleamed through the cloud, resting ... on the Tent of Meeting. The cloud shrouds the full brilliance of the glory,

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which human eye could not behold” (Driver, 1911, 147–148). This same *glory* appeared on Sinai (Exod 24:16-17), later entered the tabernacle when it was built (Exod 40:34-35), and also appeared at the inauguration of the priesthood (Lev 9:6, 23).

It is worth mentioning that there are similar stories involving manna in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11, on either side of Sinai. The Exodus story is about lack of food and the Numbers story is about the people tiring of the manna. Many have noticed that there is a repetition of complaint stories before Sinai in Exodus, and also after Sinai in Numbers, and these two manna stories are included. Similar things need not be the same thing, and the narrative arc around Sinai is teaching theology about journeying with God by faith. Obedience to God's voice will result in them experiencing and knowing that Yahweh is their God. God intends for us to know him in and through a life of faithfulness – not just by intellectual assent.

About the quail given in the evening, JSB says: “Quail migrating, often in great numbers, between Africa and Europe in the spring and autumn, often drop exhausted in the Sinai and are caught by hunters. This experience was repeated in Num 11:31–32, but did not become a regular occurrence, as did the manna. The quail were not a supernatural phenomenon, but their timely appearance at God's promise was an act of divine providence.”

The use of the Hebrew word for manna as *bread* (לֶחֶם) here has a broad meaning for food, grain, or even meat. NET adds:

What is known about [manna] from the Bible in Exodus is that it was a very small flake-like substance, it would melt when the sun got hot, if left over it bred worms and became foul, it could be ground, baked, and boiled, it was abundant enough for the Israelites to gather an omer a day per person [about 2.3 litres dry measure], and they gathered it day by day throughout the wilderness sojourn. Num 11 says it was like coriander seed with the appearance of bdellium, it tasted like fresh oil, and it fell with the dew. Deut 8:3 says it was unknown to Israel or her ancestors; Psalm 78:24 parallels it with grain.

When the Israelites saw the substance on the ground, they said to one another: *mān -hu* because they did not know *what it was* (*māh-hu*). It seems – from Aramaic and Arabic – that *mān* is an ancient form of a word for *what?* (NET). Fox suggests “a playful rendering might be ‘whaddayacallit’ or ‘what’s-its-name’!” The word *mān* sounds like the Hebrew word for *what* (*māh*), and it is used in verses 31, 33, 35 for the English translation *manna*. But Moses' response in verse 15 suggests he is saying: “It is not *what?* It is the *bread* (*lekhem*) that the LORD has given to-you (*lachem*) for food/eating.” As Hertz says quaintly: “God in his ever-sustaining providence fed Israel's hosts during the weary years of wandering in his own unsearchable way.”

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McNeile makes a good point, which is quoted in Hertz: “The fact that these constant murmurings of the people are recorded is evidence for the historic truthfulness of the narratives of the wanderings. A purely ideal picture of the Chosen People would have omitted them. They also serve to display the wonderful personality of Moses, who could control, pacify, and lead such a collection of rude nomad tribes.”

**Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45. The Bread of Heaven.** The psalmist summons Israel to praise God because he delivered his people from Egypt in history and in fulfilment of his covenantal promises to Abraham (vv. 6, 9–11). This psalm is a historical psalm covering stories from Genesis to the promised land and includes the way God sent Joseph ahead of his family – to save them from famine (NET).

God's deeds and wonderous acts are those recorded in the Torah, which the psalm goes on to recite and reinterpret. The *portents* in verse five probably refer to the wonders in Egypt and *judgements* probably recalls the giving of the law at Sinai. The audience is addressed as the seed of Abraham and the children of Jacob (v. 6); thereby making them the fulfilment of God's promise to give Abraham many offspring (Gen 15:3–6) and to connect the readers of the psalm as *his chosen ones* with the *chosen* forefathers.

Later, the psalm also shows the providence of “the LORD our God” in Abraham's generations because “he has remembered his covenant” via the seed of Abraham – in Joseph, Egypt, and the Exodus (vv. 7–37). The psalm also refers to the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 (v. 43), and to the conquest of Canaan (v. 44).

The key link with the Exodus passage in this reading is in verse 40, where it says: “He satisfied them with the bread of heaven.” *It is interesting to note that no mention is made of their complaining!* Jesus picks up the theme in John: “I tell you the solemn truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but my Father is giving you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:32-33). Jesus makes it very clear that the *manna* for Israel was a *type* of the Messiah, and Yeshua is the *antitype* – the one on whom we should feed each day in our life of faith.

The psalm finishes by saying that this act of God – and the many others recalled in the psalm – was “so that they might keep his commands and obey his laws.” In Exodus 16, it was so “you shall know that I the LORD am your God” (Exod 16:12). As we have said, obedience to the Lord's Torah is the way to come to know him deeply, not simply by intellectual assent. Alter says: “The people's inheritance of the land, the fulfilment of the promise first made to Abraham, is not simply to possess political sovereignty over territory but to observe God's statutes, which is Israel's part in the covenantal agreement.”

**Philippians 1:21-30. Life is Christ-Messiah.** Since Paul had submitted to Yeshua as Messiah, he had devoted his life to living for him. In keeping with what we have learnt in the Manna story and the Psalm, for Paul, life was found in the Messiah and so to live every day for him was living life to the full.

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Though Paul was currently in prison in Rome, he believed his prayers and those of the Philippians (v. 19) would be answered, and he would not die but be released and continue in fruitful work for them. Some scholars believe Paul was in fact let out of this first Roman imprisonment and was able to continue his work for a time but was later imprisoned a second time in Rome and died under Nero (NET).

The verb in the first clause of verse 27 means *to live as citizens* – πολιτεύεσθε, *politeuesthe* – and, according to NET, it refers to “the life of a freeman in a free Roman colony.” Philippi was one of these Roman colonies, and so the Philippians knew what it meant to live as Roman citizens. However, Paul, here, was “elevating it to the citizenship of heaven” (NET). He states it plainly in 3:20: “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Saviour, the Lord Yeshua Messiah.” To apply the Exodus metaphor, as citizens of heaven, we are called to walk with God on our wilderness journey, eating the daily bread from heaven, and with our eyes fixed on the promised land – heaven itself.

**Matthew 20:1-16. The Kingdom of Heaven is like ....** It is essential that this parable about the kingdom of heaven is read in its context. If one reads it with modern eyes and with no appreciation of the flow of thought, then one can jump to inappropriate conclusions about the teaching of Jesus. The repeated saying in 19:30 and 20:16 – about first and last – are intended to point the reader to the parallel relationship in the stories.

It was assumed by the disciples – then and often now – that if we are rich in worldly goods, then we must be right with God. However, the kingdom of heaven turns such assumptions on their head. The story about the rich man (19:16-30) tells us he went away sad (19:22), but the ones who may have minimal worldly wealth but follow Jesus are the ones who will ultimately be blessed eternally (19:27-30).

Our reading follows this story, and Jesus tells a parable to show that the basis of salvation is in the goodness and grace of God – not in our works or possessions. The lead actor is a wealthy landowner, a person who owns an estate with a large house, household, and land. He is called “the lord of the vineyard” and has an estate manager (v. 8), and each day in the high season they would engage day workers to cover the extra workload – as was common in those days. The working day ran from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., and the first group of workers were hired at the village marketplace around 6 a.m. A key point occurs in verse two where the landowner – or probably the manager on his behalf – agreed to a denarius for the day’s work. “The denarius was a silver coin worth about a day’s wage for a laborer in Palestine in the 1st century” (NET. See also 18:28; 20:10; 22:19).

The hiring process was repeated again at around 9 a.m., noon, and finally at 5 p.m. – just one hour before the end of the work-day. These last individuals no doubt would have been happy to receive any

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fair sum for their hour's work, and this was exactly the agreement made by the landowner with front-loaded emphasis: "whatever is right/fair, I will give to you" (v. 4).

At pay-time, after 6 p.m. that day (see Lev 19:13 and Deut 24:14-15 about the justice of this employment practice), there were two surprises. Firstly, the last ones hired were summoned first to receive their pay; and secondly, everyone else got the same pay as the first ones hired! One can imagine the growing surprise – and complaining – as the workers, who had worked longer, each received their pay. The implication of verses 11-12 is that the grumbling was amongst themselves, but as things progressed, no doubt it got more and more audible.

The owner of the vineyard overheard one who was complaining loudly and spoke to him directly. He addresses him individually as *friend* or *colleague* but denies the accusation: "I am not acting unfairly towards you," – using the same root word as in verse four. Again, very personally and emphatically he says: "Did not a denarion, you agree with me?" The landowner then makes it clear that treating the last one the same as him was his right, a matter of his own choice: "I want/choose to give to this last one the same as to you." As the landowner and employer, he clearly has the right to go beyond his contractual obligations and to allocate his own resources generously, if he so chooses. The landowner recognises the root problem and adds: "Is your eye evil, because I am good," meaning, "are you envious, because I am generous?" (NET, literal).

So, at the close of the parable, Jesus repeats the kingdom principle: "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (also Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30). Of course, in this parable, the issue being dealt with is not about employment but about salvation or eternal reward. On what does it depend? Does it depend on our hard work or human values? No, it depends on God's goodness and grace, on the principles of "the coming-age" (Eph 1:21) not "the now-age" (2 Tim 4:10). God chooses to give to all his servants the same salvation, and it is not dependent on how long they have served him. Notice also, that in this parable, the workers do not choose to work for the owner, but the owner comes out to choose them. Whether we are first or last in societal hierarchies, our salvation depends solely on God's sovereign goodness and grace.

In the Hebrew Scriptures and in the teaching of Jesus, the vineyard is used as a metaphor for Israel (Isa 5; Jer 12:1-4 and Matt 21:33-46). The metaphor may lie behind this parable also but clearly not narrowly meaning earthly Israel but broadly "the kingdom of heaven" (v. 1). *Note the echo here of the complaining of the hired workers, with Israel's complaining against Moses in the wilderness in Exodus 16* (JANT and Beale).

**Further reading.**

- Alter: The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary (3 vols): Robert Alter

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- Beale, G.K., & Carson, Donald A. (Eds.). (2007). Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament. Baker Publishing Group.
- Driver, Samuel R. (1911). The Book of Exodus: In the Revised Version with Introduction and Notes. Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, E. (2000). The Five Books of Moses: The Schocken Bible. The Harvill Press.
- Hertz, J.H (Ed.). (1960). The Pentateuch and Haftorahs (2nd ed.). Soncino Press.
- JANT: Levine, A.J., & Brettler, M.Z. (2011). The Jewish Annotated New Testament. Oxford University Press.
- JSB: Berlin, Adele, Brettler, Marc Z., & Fishbane, Michael A. (Eds.). (2004). The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation. Oxford University Press.
- NET: The NET Bible: Translation and Notes (2019). Thomas Nelson.

### ACNA Readings

**Introduction.** September 24-25 is Yom Kippur – the most holy day in Judaism. It is a day of fasting, refraining from work, and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with God and humankind for unfulfilled vows or other mistakes or offences.

The 29th is Sukkot, which commemorates the 40 years spent following Moses in the desert. The word *sukkot* refers to the shelters used during the wilderness wanderings. It is a time of feasting and celebrating the goodness of God, which can be seen in the harvest.

**Common theme.** These readings all focus on what it means to follow God, whether following God means freedom from slavery or wandering in the desert. Above all, it is to live a life that honours him.

**Jonah 3:10-4:11.** Jonah can be divided into two parts, which are separated by Jonah's declaration "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). The first chapter recounts God's unwelcome task of going to the Ninevites and Jonah's fleeing from it. The second chapter contains Jonah's description of what he endured during his flight from God and his resulting statement of faith.

In chapter three –which begins part two – God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach God's judgment; Jonah goes and is wildly successful. A short passage, Jonah 3:1-9, tells about the Ninevites' extreme repentance. Even domestic animals fasted and wore sackcloth as a sign of repentance.

Today's reading concludes the book of Jonah. It involves a discussion between the Lord and Jonah, in which the Lord expresses his love and care for both beasts and humans. *But what of Jonah?* He has obeyed God, preached judgment on the Ninevites, and goes to a place east of the city where he makes a little shelter – a *sukkah*, of which *sukkoth* is plural. When Jonah realizes that the Lord is going to forgive Nineveh and not destroy the city, he is "displeased" (Jonah 4:1).

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Jonah – confronted by the Lord – says, “I would rather die than live” (Jonah 4:3). God asks Jonah – whose name means *dove* – if he is really so deeply grieved because of a plant that had shadowed him and had been killed by God’s worm. Like Balaam’s donkey and Jonah’s great fish, it is a part of God’s obedient creation.

Jonah answers *yes* and the Lord replies that Jonah cared about a plant that grew up and died in a day. Should God not care about a populous city, filled with both people and animals? (Jonah 4:10-11). We are left with this question about the goodness of God. We understand God’s goodness when it is extended to us, to people we love, or to those who are like us. But what about *our Ninevites*? The book ends on this question.

**Psalm 145:14-21.** In the Jewish tradition, Psalms 145-150 are recited at the beginning of the morning service. *Hallelujah* – in English, *praise the Lord* – begins and ends Psalms 146-150. However, Psalm 145 is a song of praise of David; rather than beginning and ending with *Hallelujah* it begins with full verses: “I will extol you, my God and king and bless your name forever and ever” (v. 1) at the beginning and at the end “let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever” (verse 21). This forms an *inclusio* that takes in all life!

The psalm falls into two sections. The first section – verses 1-13 – praises the character of the Lord. Today’s selection is the second section – verses 14-21 – and it tells of God’s relationship with his creatures, including humankind.

The Lord upholds all who are falling  
Feeds every creature  
Is righteous and kind in all his works,  
Is near to all who call on Him in truth  
Hears and saves those who cry to him  
Preserves all who love him.  
Destroys the wicked.

In other words, the Lord cares for the weak, provides for their physical needs, listens and saves those who cry to him, and preserves people who love him. This is the love of God; these are the privileges of those who return his love.

**Philippians 1:21-27.** Jonah, in chapter four, tells the Lord he is so angry he wants to die. Here St. Paul is going to tell us that his desire is also to depart – die. Unlike Jonah, however, he is not so angry he wants to die. He desires death in order to be with Christ, whom he loves.



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Yet, for Paul, dying is not the only way to be with Christ. He says, “To live is Christ” (Phil 1:21). What St. Paul meant by this is spelt out in the concluding verse, which reads “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. . . standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil 1:27). Specifically what St. Paul meant by this is fleshed out in 2 Corinthians, “five times I received. . . forty lashes less one . . . three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked” (2 Cor 11:24-25). From there the list continues. This is a small portion of what it cost St. Paul to strive for the faith of the gospel. He asks us too to stand firm and strive for the gospel, because to live at all is Christ.

That is not all St. Paul is saying. “To die is gain,” he says. Living in Christ is worth the cost, in spite of pain and danger, and dying is even more gain.

St. Paul confesses to us that he is torn between living and dying. Dying means to depart from this world and be with Christ himself, the God of Psalm 145, which would be an immeasurable gain even if St. Paul's life in this world had been a bed of roses.

Which to choose? St. Paul concludes, “to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Phil 1:24). The love of Christ for his followers makes his apostle concerned for Christ's people. “I know that I will remain. . . for your progress and joy in the faith” (Phil 1:25). Unlike Jonah, who wept for a weed and wanted to die, St. Paul is willing to live in hardship and danger. (2 Cor 11:26-27) This is the love of God for his people lived out through the labours of one of those people, the Apostle Paul.

**Matthew 21:28-32.** Understanding the parable told in this reading requires context. Jesus is in Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion. He has made his triumphal entry as prophesied at some length in Zechariah

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
Righteous and having salvation is he,  
Humble and mounted on a donkey  
On a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech 9:9).<sup>1</sup>

Jesus has cleansed the temple (Matt 20:13). He has been healing, casting out demons, raising the dead, and preaching throughout the three years of his ministry. His bona fides have been established over and over again. Yet in Matthew 21:23, the chief priests and the elders of the people accost him as he enters the temple and ask, “By what authority are you doing these things?”

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<sup>1</sup> This is shortened when Matthew quotes it in his Gospel.

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Instead of answering them, Jesus asks them a question: “Where did the baptism of John come from? From heaven or from man?” They in effect refuse to answer, saying that they don’t know, so Jesus refuses to indulge their loaded question about his own authority.

At this point, Jesus tells another of his *two sons* parables. In this parable, one son at first refuses to work in the father’s vineyard but ultimately does work. The second son says that he will go but doesn’t. Jesus then asks us, which son did as the father asked.

The consensus is that the first son, who first said no but later went to work, obeyed the father. Jesus then draws on the parable to make a point about John the Baptist – or Baptizer. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed John, Jesus says. He rebukes the priests and elders for not believing in John, even when they came to recognize the rightness of John’s preaching.

What then does this parable tell us about living a life worthy of the Gospel? First of all, Jesus’ final comment is arresting. “Even when you [the priests and elders] saw it [the truth of John’s preaching and baptism] you did not afterwards change your minds and believe him” (Matt 21:32). We have the possibility of changing our minds when we see the truth – even if we have been stubbornly refusing to admit it. When we see the truth is less important than that we see the truth and believe it.

It is also unimportant what we have done in the past, whether we were tax collectors or prostitutes or whether our sins were more subtle like hatred hidden behind a smile or more sophisticated like pride. We are invited to come no matter who we are. The question is will we change our minds, believe, and serve, like St. Paul?

If we are to pursue the life that St. Paul tells us, this is the question we must first ask ourselves. How we answer it is only by the grace of God which brings us first to salvation and then to a life worthy of the gospel of Christ.

**About the RCL author.** Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.

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