

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

ACNA Readings – Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:1-13(14-21); Romans 7:21-8:6; Matthew 11:25-30

Introduction. Every couple who has ever been married for any length of time is usually asked the same question: what's the secret to a happy marriage? The answer of course will vary from couple to couple. One common response would be: don't go to bed angry, and the more Christian line might be: those who pray together stay together. Marriage is a bond, firmly established at creation. Two people yoking themselves together in the journey of life. There is another yoke of even higher importance, the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. As we journey through the season of Pentecost, we will learn more about the nature and call to take the yoke of Jesus the Messiah.

Common Theme. The concept of a yoke does not have to be negative. Binding ourselves to another – such as in marriage – can be a positive and healthy thing. In our readings this week, we will encounter the bonds of a man and wife, the heart and the tongue, and the yoke of the kingdom of heaven through the call of Jesus. When used appropriately, they will all bring forth blessing and praise.

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67. The Torah contains several incidents of *well narratives*. Water was of prime importance in the ancient world. It is the necessity for life for all creation. Civilizations that had access to an abundant water source could cultivate more food, and thus support more population and maintain larger armies with the result that they became empires. Egypt had the Nile River, and Mesopotamia had the Tigris and Euphrates and these helped them establish vast kingdoms.

With no major river system, the land of Canaan relied on water wells, called Be'er in Hebrew. Unlike with other nations, the water supply of the people of God is linked to their morality. Prior to entering the promised Land, the Lord declares in Deuteronomy 11:13-15 that; "If you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied."

With wells being so important, the encounters based around wells in the Bible are likewise important. Each encounter – or *well narrative* – teaches us something about the character of the people involved in the incident. In this week's reading, we have the encounter around a well, while Eliezer of Damascus – the principal servant of Abraham – is fulfilling his commission to seek a wife for Isaac. Throughout the chapter, Eliezer refers to Abraham as "my master." Actually, he says this an amazing 22 times so it becomes the chief refrain you hear when reading the text. Reflecting on his character, this consistent use of the phrase "my master" indicates Eliezer's incredible loyalty to Abraham and his lack of aspiration to

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seek independence. In terms of servanthood, he is a model servant. All believers should endeavour to model such service to God as Eliezer does for Abraham.

We also learn from this encounter that Rebekah has a generous spirit. She prefers to serve water to a stranger and his animals before serving herself. Generosity is one of the primary characteristics of a disciple of Jesus. Finally, we are introduced to Isaac again. We have not seen him since Genesis 22 with the incident on Mount Moria – called the *Akedah* in Hebrew or the *Binding of Isaac*.

In Jewish literature, the incident is not termed the sacrifice of Isaac as Isaac was never sacrificed only bound. Isaac – we discover – has not been residing close to his father who went to Beersheva. Instead, Isaac is living at Beer Lahai Roi, which is further away and probably indicates a strain on the father-son relationship. Isaac is a rather passive character in the Torah. He wasn't present at the burial of his mother who died following the *Akedah* and he doesn't go out to seek his own wife. In contrast to other Biblical figures Isaac only ever has one wife, never leaves the land of Canaan and doesn't get a name change.

While love-based marriages might be the preferred choice for most people in the Western world, arranged marriages are still quite common – particularly in Eastern cultures. That is not to say that love is not a part of arranged marriages; it often comes later. This we also see at the conclusion of our Genesis passage. Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife, which is described poetically as “brought into Sarah's tent,” and the word love appears after the marriage. Love is not an emotion, nor something beyond our control. Actually, love is a choice.

We are commanded to love God with heart, soul and strength. This would be a superfluous commandment – even though it's the greatest commandment – were it to be purely based on emotion. The command is not to love God if you feel like it. Sometimes we have to first accept God as our saviour, master, and king and then love will develop through the relationship as we get to know him.

Psalm 45:10-17. The superscription of this psalm from the sons of Korah indicates that it was prepared for the occasion of a royal marriage. This pairs nicely with the arranged marriage of Isaac and Rebekah. The psalm was probably used more than once for royal weddings of the house of David and subsequently found its way into the collection of Jewish prayers and the Book of Psalms.

Originally intended for ceremonial occasions, the psalm took on several messianic themes during the Second Temple period. The exhortations to the king within the psalm became applied to the Messiah culminating in verses six and seven with the promised Messiah – son of David – sitting on the throne forever. The writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45 in Hebrews 1:9 applying this same exegetical thinking to Jesus.

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Verse 1 shows the connection between the heart and the tongue. The tension between the heart and the tongue is explored in greater detail in the Epistle of James. The two are intimately bound together. The desire to praise the Lord begins in the heart and overflows from the tongue reflecting the truth that the tongue is first and foremost guided by the heart.

Romans 7:15-8:6. Paul seems to be describing the situation in which many of us find ourselves. It's not that we have a lack of the desire to do good things, it's simply that we don't always do them. If we are honest with ourselves, we all know the right thing to do. In verse 22, Paul says that on the inside he delights in the law of God. *Why would Paul say such as thing?* Because anything that comes from God must be good. And so the Torah is in and of itself good since it comes from God.

David says he also loves the Torah and meditates on it day and night. However, knowledge of the right thing to do is not the problem. It's the implementation! Paul acknowledges that he is a sinner, just like us. And that it is the nature of sinners to continue to sin. Paul describes his situation as wretched. The Greek word in verse 24 translated as *wretched* is *ταλαίπωρος* – *talaiporos* – and is used to describe the affliction stemming from constant trials and troubles. Paul has been wrestling with trying to do the right thing all the time and not succeeding. Therefore, he is in an exhausted wretched state. It seems like we find ourselves in a hopeless situation.

Paul then acknowledges – as must we all – that we have to look beyond ourselves to someone else for help in doing what is right and good. And that person is the person of Jesus. By taking his kingship over our lives and giving him our loyalty, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to walk the way in which Jesus would have us walk. Colossians 1:10 says we are to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. With the Lord, there is no condemnation – especially self-condemnation.

Paul contrasts the law of the Spirit with the law of sin and death. So it's not that we are lawless. That would cast us into the same realm as the man of lawlessness, and that is a situation in which we do not want to find ourselves. We have a law; it's to walk under the kingship and lordship of Christ. While the law of God – the Torah – is a great guide, full of God's wisdom and instruction it does not give us the necessary energy, enthusiasm, and ability to walk it out. That will come through the gift of Spirit – the presence of God in our lives that empowers us when we accept Jesus as our Lord, King, and Saviour.

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30. Jesus received some criticism for the way he and his disciples conducted business by having table fellowship with those considered unclean, undesirable, and almost irredeemable. It's true that the lifestyle of Jesus is in contrast to that of his cousin John. John the Baptist subsisted on a meagre diet of wild honey and carob, while Jesus attends banquets and functions hosted by such villains to society as tax collectors and the *unwashed* sinners. Jesus also dined with Pharisees. But those who have a heart to criticize will always be able to find something to criticize. And that includes us!

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One of the ironies in Scripture is that the criticism levelled at Jesus – that he was *a friend of sinners* – is now a term of endearment. The phrase that Jesus is *a friend of sinners* holds a place of honour in the way we describe Jesus to ourselves and to others.

The two portions (16-19) and (25-30) are joined together by some comments about wisdom and the wise. In response to the criticism towards him, Jesus says that wisdom is justified by her children. That is to say that those who are truly wise are proven to be so by the fruit of their actions. Then Jesus praises the Father for hiding the message from those purporting to veritably be wise, showing them genuinely to be fools.

The unlikely recipients of the message of Jesus were actually the people who were deemed to be unredeemable and outside God's grace. Simply put, Jesus came to save sinners. Here he calls people to himself. To whom is he calling? Those under a heavy burden. Which could be all kinds of things, most of which are placed upon us by others but sometimes by things we burden ourselves with. Burdens such as high societal expectations, family expectations, and forms of behaviour that are beyond our doing.

Jesus now admonishes us to accept his yoke and his burden, which he defines as easy and light. In Judaism of the Second Temple period, the yoke was a symbol of great importance. It was and still is a symbol of service and servitude to another – in this case to God. The yoke of the kingdom of heaven is a phrase that meant binding oneself loyally to God and his commandments. To put into practice everything instructed by the Lord, which sounds like something we should do actually.

However, it also meant accepting the interpretation and teaching from the Jewish sages on how the Torah was to be implemented. From the Hebraic perspective, everyone is *yoked* to something or someone. That is our history, traditions, beliefs, and worldview shape who we will direct our loyalty to and motivate our behaviour.

The only person who has no yoke is Satan. One of the names of the Enemy in Scripture is *Beliel*. In Hebrew, that means *the yoke-less one*. Satan threw off the yoke of the kingdom of heaven; he decided not to be loyal to God – to be disobedient and to rebel against God's authority.

In Matthew 11, Jesus makes a beautiful invitation to accept his authority and kingship by taking his yoke. His interpretation and understanding of the Torah are not hard, heavy, or burdensome. It's the true perspective of God's word and how we should implement it. We are all going to have to be yoked by something; we might think we are yoke-less and free, but actually, by removing the yoke of Jesus we end up bound, yoked, and slaves to the yoke-less one. So the best position is to be yoked with Jesus and to be instructed by his truth, which then ironically sets us free.

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ACNA Readings

Zechariah 9:9-12. This passage is an immensely packed messianic prophecy of the coming messianic king. Jewish sages struggled to understand all the intricacies of the prophecy. For on the one hand, the coming king was humble, poor, and not astride a conquering warhorse, but on the other, the coming king was militarily victorious – destroying the weapons and chariots of his enemies and having a worldwide dominion.

The struggle to understand the obvious dichotomy was to proclaim that there were actually two messiahs. One messiah, termed messiah *ben Joseph* was the lowly humble figure like Moses, and the other was messiah *ben David*, who would be the battle-hardened victor over the enemies of God. Peace would come to all the world, but the question was how. Through military conquest or some other means?

Zechariah prophesied that the *blood of the covenant* will set the prisoners free. Here we are not talking about the blood of the sacrifices in the Tabernacle or Temple. Those sacrifices were only for unintentional sins. Repentance was the only way to atone for intentional sins. The *blood of the covenant* here is in reference to Exodus 24:1-8 which describes a one-time blood sacrifice by Moses to initiate the Covenant of Sinai. Hebrews 9 references this *blood of the covenant* applying the one-time sacrifice of Jesus' blood for the establishment of the New Covenant.

The return of the king in Zechariah 9:12 ends with restoration, prosperity, and blessing. The return of the Messiah is something for which we ought long and pray. With the coming of the King, there are a great many blessings to come for the whole world.

Psalms 145:1-13(14-21). This is the only psalm in the Book of Psalms entitled “A Praise to David,” and it is the last psalm that is attributed as a work of David, and it is the last psalm that uses the acrostic pattern in which the first word of each line begins with the next successive letter of the Hebrew Alphabet.

It is a well-crafted magnificent call to praise that became embedded into early Jewish liturgy. It is recited twice a day – morning and evening – because of its powerful call to bless the Lord and because of the second verse, in which the worshiper declares that every day they will bless God. Those who pray this psalm will – through the words of David – declare God to be a king forever. Added to the call to bless the Lord is a sense of timelessness as we join in the praise of God that perpetuates from one generation to another.

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This psalm reminds us that it is more than just about *me and Jesus*. We are part of something much greater and much bigger. Creation itself will join in the praise of the Almighty for it is written: All Your works – everything You made – and all Your saints will praise You! (v. 10).

No one can be sure when in David's career he penned this hymn. Perhaps after his kingdom and rule had been firmly established. If so, David acknowledged that as kingdoms come they also go – including his own – yet the kingdom of God endures forever. So praise the Lord!

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.