

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

ACNA Readings – Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-21; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:28-32

Introduction. “Those who do not learn history are deemed to repeat it.”¹ The author of this statement clearly intends that future generations will not make the same mistakes as those who have lived beforehand. It is something true of major events – such as wars – where the hope is that there will be no repeat wars and that nations will learn a different path, but it can also be true of an individual. An individual who learns from something they have done wrong will then be in a better position to make different choices in the future.

Common Theme. There is a very strong recurrent theme in each of these readings. God is a reliable God. He remembers what he has promised and acts accordingly. He shows himself to be faithful, trustworthy, and reliable, which means that his followers can trust him and pray in confidence. Equally true is that whenever believers remember what God has done, they can have certainty and hope in their prayers. Additionally, they know that if they change their lives and do not repeat their mistakes, they will be in a better position.

Exodus 17:1-7. It is always amazing to note how short the human memory is. The Israelites have been set free from Egypt and have seen the sea divide in two. They have spent time in the desert where they have experienced the hand of the Lord. In Exodus 16, we read that God provided manna and quail in the wilderness; yet when they arrive at Rephidim and find no water, they do not trust the Lord but start to complain. They quarrel with Moses demanding he give them something to drink.

Too often the leader of a congregation is attacked when people cannot have what they expect or want from God. This is clearly behind Moses' reply in verse two when he asks why they are quarrelling with him, but he also asks why they want to put the Lord to the test. Lack of faith and trust in the Lord is often shown through complaint and demand. This develops in verse three as they grumble again at Moses asking him why he brought them out of Egypt to die of thirst.

As a leader, Moses does the obvious thing and turns to God (v.4). He has known God in Egypt and he knew how God was leading them. Rather than ask God for the water, he instead asks God what to do with the people as he feels he is in danger of being stoned. Although Moses could have addressed the situation of the water, he instead questioned God based on his own feelings.

One way of reading this is that Moses is asking God what to do and the reference to him being stoned is just an explanation of the state of the people. If that is the case, Moses is trusting the Lord for a solution whereas the people have lost sight of a provider God. An alternative reading would be to suggest that

¹ This quote is based upon George Santayana's statement “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” from *The Life of Reason*. It has been quoted in many varieties over the decades.

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Moses is asking for his own safety rather than for the Lord to solve the problem that the people have raised. If this is the case, again Moses trusts the Lord to look after him even though the people are at odds with God. He continues to have the trust that the people have forgotten.

The faithfulness of God becomes apparent very quickly. He does not turn a blind eye to the prayers of Moses but instead issues instructions that will provide a solution. These are stages which show some of the attributes of the Lord. In verse five, he tells Moses to take some of the elders with him to witness what the Lord will do. He tells Moses to use the same staff that was used on the Nile – demonstrating the continuity and reliability of God. God often works within our own expectations, maybe for Moses this was comforting as he knew that staff had worked before when carrying out the instructions of the Lord.

Verse six teaches us that God does not hide from problems. He tells Moses that he will stand by the rock as Moses strikes it. It was likely a comfort to Moses to know the Lord will be there, and amazingly the Lord uses Moses to bring about the miracle as it is Moses who needs to strike the rock. Throughout Scripture there is a partnership between the Lord and his servants and, in this case, using Moses to strike the rock demonstrates that God still has confidence in Moses and wants the leaders to see what he does so that they too will renew their confidence in Moses. Put simply, God does not duck out of problems but stands alongside those who are facing them.

Another often repeated principle comes into play as Moses names the place *Massah* – meaning *testing* – and *Meribah* – meaning *quarrelling*. God specialises in leaving memories of his work, such as the Passover meal to remember the Exodus, and here is no different. The names of the place are a testimony to what happened there and serve as a reminder to the weakness of the people.

The tradition of passing on memories of these events continues to this day. At the end of Sukkot,² Jewish people around the world celebrate and remember the wilderness wanderings. Sukkot is a Torah-commanded festival and one of the three great festivals that required the people to go to Jerusalem. Today you see Jewish people building sukkot – tents – of things like palm leaves in their gardens. Hotels and restaurants have sukkot for guests to eat in. They remind people that their ancestors journeyed through the desert for 40 years without a real home as they headed for Israel. It is a very visual reminder of how God led his people in the past, which one would hope will encourage them to turn to him today also.

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16. The Psalm begins as the people are told to hear the teaching and listen to the words of the Psalmist's mouth. Verse two speaks of a parable, which is a very common biblical tool; Jesus himself uses parables extensively because they illustrate teaching points. The Psalm instructs the

² This year, the end of Sukkot is 6th October and so coincides with these readings.

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uttering of things of old, “things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us” (v.3). Continued repetition keeps the events alive in the consciousness of the people. Naming a place according to what had happened there, which we saw in our Exodus reading, is one way this works in practice. Places are named, events are recorded, and so on – which years later serve as parables or teaching tools for current situations. As Ecclesiastes 1:9 states, “There is nothing new under the sun.”

The Psalmist tells us to look back and learn, just as the Jews do regularly in events such as the Passover meal reminding them of the Exodus and Sukkot. Verse four encourages people to keep that same tradition with an instruction to tell everything to the next generation, to hide nothing when it comes to what the Lord has done – his power and wonders. When those things are passed on, it becomes easier to trust God for whatever is being faced at the time. On the opposite side, the reminders warn people of that which has previously displeased God in the hope that the same mistakes are not repeated.

It is interesting to see that in verses 12-16 the Psalmist lists some of the key events that have been experienced by the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. These verses reinforce the idea of looking back. They are a reminder of some of the wonderful things that the Lord did for them on that journey. Maybe the Psalmist is listing them in order to focus their minds on their history and heritage. We cannot know that for certain but it would fit with the overall theme of this Psalm. All the events listed are found in Exodus and are relevant, particularly for the Feast of Sukkot.

Philippians 2:1-13. This is one of the most powerful passages in the New Testament, although admittedly there are many passages to which that title could apply. Paul begins in verse one by stating that whatever situation you are in – whatever your needs and desires are when it comes to the Lord – coming together in faith and love is the answer. For Paul, this is something that will bring him joy (v.2), because believers should be one in spirit and mind. Such an attitude to the Lord will help believers not to be tempted to focus on selfish ambition and vain conceit, that is not to be self-serving, because the desire will be to value others more highly than yourself – just as the Lord himself demonstrates in the life and ministry of Jesus. The point is driven home with an explanation of the mindset of Jesus. It may be that the following verses are an ancient hymn or poem, something well known to the Philippians, but whether or not that is true, the lessons are invaluable.

The following verses take the reader back to learn from Jesus. Verse six is a clear statement that Jesus is God. Scripture is clear in its teaching that Jesus is fully God yet does not cling to equality with God. He is willing to set himself lower than his status entitles him. Verse seven shows just how far he will go in that he makes himself nothing. There is a total surrendering of his position, which is in marked contrast to other parts of Scripture where men and women are setting themselves up as gods or boasting of their positions in society. We learn too that Jesus descends into the role of a servant, which illustrates his humility, and also that he is made in human likeness. There have been heresies in the past that have

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taught that Jesus was not fully God or not fully human. This one verse on its own, which is supported by many other references, fights against those two false claims and should be taken seriously.

Verse eight teaches just how far the humility of Jesus will take him. He becomes obedient to death. His death is his choice. Planned before the foundation of the world (Eph 1). Jesus could have backed out of his death – something that is apparent from Matthew 26:57-58 and Luke 22:42 – the latter being Jesus' own request to the Father to remove the cup of suffering before he surrendered his life. These verses are screaming out to us that Jesus is in complete control of what is happening. The plan of God unfolds perfectly because God is a faithful, trustworthy, and reliable God who is always consistent.

As we move into verse nine, we are beginning to see that the plan of God will end well as Jesus is exalted to the highest place and given the name above all names (v.9). Death and destruction are not the end of the line for Jesus. Scripture also teaches that death does not have the final victory; so it is essential to see Jesus exalted and honoured. It strengthens our understanding of the reliability of God and how he sees things through to the end. The inevitable follow-on from the exaltation of Jesus is that every knee in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will bow before him and every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. The picture of God is superb. He is faithful; he fulfils his plans; he gets his own hands dirty; he involves himself in humanity; he honours obedience; and he stands alongside humanity. These traits are all seen in various places in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is a strong continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

Matthew 21:23-32. To say that not everyone believed in Jesus would be a gross understatement. This passage is one where we see that disbelief in action. As Jesus enters the temple courts he is questioned by the chief priests and elders of the people – those who should have been tuned into God with their vast experience and knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. They question the authority of Jesus and who gave him that authority. His answer asks them to reflect on the past – as we have seen in all of the above readings. They need to reflect on things they should know and in particular on the baptism of John; Jesus questions them on whether it was a human or a heavenly baptism.

Verses 25 and 26 show us that the chief priests and elders are stuck on how to answer this. If they say from heaven, it will lead Jesus to ask why they did not believe him, but if they say it is of human origin they face anger from the people who considered John the Baptist to be a prophet. Inevitably, they cannot answer and so say that they do not know. Had they been in step with the Lord beforehand and had they known what the Lord was doing through history and made sense of the prophets, they would have known the answer for sure.

Jesus uses a parable as a follow-up to this conversation. There are two sons of an owner of a vineyard. Both are asked to go and work. One refuses but later changes his mind and does go to work; the other promises to go straightaway but never turns up for work. In true rabbinical style, Jesus then asks which

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of the two the father would want. They answer “the first”. Jesus explains that those who rejected the Gospel and the Lord at first – the tax collectors and prostitutes being the examples he used as they were often reviled in society – are entering the kingdom of God ahead of those who ought to be there, a direct attack on the chief priests and elders. The reason? They did not believe John when he showed the way of righteousness but the tax collectors and prostitutes did, yet even that did not lead the chief priests and elders into a relationship with the Lord.

Behind this teaching is the idea that God has made himself known – in this case through John – but that rather than remembering all that has been taught, people are making their own judgements and it is leading them away from God to the point where they can attack the Son of God whom they should have recognised.

ACNA Readings

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32. This reading from Ezekiel starts with what is likely to have been a well-known saying “The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” The fact that it is set out as a quotation, and referred to as a proverb that people quote is why we know it must have been well known at the time. What lies behind it is the understanding that when one generation has a poor, or even bad, experience, then the next generation will reap the consequences. Put simply, whatever we do or say is rarely in isolation. There are always effects lasting to the next generation.

Two obvious examples in our generation are a parent who was abused can become an abuser; a drug addict can give birth to a baby already dependent on drugs. Verse three states clearly that the Lord is going to bring an end to this situation. It is one of countless examples showing us that God wants to get his hands dirty in supporting and helping his people. He does not stand idly by and watch suffering. He enters into it and goes through it with people with the aim of bringing people to a place of fulfilment, which in some cases may not even be in this life. So, God declares that the knock-on effect of suffering will cease to be among his people in his land because all belong to him. Only the sinner is the one who dies.

Despite the continual reminder through Scripture that the Lord is there for his people, there are those – according to verse 25 – who claim that “The way of the Lord is not just.” There are always those who want to bring an accusation against the Lord, but he is quick to refute it by turning the tables and asking the accusers if it is not actually their ways that are at fault. We are reminded of Jesus’ warnings to look at our own behaviour and thought process before challenging that of others. In fact, as Ezekiel continues speaking the words of the Lord, righteous people will die if they have turned from their righteousness and committed sins, and they will die as a result of their sin. In modern terminology, they only have themselves to blame. Verse 27 then starts with one of the most powerful words in Scripture, *but*. *But* so often leads us from condemnation to praise, from cursing to blessing, and here is no different.

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The wicked person who turns from their wickedness – that is the opposite of the one described in verse 26 – will save their life. Their consideration of all that they have done wrong (v. 28) will lead them to life rather than death. God is laying out a simple choice here and the natural consequence of that option is to question, to ask the Israelites directly, “Are my ways unjust?” “Is it not your ways that are unjust?” The fascinating thing here is that God answers in such a way as to throw down a challenge to answer him. He does not just condemn them for their thoughts. There is a process; there is a question; there can be a response. Ever since Genesis, the Lord has been allowing people to question him and allowing people to make their own decisions – even if that should lead them to a place he would rather they did not go. He is a fair and just God.

Being a fair and just God, the Israelites are told in verse 30 that each one will be judged according to their own ways. There is no collective judgement. God is so fair that he deals with each one individually. He is also a patient God and so before the judgement comes they are given time to repent – to turn away from their wrongdoing and thus avoid the inevitable downfall that comes from sin.

Verse 31 repeats the encouragement to repent – although it is worded differently – and a positive side of repentance is offered – a new heart and a new spirit. God is offering a chance for change, but it is such a significant change that we do well to remember that there is a clear division between those who are with the Lord and those who are not. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures mention this in many different places, such as Psalm 51 and Romans 12. God wants people to turn to him and not to die – as explicitly stated in verse 32 where God says that he has no pleasure in the death of anyone. Always with the Lord is the chance of a new hope.

Psalm 25:1-21. David begins this Psalm with a statement that he trusts in the Lord. This is in contrast to the other readings where there seems to be a distrust of the Lord. His trust allows him to appeal to the Lord that he will not be put to shame (v.3). His words are in stark contrast to his enemies, upon whom he is certain will be shamed. Verse four carries on with the contrast. Against those who go their own way, David wants to stay in tune with the Lord and so asks the Lord to show him his ways and furthermore in verse five that God will guide him and teach him. He is focused on the Lord and wants to walk in his ways, that God will be his saviour and his hope.

In verse six, there is a reason for David's motive for prayer and his confidence in God. He knows God can and does remember his great mercy and love for God has always been like that and David sees no reason for a change. Asking God to remember his love and mercy also reminds David that God can remember the sins of our youth and our rebellious way, and so David asks him to forget those. It highlights the need for change again. As David prays for a strong focus on the Lord so as not to slip, he prays that the Lord will choose to focus on mercy and love – not David's past sins. In the wider context of Scripture, we know that God does choose to forget sin, but it should be a driving force in prayer.

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From verse eight onwards, David is again remembering, but this time he is remembering the character of God – a God who is good and upright and instructs sinners in his ways. It bears repeating that God does not take pleasure in anyone's death. Not only are people instructed, but if in a state of humility, they are guided and taught by the Lord as he invests his time in them. In case anyone should ask what God's ways are like, David answers the question in verse ten stating that the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful but adds that this is only towards those who keep the demands of his covenant.

It may seem slightly odd, therefore, that David then asks in verse 11 that the Lord would forgive his iniquity. David has expressed confidence before but now appeals to the Lord again for forgiveness. It could well be a literary tool that the faithfulness of God is sandwiched on either side by David's acknowledgement of sin, but more likely it is David being aware of his own position before the Lord.

Verse 12 asks the question "Who are those who fear the Lord?" This is a good question because people who do not fear the Lord generally do not look any different to those who do fear the Lord. So in the second half of verse 12, David states that those who fear the Lord are the ones God instructs, which emphasises a relationship between the believer and the Lord. They are the ones who will find that their days are prosperous and who will inherit the land. There they will continue to be in relationship with the Lord, a relationship so deep that the Lord himself will confide in them and make known his covenant that they may remain strong. For that reason, it would seem, David tells us that he will have his eyes forever on the Lord (v.15) so as not to lose sight of what God wants for his life, and to ensure that he is not trapped somewhere without the Lord's protection and guidance.

Verses 16-21 form the basis of a personal prayer from David. We have seen he is confident in the Lord, but he does not take the Lord for granted. He asks the Lord to turn to him – to be gracious and relieve him of the troubles of his heart and to fight his enemies. He can only pray like this because he has learnt of the trustworthiness and reliability of the Lord in other times. It shows the value of remembering who God is and what he has done. That enables the believer to pray with confidence for the future.

About the author. The Rev Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shoreside Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.