

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

ACNA Readings – Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-10; Matthew 25:14-30

Introduction. This Sunday we begin our approach to the season of Advent. As we draw close to the end of this church year, we begin to prepare our hearts for Advent by reflecting on our lives and the need for change and to prepare ourselves spiritually for the time of Christ's return, whenever that may be.

Common Theme. Our readings this week have the theme of trusting in the Lord and being about the Lord's business, confident in his word and promises as we await the coming Day of the Lord. The heart of the failings of Barak in the reading from Judges, the worry of the Thessalonians, and the unworthy servant in Matthew essentially boil down to a lack of trust in God and a failure to act in the confidence of the Lord's goodness. As we prepare to enter the season of Advent, the readings are useful in that they should make us question our own position before the Lord and how much we place our trust in him, particularly in times of adversity. The readings from Zephaniah and Psalm 90 both remind us of the holiness of God and that he desires that we live holy lives, making the most of our lives to be sincere in our works for the Kingdom.

Judges 4:1-7. Our reading from Judges¹ presents us with a repeated problem seen throughout the Hebrew Bible: "And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died" (Jud 4:1). Why is it that this pattern of behaviour appears time and time again? Is it simply a lack of trust, or a desire to *reap the benefits* that other religions and religious practices appeared to bring? The sin here is compounded in verse three where we read that the people only cry out for help when devastation is upon them, and they have been oppressed for twenty years. At least they eventually do call upon the Lord, but it is a sobering reminder that he should have been their first port of call. This is why daily prayer, study of scripture, and coming into the Lord's presence daily is so important, as we can address problems as they begin to arise and not seek the Lord's wisdom and intervention just when things have gotten on top of us.

The chariot was akin to the modern-day tank, and so the Israelites had every reason to be fearful when they understood that King Jabin had 900 of them.² This is significant and leads us to pay close attention to verses six and seven as Deborah is posing a question to Barak, not making a statement or giving a prophecy. She is challenging Barak as to why he has not already acted on what the Lord has said, indicating that Barak already knew that the Lord would give King Jabin into his hand. The verses following our reading compound Barak's failings – still not trusting in God – he only agrees to go if the

¹ Roughly speaking, the events of the Book of Judges covers everything from the period of Joshua's death up until the anointing of Saul as King.

² Caanan at this point was divided into cities, with a different monarch ruling over each one. Jabin's kingdom of Hazor occupying what would now be country in the modern day Upper Galilee.

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prophet Deborah goes with him, suggesting he is still not trusting the Lord alone but in Deborah's status as Judge and prophet.

When the Lord has clearly spoken to us about something he is calling us to do, do we fall into Barak's shoes and also look for a sign or some other person to accompany us? Do we hesitate until the circumstances look more favourable than they may do when we first heed that call? If we do, then we are falling into the same trap as the Israelites in that we have a severe lack of trust and that can easily lead to bad decisions and trying to do things in our own strength. If after careful discernment of the Lord's will in our lives is clear, then we need to act on that in faith and not hesitate.

Psalm 123. This psalm is one of the Psalms of Ascent,³ and the sense of reliance and dependence on God is clear throughout this psalm. The first two verses liken our looking to the Lord as one might look to an earthly master or one in authority over us whose judgement and directives we trust. These verses call us to look to the hand of the Lord as we would the hand of a master or mistress, a gesture from them of approval and possibly protection. The remaining verses call upon the Lord to have mercy upon us from those who bring contempt and scorn, reminding us as with the reading from Judges that we should turn our attention to the Lord as soon as we find ourselves in situations where we may be oppressed or ridiculed first off, especially when we see these difficult circumstances appearing on the horizon.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Those worried Thessalonians! Straight off from Paul dealing with their concerns over what happens to believers who have died in chapter four, now he must tackle another issue; the coming of the Day of the Lord.⁴

Our opening verses see this concern made manifest, the Thessalonians concerning themselves with *Times and Seasons* – in other words the period leading up to the End of Days and the Lord's return. Paul works to point out that though this time will come suddenly, they need not worry and simply be prepared. Paul draws on the imagery used by Jesus himself in Luke 12 – the thief that comes unexpectedly in the night – to emphasise the suddenness of this event and that its coming will be on a day unknown. The Thessalonians are not alone in being preoccupied with the End of Days and the time and date of the Lord's return.

³ Psalms 120-134, the Psalms of Ascent, were sung by pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate the three pilgrim festivals of Passover (*Pesach*), the feast of weeks (*Shavuot*), and Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). They were designed to increase the sense of joy as people made their way along the road and remind us that we should turn our eyes to the Lord, whom we can trust and from whom all goodness flows.

⁴ The expression *Day of the Lord* appears a number of times in the prophetic writings, and the phrase typically was associated with the time when the Lord would intervene directly into the world, saving Israel from its enemies and exercising his great and sovereign power in doing so. There was a sense of a righteous judgement coming upon those who opposed God, one that would be swift and unrelenting.

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Over the years, I have met many Christians whose faith has been sidelined by what amounts to almost an obsession with when this date will be. Why are the specifics of the Lord's return and the Day of the Lord so distracting to many? I suspect, like the Thessalonians, it relates to a lack of trust and confidence that we are "Children of light" (1 Thess 5:5) and so should have no need to fear the darkness – judgement – as we remain in that light with Jesus.

As opposed to spending their time worrying, Paul's advice is simply to continue with daily life in a state of awareness and self-control. He draws on the imagery of metaphorically putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of salvation as a means of reassurance — all of which he calls the *Armor of God*; this is imagery that he will expand on in Ephesians 6. The final verse asks the believers to encourage one another and build one another up. Many of us, like the Thessalonians, come across questions of faith that can often lead to worry, concern, and questioning of what we believe. Paul's simple wisdom here is essential to us and actually is a common sense approach. Support, fellowship, and journeying together with our brothers and sisters in Christ is one of the best ways of traversing these difficult periods and also allows us to pray for one another that we might be strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 25:14-30. The parable needs to be read in the context of Jesus' teaching, which is about being prepared for his return and our role in the kingdom on earth while we wait. It seems a lot is at stake here considering the value of the talents distributed to the servants of the master. Parables nearly always contain a shock factor to engross the audience, and this parable has two. The first is the sheer value of the money given to these servants. If we consider in modern money that just one talent is approximately 522,000 USD, then these sums of money in the parable represent riches beyond most people's wildest dreams and would have immediately caught the imagination of the hearer. The second shock is that the last servant – even though given just one talent – fails to make any use at all of that enormous amount of money and just buries it in the ground.

Now to be fair to the last servant, burying money in the ground was not an uncommon practice at this time in history. Modern banks as we understand them were not in existence in the same way, and so many would bury their possessions in the ground to keep them safe. The shock here is this amount of money the servant buries in the ground, the entire talent. He did not even have the confidence to use some of the value of the talent to invest, buy, or sell, in an attempt to make money for his master. An investment of even ten percent could have reaped huge rewards. The sense here is that even the most cautious investor could probably have generated some sort of return.

Note the last servant's response to his failure to recognize that his master had entrusted him not just with this money, but the potential he had to make a good investment with it. Simply put, he makes excuses and refuses to take responsibility for it himself. Nowhere in the rest of the parable is there anything to suggest that the master is as unjust as the servant claims; if anything we see a master who is generous,

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trusting, and willing to give his servants great opportunity to use their master's gifts to good effect. His slandering of his master's character is an effort to shift the blame for failings that are entirely his own. How often do we blame God for our own failings in a similar way when we perhaps need to take a closer look at ourselves?

The parable of course is a metaphor for the kingdom and how membership of it requires us to be active and about the Lord's business. The reference to *settling accounts* in verse 19 and the final verse – when the servant is thrown into a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth – are both references to the final judgement. Note as with the previous parable before this one, the time of the master's return is similarly uncertain and delayed, further developing the trend of these parables that we do not know the day or the hour the Lord will come, but we do need to be prepared.

For us, the parable is a reminder that the Lord gives us gifts abundantly and desires to pour out blessings on us. That generosity is a wonderful thing, but it is incumbent on us to use those gifts we have been entrusted with. Using our gifts sometimes also requires a measure of stepping out of our comfort zone and faith in the Lord's goodness and knowledge of who we are as his children. We must trust that he knows what he is doing when he gives us those gifts for his service and so not metaphorically bury those gifts in the ground but put them to use.

ACNA Readings

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18. From the very beginning, the writing of the Prophet Zephaniah makes for rather gloomy reading with judgement – and the consequences of that judgement – clear from the off. In keeping with the theme of the readings this week, verse 12 speaks of those who are indifferent to his coming, summed up by the statement “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill” (Zeph 1:12b). Their complacency will come at a shocking and catastrophic cost as the prophet then outlines the consequences for the people in graphic detail.

In reading this passage, there are few sources for joy and instead, the righteous judgement of the Lord is outlined leaving no doubt as to the consequences of being indifferent, and how people who put their stock in houses, material possessions, silver, and gold will not be helped by them on the Day of the Lord. The passage is a reminder of the holiness of God, and that he does not just sit around watching humanity unconcerned or uninterested in how we live our lives. This is especially true for us who are part of his kingdom. We enter the kingdom through no merit of our own but through his grace, and that grace requires us to respond in kind by living lives faithful to him and by keeping his commandments.

Psalms 90:1-17. Attributed to Moses, this psalm is actually a prayer, and if Moses is indeed the author then it makes this psalm the oldest composition in the Book of Psalms. The psalm continues the theme of the reading from Zephaniah – the “wrath of the Lord” against the injustices carried out by humanity.

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The psalm presents the mortality of man – limited and alive for a short amount of time – contrasted with the eternal nature of God for whom a thousand years are like a day that has just gone by (Ps 90:4).

Moses in his prayer recognizes the transitory and brief nature of our existence and that our sins and failings are only too visible in the sight of the Lord. Since our days are short Moses' closing words are so important for us to remember:

“Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!” (Ps 90:17).

The meaning of “establishing the work of our hands” is one that implores of the Lord that we may use our brief existence to be one of value and worth. Moses understood that due to the brevity of our lives – and our tendency to sin – we should make every effort to make the best use of our time that we can, using that time valuably and in the service of the Lord. These words echo the sense of both our readings from Thessalonians and Matthew that we should be about the King's business at all times – living in the light and serving the Lord with all our hearts.

About the author. Fr Kevin Cable is the priest of St Peter's Anglican Church in Jaffa, Israel. A Messianic Jew, he was a long-serving police officer in the United Kingdom before training for ordained ministry at Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford in 2006. After many years as a parish priest in the United Kingdom, since 2020 he has worked with the Church Mission Society to strengthen the Christian presence in Jaffa, and to rebuild the Anglican Community, most of whom left in 1948. He is married to Jen, a lifelong nurse, and together they share the ministry to people of all faiths and none in Israel.