

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 25:1-9; Psalm 23; Philippians 4:4-13; Matthew 22:1-14

Introduction. There are good leaders and there are bad leaders. One of the problems of the human condition is that our leadership does not always behave in the best interest of the people they should be leading. Leaders are also on display – whether they want to be or not – and their behaviour will often be emulated by those they lead. Rosalynn Carter is quoted as saying, “A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don’t necessarily want to go, but ought to be.”

Common Theme. In this week’s readings, we can see some aspects of good leadership in Moses and the Lord as the good shepherd. The call to prayer and to stand in the gap is also a common thread in the readings. Leadership presents a model for the people to emulate. A good shepherd can inspire the flock to act and care similarly.

Exodus 32:1-14. The incident with the golden calf raises all kinds of questions as to why the Israelites would so quickly fall into idolatry after having so recently witnessed and participated in the redemption from Egypt. The delay of the return of Moses seems to have deeply troubled the people and so they requested his brother, Aaron, to make gods for them.

One problem here is that in Hebrew, the word gods is *Elohim*. *Elohim* is the most common name for the Lord in the Hebrew text. This raises a serious question as to which god did the Israelites actually want to worship. Are the Israelites simply saying, gods like the ones they knew in Egypt? In which case they could have used the Egyptian names for the gods, and they would have known them, or are they trying to worship a form of *Elohim* that they are aware of in their oral traditions? Either way, the worship is inappropriate!

Aaron constructs a calf of molten gold. In the context of the ancient world, it’s useful to understand that the calf itself isn’t the god. In the ancient world, gods rode on the backs of great animals such as bulls. Creating a golden bull was the ancient way of calling a deity to come and dwell among the people. The Israelites are not worshipping the calf, they worshipping the thing that’s on the calf ... which is nothing, since there is nothing there.

Aaron says after having fashioned the calf that tomorrow will be a feast for YHVH. This begs another question, who did Aaron think was now taking its place on the back of the calf? God is greatly displeased at the conduct of the Israelites and announces that he will destroy the people and start the whole enterprise again with Moses. Rather dramatically God calls the Israelites *your people* and not *my people*. God charges the Israelites with having quickly turned aside from the way.

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We might pause here and contemplate how we deal with what we might consider divine delay! When things do not go as quickly as we thought they should, or the results of our efforts do not come as quickly as we hoped. How do we handle that? What follows next becomes one of the characteristics of the redeemer: intercession! Moses pleads the cause of the sinful people and successfully makes God relent from bringing absolute destruction on the people. This becomes one of the future characteristics of the Messiah; he will be like Moses and intercede for the guilty.

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23. Psalm 106 is known as one of the historical psalms because the psalm recites sacred historical events of the Israelites. The opening sentence calls the worshipper to praise the Lord and recalls his enduring mercy. A rhetorical question is asked regarding who can declare such praises and who can speak of the mighty deeds of God. The answer is that those who walk in obedience are the ones who are capable of praising the Lord.

The majority of the psalm then recalls some of the events of Israel's disobedience and unfaithfulness toward the Lord during the Exodus from Egypt. The psalm does not present sacred history in the chronological order of the actual events during the Exodus. For example, the golden calf is mentioned before the miracle of the Red Sea. Importantly, the psalm reminds the worshipper that Moses stood up and interceded for Israel. Moses did not stand idly by and watch the Lord destroy his people, although he certainly could have.

As we pray this psalm we are challenged by the character of Moses. Our calling is also to *stand in the gap* and intercede before the Lord. We need to pray that the Lord of the harvest sends more workers into his harvest field. We need to pray for mercy for our rebellious culture and encourage each other to be active in bringing light and hope to our communities. Moses' intercession was successful in turning away the wrath of God. This should encourage us in the power of prayer.

Philippians 4:1-13. As the Epistle to the Philippians draws to a close, Paul appeals for steadfastness and unity. There existed a dispute between two sisters within the community – Euodia and Syntyche. Paul did not take sides in his letter but requested unity of mind if not in bodily agreement. The community was called upon to assist in bringing a resolution to the conflict. The disagreement was not going to be ignored; it was going to be resolved. Sweeping things under the rug, so to speak, is in the long term extremely unhelpful.

Paul admonishes the community to be anxious for nothing. He writes this not as a suggestion but as a command. By way of reducing anxiety, we are instructed to bring our prayers and supplications before the Lord. What should be the subject of our prayers? Paul says everything! Everything can and should be prayed about. We should not hide from the Lord anything that goes on in our communities or the world. All areas of our lives are open to the Lord, so bring it all before him.

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Paul wants us to rejoice in all things and at all times. From experience, we would all know that this is not an easy task. When the circumstances of life cause us to lose joy – and those times will come if they have not come already – what should be our response? Paul commands us to be anxious for nothing. How do we deal with our anxiety then? Paul urges constant prayer. Everything needs to be brought before the Lord. God has to be invited into our situations.

I think what Paul is expressing here is a confidence that God will not leave or abandon his people. He is a good shepherd and good shepherds don't leave the flock. Knowing that God is close by can bring us a form of peace that is supernatural. Paul describes it as surpassing all understanding. You can't explain it but you can experience it.

Matthew 22:1-14. The parable of the Wedding Feast is another unique story of Matthew. In the Jewish context of matrimony of the late Second Temple period – the time of Jesus – the parents of the bride and the groom were deeply involved in all arrangements of the wedding. They would meet and prepare the marriage contract for the couple. Modern Hebrew calls this contract a *Ketubah*, which is read aloud during the wedding service.

If this was an arranged marriage, then the bride and groom would meet in public – possibly for the first time. Regardless of whether this was an arranged match or if the couple had participated in the betrothal themselves, they were now considered married but would separate until the actual wedding ceremony. The groom would prepare a home for his bride and the parents might assist. The parents would also prepare the ceremony and the following wedding banquet.

As part of Jewish teaching tradition parables contain *shocks*. That is, there is something in the telling of the parable that causes the listener to pay attention or ask questions. In this parable, a king has prepared a wedding feast. The marriage of his son would presumably have been well known to all his subjects. Time had passed since the betrothal and the day of the wedding and the festivities had arrived. The shock is the rejection of the invitation by the king's subjects. Who would do such a thing and why? What kind of subjects would dare refuse the invitation of their sovereign?

Understandably, the king is enraged, and his retribution is fierce. Invitations are reissued to anyone who would hear to ensure the wedding has guests for the king's heir. Interestingly, the invitations are noted as applicable for the good and the bad. Distinctions of deservedness to attend the wedding are not made. Those who had initially been sent invitations had proved themselves unworthy.

The parable leaves us questioning who the person is who enters the wedding without the right clothing. Jesus does not explain as to the nature of proper wedding clothes. It could be that they represent those who follow the teachings of Jesus; that is, those who are truly his disciples. However, in all honesty, we do not know for sure.

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Why did the man not dress appropriately when he had accepted the invitation? Who let him inside in the first place? The parable does suggest that the man was conspicuous by his lack of clothing; the king could easily spot him in the crowd of attendees as someone who does not belong and his end was rather unpleasant.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 25:1-9. In context, this song of praise from the prophet Isaiah follows directly from a declaration of tribulation and destruction in the previous chapter. Those who trust in the Lord and believe in his righteous justice can continue to give glory to God even during dark times. The song does not shy away from describing the judgment of the Lord. Verse two mentions a city that had befallen devastation at God's hand but does not disclose the name or location.

As destruction takes its hold on the city the prophet reminds us that the poor and needy are sheltered and protected. One of the glorious attributes of God is his constant care of the weaker members of society. The ones who are too often forgotten and alone but are never far from the heart of the Lord.

Isaiah concludes that while a city falls and demonstrates the power and justice of God to the surrounding nations; what is really going to be destroyed is death itself. And the veil of darkness and lies that deceive and cause us to not see the poor and needy around us will be removed. We will see as he sees. God's mercy and love are always ready to wipe away the tears of his people. They may have endured suffering but they will be given salvation. The prophetic response of the worshipper who has continued to trust God during all this will be continued praise.

Psalms 23. Much has been written on this very well-known Psalm of David. In its ancient context, the shepherd was a common image. Before urbanization, the shepherds were clan leaders and the wealthy elite. All of the patriarchs until Solomon were shepherds of Israel. The metaphor of a shepherd was applied to good kings, leaders of the community, and even to the gods themselves. The God of Israel was understood in terms of shepherding his people.

With the advent of urbanization and the draw to move into town, the wealthy left the land and built large homes in cities. The poorer were sent to work out in the fields and the role of the shepherd went to the lower classes. By the time of Jesus, the shepherds were no longer held in high esteem. The image of God as a good shepherd remained in the minds of the people – as it does to us this day – both through the sacred history of Israel and through the words of this psalm. God guides, cares, leads, corrects, and defends his flock. He walks with us in times of danger. If there is anyone we would want to be the shepherd over us, it is the Lord himself.

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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.