

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6,13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

ACNA Readings – Exodus 22:21-27; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

Introduction. Nothing happens in isolation. What we do in this world will affect someone else. Some of this is obvious. A person putting their hand in their pocket to give to a charity will benefit those that the charity serves, but even on a much smaller scale what people do in their day-to-day lives impacts others. Something as simple as coming home late without explanation can cause the rest of the family to be inconvenienced or worried about the reason for a late revival. Even working on one's own garden for one's own pleasure can give passers-by something to enjoy looking at. We do not live on deserted islands. We are never totally in isolation from the lives of others.

Common Theme. This week's readings show how a relationship with God can bring about blessing, or possibly otherwise, for each and every person. Moses knew that how he related to the Lord affected the Israelites during the Exodus. This is not only for the time in the wilderness; the other readings speak of how the care of others should continue throughout time whether you are interacting with people of the same persuasion as yourself, or whether it is to do with how you relate to those who are misfortunate.

Deuteronomy 34:1-12. Having led the Israelites out of Egypt and through 40 years in the wilderness, Moses can only see Israel from Mount Nebo – in modern-day Jordan, a mountain that is opposite Jericho, just across the Dead Sea. He is taken there by the Lord who uses the opportunity to show Moses all the land that the Israelites are to inherit. The Scriptures actually state what the area of that land is so that there is no doubt about the area which God is giving to them. In fact, verses two and three are very specific indeed.

Moses is reminded in verse four that this is the land that was promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in so doing God is showing Moses that he has kept his word to give it to the descendants of the three great Patriarchs. For Moses, however, this is the nearest he will get to the land for God had decreed that Moses would not enter the Promised Land, because Moses had broken faith with the Lord as recorded in Deuteronomy 32:51-52.

Verse five tells us that Moses then died as the Lord had said to him. There is the great fulfilment of the gift of land and there is a one-to-one fulfilment of something said to Moses. What is particularly interesting, however, is that in verse six it is the Lord who buried Moses. Although Scripture records this in the valley opposite Beth Peor, it is also stated that no one knows where the grave is. It can only be a matter of speculation as to why the burial place is to be kept secret. What we do know is that Moses had reached the age of 120; although as verse seven records, he was still a man with strength and good eyesight. He had led the people in the Exodus, but his time on earth was finished.

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Verse eight states that the Israelites grieved for Moses for thirty days, which must have been a decreed time because the verse states, "...until the time of weeping and mourning was over" (Deut 34:8). The same verse also tells us that they mourned for Moses in the plains of Moab, which means they did not try to enter the Promised Land during their time of mourning.¹

Joshua had been appointed to take over the leadership of the Israelites. He is said to be filled with the spirit of wisdom, specifically because Moses had laid his hands on him. The mantle is passed on from Moses to Joshua, and for that reason, the Israelites listened to Joshua. They did everything that the Lord had commanded Moses – a statement that could be overlooked easily but actually informs the reader that there was a continuation from the leadership of Moses to the leadership of Joshua. Things would carry on. There may be a new leader, but God is still in control.

In a tribute to Moses, verse ten speaks of the fact that Moses was unique in all of Israel. There has never been another prophet like him – specifically one who knew the Lord face to face, who did all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to do in Egypt as a proclamation to Pharaoh, all officials, and beyond them to the whole land of Egypt. Moses may have done the wrong thing by breaking faith with the Lord in Deuteronomy 32, but his position would never be matched by anyone else. Verse 12 broadens the comment slightly as Moses is accredited with being the one who showed mighty power and performed awesome deeds in the sight of Israel. Clearly, he was a hero in the modern sense of the word – a leader of superior quality – and unique in all of Israel when it came to his relationship with the Lord.

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17. This Psalm is attributed to "Moses, the man of God" (Ps 90). It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that it begins with a reference to the Lord as "our dwelling place throughout all generations" (Ps 90:1). Moses was a man who knew God face-to-face. He had found security in God as he led the Israelites through the wilderness to see the work of God protecting and guiding his people.

Moses also knew his place before the Lord. He never saw himself as equal to the Lord and verse two explains why, for it reminds the readers that God was there before anything in creation, and God will be there forevermore – everlasting to everlasting – something no human can achieve. Further references to creation occur in verse three, with the reminder that God can return people to the dust. In Genesis 3:19, it was said that Adam had been created from dust and would return to dust as part of the curse that God pronounced following the Fall.

Verse four acknowledges that human timescales are nothing like those of God for it is said that for God a thousand years are like a day or a watch in the night. This is powerful imagery into the eternity of God

¹ The Jewish People have a period of mourning called *shiva*, which is for seven days. Today, during this time certain customs are observed such as mirrors covered, television and radio kept off, and mourners coming to visit the family. This period of mourning even predates the Torah. As early as Genesis 7:4, God delays the rains for seven days. The Talmud says this was to observe the seven days of mourning for Noah's grandfather. In Amos 8, God says he will turn the feasts into times of mourning, so as Pentecost and Sukkot are seven day festivals, the same time will be allocated to a period of mourning.

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and is picked up in the New Testament in 2 Peter 3:8. Not only is God everlasting, but he is all-powerful and sovereign over all things, which is where verse five leads with a reminder that God can “sweep [people] away in the sleep of death” (Ps 90:5, NIV) just like the grass, which springs up new in the morning yet is dry and withered by evening. There could not be a more vivid comparison between the nature of humanity and the nature of God.

Despite the great differences between humanity and God, verse 13 reminds people that it is acceptable to petition God, and there is a strong petition here for God to have compassion on his servants and that true satisfaction will be found in the morning because of God's unfailing love. There is an expectation not only that God would have mercy but that he would also bring about blessing – a blessing so great that as the second half of the verse states people may be singing for joy and gladness throughout their lives.

The understanding that God truly cares for his people and that they can return to him and find him is one of the key themes in many places in the Scriptures. A return to the Lord and the compassion of the Lord are sought, but in verse 15, there is the acknowledgement that God is able to bring affliction on his people, which may last a considerable time. Although these phrases are not explicit, there is real honesty here which compares the judgement of God with the loving forgiveness of God, showing he is not to be taken for granted.

One of the key ways of knowing God is through his deeds. Scripture often calls people to look back at what the Lord has done in the past. One of the clearest examples of this is the Passover, celebrated by the Lord Jesus at the Last Supper and still remembered to this day. Thousands of years after the Exodus, the Passover still recalls all that God did for the Israelites and there is an injunction to pass this on to the next generation.

In the context of looking back, verse 16 is therefore a logical prayer, asking for the deeds of God to be made known and for the children to learn too. Knowing that God has been favourable in the past, verse 17 can be seen as a confident prayer that God will show favour to his people and establish what the people of God can do with their hands. In other words, the belief that their efforts will not be wasted for God will bring blessings.

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8. All of Paul's epistles have encouragement for the readers in common yet also rebuke or challenge and an honest acknowledgement that things do not always run smoothly. That is what we see here. In verse one, Paul states that his visit was not without achievement and compares it to his visit to Philippi where he was treated very badly and suffered (v.2). Paul's honesty is always to be noted for he never gives a false hope that the Christian life is all plain sailing. More importantly in the same verse, he is quick to point out that he does not minister without the support of God and in view of that – despite strong opposition – he was able to preach the Gospel.

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Another of Paul's traits is to reveal his motives for preaching, which are always rooted in God, although clearly in verse three there have been accusations that he was in the wrong and had impure motives, even trickery. *If this were not the case, why would he mention it?* He refutes those charges by making known in verse four that he speaks as one whom God has approved and to whom God has entrusted the gospel.

Similar to today, there were plenty of views around as to what was true faith, who was the true God, and heresies were commonplace. Paul is keen to align himself with the truth of the God of Israel and thus set himself apart from other views that were around at the time. He speaks of having a clear conscience on this matter; for, he is more concerned with what God thinks of him than what other people think of him, and he knows his heart will be tested by God to look for any impure motive.

His language reminds us of the Hebrew Scriptures. David spoke in the Psalms of the need for a clean heart and that it would be examined by God in Psalm 51. Paul – as a good Jew – would have known those Scriptures and by mentioning his heart, clearly believes that God works in the same way post-Jesus.

In verse five, Paul seems still to be refuting charges that have been brought against him elsewhere by declaring that he does not use flattery in his preaching or put on a mask to cover up greed and once more appeals to God as his witness. Verse six is a repetition of verse four, as once again, Paul asserts that he is not interested in the praise of people whether they are for him or against him. Paul is clearly confident of the message he is preaching. He could have asserted his authority as an apostle but instead relies on the power of the gospel message he brings and is keen to show that he is only a servant of the Gospel; he describes himself and those with him as children, thus of a much lower rank than God himself. In other words, he seeks no glory for himself. Everything should point to the Lord.

Yet, he sees himself in a maternal role as he cares for the Thessalonians with the same passion as a mother cares for her children (vv.7-8). This relationship developed as Paul states that he, and others with him, would share their lives with the Thessalonians as well as the Gospel. Christians today do well to share their lives with others to bring encouragement, support, and help, which will lead people ultimately to the gospel. This is the model Paul demonstrates here.

Matthew 22:34-46. Jesus is never far away from a dispute with the religious authorities of his day. Here the Pharisees are trying, once again, to trap him. When looking into verse 34, it is important to have in mind a basic principle of Bible study, which is to consider every single word for nothing is wasted in Scripture. We are told here that the particular Pharisee chosen for the task was an expert in the law – presumably chosen because he would be expected to hold his own against Jesus – and so he asks which is the greatest commandment. The fact that he is recorded as an expert on the law demonstrates that he was trying to trap Jesus rather than asking out of ignorance.

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Jesus replies with Deuteronomy 6:5 that it is necessary to love the Lord with “all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind” (Deut 6:5). Loving God requires a complete and total focus on God with every part of one's being. That, said Jesus, is the first and greatest commandment. I think of it as a summary statement of the first four of the Ten Commandments – all call for a total focus on God, an awareness of who he is, and the need to respect God and his decisions. By the same token, the second commandment Jesus gives “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt 22:39) is lifted from Leviticus 19:18 and could be seen as a summary of the remaining six commandments – all point towards how we should treat other people.

Jesus states that all other commandments hang on these two basic ones, which summarised, are to put God first and then to treat your neighbour with love – the second should flow naturally out of the first as people will then be seen as God sees them. No reply from the Pharisee is recorded. Neither is there any kind of reply from the other Pharisees who must have realized there was nothing they could do against Jesus with an answer such as this one.

Jesus does not let them off that easily and so he asks them what they think about the Messiah and to tell him whose son the Messiah is. As expected, they reply that the Messiah is the son of David because the Hebrew Scriptures record that the Messiah is to be descended from the line of David. Jesus does not leave it there and next asks them to explain why David, when speaking by the power of the Spirit calls the Messiah ‘Lord’ and to reinforce his point, he quotes Psalm 110:1 where there is an exchange of David to his Lord.

Jesus is asking them to interpret their own Scriptures, which according to verse 46 they are unable to do. They have no answer to the question Jesus poses, “If David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (Matt 22:45). The Pharisees have no idea that they are talking to the Messiah – the Son of God – a descendant of King David. The fact that they cannot answer makes them look like they do not even understand their own Scriptures.

It is worth noting in these two exchanges that the Pharisees ask questions they hope will land Jesus in trouble, yet he answers them in such a way that they are silenced and when the tables are reversed so that Jesus asks the question, they are once again silenced. No match for Jesus.

ACNA Readings

Exodus 22:21-27. Although the Hebrew Scriptures do make it clear that the Israelites could kill their enemies, there is also a very strong strain throughout that there is a need to treat others properly. Leviticus 19:18 is very clear that people should love their neighbours as they love themselves, which cannot be done if they are mistreating people. Despite that, it seems that mistreatment did happen and

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from time to time there are challenges for them to pull their behaviour into line – not least by looking at the state they were once in themselves.

In verse 21, they are not to mistreat or oppress foreigners because historically they too were foreigners in Egypt. They are also required not to take advantage of the widow or fatherless. At the time that this was written, there was no protection for widows or orphans, they could easily become destitute, but God has a place in his heart for them as revealed when verse 23 is considered. God says that if widows and orphans were to cry out to him, he would hear their cry and his anger would be aroused; the men would be killed by the sword and their own wives and children would become widows and orphans. If they cannot love others as they love themselves, then they will suffer as others have suffered.

There are other injunctions here too. Verse 25 takes further the idea of looking after others in that if someone should need money, it is fine to lend it to them but not charge interest – not to treat it like a business deal. They are not to profit from the suffering of others. Equally, if a cloak is taken as a pledge, it must be returned by evening so that the owner of the coat has protection against the night and something in which to sleep for they have nothing else. Once again God says if the owner of the coat is not treated well and cries out to God, he will again hear their cry for he is a compassionate God. As well as teaching the Israelites how to behave and respect each other, these verses clearly show that God is interested in the world and cares about people enough to be involved in their potential suffering.

Psalm 1. The first Psalm is one of the most beautiful in its simplicity. The Psalmist draws a straight comparison between the person who follows God and the one who does not and he does so in a way that is crystal clear. He begins the Psalm with a clear assertion that there is a blessing for the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the company of mockers (v.1). When you piece these three statements together you have what would amount to daily life - walking, standing, and sitting. Those are the three actions we do without thinking and it is possible that the idea behind this is to stay completely away from those who are not believers.

Then in verse two, he draws a direct comparison with a lifestyle that makes the law of the Lord a delight. In other words, rather than pursuing a life that is contrary to God's law, spend time pursuing a life that is in line with God's law. So precious is this way of life that it is worth spending 24 hours a day on it. Meditating day and night suggests that whatever awaits a person at any hour of the day they can find blessing by living according to the law of God.

To force home the message, he then draws a comparison with a tree planted by streams of water. Anyone can understand that if a tree is planted near water, it is going to flourish because its roots will find enough water to sustain it and help it grow. In Israel, of course, the very hot summers will cause plants to die without water. His expectation is that the one who meditates on the law will flourish and prosper, just as the tree by water produces fruit and does not have withered leaves.

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Verse four brings the inevitable comparison. The Psalmist speaks of how to be blessed and now turns his attention to the fate of the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away (NIV). Chaff is a waste product and is very light, so light it can just blow away in the wind. The wicked face the same fate. They are easily blown away, presumably from the presence of the Lord ultimately. This comes about because he says in verse five that the wicked cannot stand in the judgment – that is before the judgment seat of God.

In the same way, they cannot stand in the assembly of the righteous, just as chaff cannot remain with the grain once it is harvested. Why is this? The Psalmist gives an unequivocal answer. The way of the righteous is watched over by the Lord, which suggests the care, protection, and love of God; whereas the wicked are without those things and are thus on a trip to destruction. It is a harsh ending in some ways but is in stark contrast to the beginning of verse one. The Psalmist is ensuring we really do understand the difference between the righteous and the sinners.

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 Shores 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.