

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

**ACNA Readings** – Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 67; Acts 1:1-8; Matthew 9:35-38

**Introduction.** The season of Epiphanytide is where the church focuses on the revelation of the Messiah – the Light – to the world, and especially on the missionary movement of the church in response to this. With this in mind, the Book of Common Prayer in the ACNA sets aside the Second to the Last Sunday of Epiphany for World Mission Sunday. The ACNA readings highlight God's heart to gather to himself not only scattered Israel but all the nations, even to the ends of the earth. For resources – prayers, videos, bulletin inserts, discussion guides – from the New Wineskins Missionary Network, visit [newwineskins.org/worldmissionsunday](http://newwineskins.org/worldmissionsunday).

**Common Theme.** Our individual and collective responsibility to walk in God's ways is a theme that cuts across these readings. "Choose life", Moses says in the Deuteronomy passage. The psalmist in Psalm 119 expresses a tremendous desire to walk in the way of God as revealed by God's word. Paul reminds us in the 1 Corinthians passage to keep the main thing, the main thing when following Jesus as the church. Jesus, in the Matthew passage, helps us gain perspective on the light and weighty commands in Scripture. The readings from the ACNA carry these same themes as the RCL as they call the body to servanthood and gather Israel and the nations to God. The theme is carried further as the gathered ones are called to go and spread the good news of the Messiah "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20.** This passage falls within a greater passage called the Parshah Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9 – 30:20). A parshah is a set weekly Torah reading that Jewish people follow on an annual cycle, similar to the lectionary concept that has different weekly readings over a three year cycle. The name "Nitzavim" is derived from the opening verses of the parshah passage and means 'standing', because it unfolds in the context of standing. Today's shorter segment is addressed to everyone – "All of you are standing today..." (29:10). The ALL includes the leaders, nobles, and the lowly; men, women, and children; Israelites, and aliens (29:11).

Moses confronts the gathering with a number of critical choices that will lead to "life and prosperity, death and destruction" (30:15). He doesn't issue a soft invite but rather commands the gathered people "to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws" (30:16). Following this way, walking along this path, will lead to the life and prosperity that has been set before the people. Alternatively, turning from the path God (through Moses) has decreed and walking another road leads to death and destruction, doom and gloom (30:17-18). As if this has not caught the people's attention, Moses returns to the same language of his opening statement but adds to the dramatic utterance, "This day I call on heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life...for the LORD is your life..." (30:19-20).

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This final statement has profoundly shaped Judaism. Rabbi Sacks comments:

Choose life. No religion, no civilisation, has insisted so strenuously and consistently that we can choose... The ancients – with their belief in fate, fortune, *Moirai*, *Ananke*, the influence of the stars or the arbitrariness of nature – did not fully believe in human freedom. For them true freedom meant, if you were religious, accepting fate, or if you were philosophical, the consciousness of necessity. Nor do most scientific atheists believe in it today. We are determined, they say, by our genes. Our fate is scripted in our DNA. Choice is an illusion of the conscious mind. It is the fiction we tell ourselves. Judaism says no... We are not an inconsequential life-form lost in the vastness of the universe.

With the freedom to choose comes the great responsibility to walk in God's ways in every generation. This freedom to choose, and the responsibility that comes with it, is continued with those who recognise and walk in the way of Messiah Jesus.

**Psalm 119:1-8.** The Psalmist in this very long psalm reflects on walking along different ways. There are God's ways, our ways and other ways. There are those who seek to ensure that their way corresponds to God's way and those that stray from God's way. In the space of the opening eight verses, the Psalmist expresses a tremendous desire to walk in the way of God as revealed by God's word.

God's word reveals that walking is a big deal. Enoch is a mystical figure who "walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away" (Genesis 5:24). Noah was commended for his walking: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God" (Genesis 6:9). Abraham is the father of all who walk by faith. He literally walked into the unknown, being obedient to God's decree. One of God's decrees to Abraham is to "go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you" (Genesis 13:17). But his walking is not simply a physical action. God also says to him "walk before me faithfully and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). The Exodus story contains a lot of walking of all dimensions. The people of Israel walk and walk and walk. They wandered around the wilderness for forty years and yet their feet did not swell, and their sandals did not wear out (Deuteronomy 8:4; 29:5-6). In all their walking, God is walking with them. God even promises to march ahead of his people (Deuteronomy 31:8).

Walking features with many of the prophets, which we'll skip the sake of brevity. But suffice to say, Micah sums up what God requires with "...walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Lest we think the end goal is any different in Messiah Jesus, the Apostle Paul says, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). Many other translations simply render the last part "which God has prepared that we should walk in them." May we learn to walk in God's ways that they become our ways always.

**1 Corinthians 3:1-9.** It is tempting to think that the churches of the New Testament existed in a state of near perfection and then drifted into problems later, eventually leading to divisions and schisms. Many

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modern church movements around the world are nearly completely ignorant of the history of Christianity and their place in it. This ignorance truncates their understanding of what the church has looked like over the centuries and that others that have gone before them have also sought to found and grow “New Testament” churches. In fact, the first Anglican reformers believed that they were reforming the Church according to the principles of the Church in its “pristine youth before the church erred in matters of Faith”.<sup>1</sup>

The problem was – and it is front and centre in the church of Corinth in this passage – that there were problems from the start. There was disfunction. There were power-plays, misunderstandings and disputes. Some said they followed Paul, others that they followed Apollos. There were different ways of doing things among the churches. The reality of this disfunction and diversity among the New Testament churches was so real that it exposes the profound naivety of any desire now to “get back to the New Testament church”; since to which church should we return? And, viewing Paul’s many battles in those first churches, which problems do we want to rekindle? Don’t we have enough problems in our own times in our own churches?

Paul presses pause on all the nonsense. With a cutting thrust of his argument, he asks, “What is Apollos, what is Paul?” (3:5). Interestingly, he does not ask “who” but “what”? “Only servants” is his answer, and servants serve - servants, who no matter what other fancy title they may carry or who they think they are, exist to serve the purposes of God who grows the church (3:6). Paul therefore says, “So neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (3: 7). Everything is God-focussed for Paul – “For we are God’s fellow-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (3:9). Perhaps there is a lesson here to take on board, but not about finding, founding, or becoming the pristine church. Early Christianity embraced diversity and struggled through disfunction as long as there was essential unity with respect to the gospel of God as revealed in the person and work of Messiah Jesus. Keeping the main thing, the main thing.

**Matthew 5:21-37.** This passage is from what has been nicknamed the “Sermon on the Mount”. RVG Tasker argues that it wasn’t a single sermon as the sayings are found in a variety of different contexts in Luke’s narrative.<sup>2</sup> It was compiled like this by Matthew to portray Jesus as the second, greater Moses, who (on a mountain) gives Israel a new law. R.T. France holds the same view that the Sermon on the Mount was not a single sermon but a collection of teachings, “a manifesto setting out the nature of the life in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>3</sup> Whether a single sermon or not, Michael Green calls the Sermon on the Mount “the supreme jewel in the crown of Jesus’ teaching.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob, W. M., *The Making of the Anglican Church Worldwide* (London: SPCK,1997), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Tasker, R.V.G., *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1961), 59.

<sup>3</sup> France, R.T., *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Green, M., *The Message of Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 88.

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The section from 21 to 37 addresses murder, adultery, divorce and oaths with a repeated refrain “you have heard it said” or “it has been said” (verses 21, 27, 31, 33) that introduces a quotation from the Hebrew scriptures:

Do not murder (Exodus 20:13).

Do not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14).

Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1).

Do not break your oath but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord (possible paraphrase, Deuteronomy 23:21).

Jesus follows up each statement with “But I tell you...” (vv. 22, 28, 32, 34). This has simplistically been interpreted as Jesus setting a new and higher standard than that of the Torah and abrogating the law. The church throughout the ages has sometimes added an anti-Jewish spin that this shows that “the Jews” were concerned with legalistic compliance with the law, but Jesus was concerned about a new spiritual ethic and internal matters of the heart. In so doing, the church has set up Jesus to be at odds with his own Jewish self.

In actuality, Jesus is being entirely consistent with, and faithful to, an approach to teaching the Torah found within ancient Judaism. Brad Young notes that “reading their biblical text midrashically, Jesus and the sages conclude that the minor commandment is as significant as the major commandment.”<sup>5</sup> Anger can lead to murder, and lust can lead to adultery – violation of a minor commandment (*kal*) can lead to the transgression of a major one (*chamor*). Young goes on to say:

Jesus’ teachings were not contrary to the spirit of Judaism of his day. His message, spiritual concerns, moral values, and prophetic warnings were in line with the best trends and theological achievements of the Jewish people during the Second Temple period.”<sup>6</sup>

Appreciating the masterful skill with which Jesus is inserting himself into some very heated rabbinic debates of his day also helps us to untangle dogmatic knots that have kept us bound. Separated from its ancient Jewish context, the church’s historic teaching on divorce based on verses 31 and 32 (and alternatively Matthew 19:1-9) has caused untold pain and trauma.

In Jesus’ day two rabbinic schools of thought predominated: the school of Rabbi Shammai and the school of Rabbi Hillel.<sup>7</sup> Jesus very often sided with the more genial and generous-spirited Hillel rather than the far sterner Shammai. At other times Jesus agreed with some teaching strands of the Dead Sea Scroll (Essene) community, and yet at other times he followed no-one. In this sense, Jesus was his own

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<sup>5</sup> Young, B.H., *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Young, B.H., *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 47.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to John Atkinson’s teaching “What Does the Bible Say about Divorce?”

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man. On the rarest of occasions, Jesus sides with Shammai and one of those times is on the matter of divorce.

The Torah permits divorce. This passage from Deuteronomy 24 is not a law instituting divorce but rather one intended to provide some protection for women which was lacking in Oriental societies of that day. Fast forward to the Mishnaic period, and the idea that a husband could divorce his wife at will – even on a whim – was being challenged by the school of Rabbi Shammai. Marital unfaithfulness was not the only ground for a valid divorce, but it is Jesus' way of saying he is siding with a view of divorce that affords women the greatest protection in a society where they were particularly vulnerable in terms of marriage rights. Jesus affirms that God does not wish divorce to happen, but recognises the pastoral reality that imperfect human marriages will sometimes break down, and need a divorce to clear them up. His teaching here is meant to bring hope and life.

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### ACNA Readings

**Isaiah 49:1-7.** The first reading is from the Servant Songs and sits in the middle of the grouping (Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-12; 50:4-11; Isa 52:13-53:12). Who is this servant? The nation of Israel – “descendants of Abraham my friend” – is called “my servant” by God (Isa 41:8-10, cf. “Jacob” in Isa 44:21, 48:20). When we get to Isaiah 42, this servant seems to be an individual carrying the Spirit of God and quietly, patiently working justice not just for Israel but for all the nations: “The coastlands wait for his Torah” (42:8 CJB).

By Isaiah 49, it is clear that the servant is an individual human formed “in the womb” called to regather the scattered people of Israel. But God has much more in mind. This servant is meant to take Torah (instruction) to the coastlands, be a light to the nations, and bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

While the reading ends at verse 7, take note of how verses 8-10 prefigure the messianic mission of Isaiah 61. Couple that with the imagery of Isaiah 53 and most Christians cannot help but see Jesus of Nazareth as the servant who Isaiah is writing about. Yet, Jewish commentators see – even in the singular – a reference to the nation of Israel.<sup>8</sup> It can be both, and we Christians should take the challenge to uphold both interpretations. Christopher Wright, in *The Mission of God*, writes, “God so loved the world

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<sup>8</sup> Rashi says in reference to Isa 53:3, “So is the custom of this prophet: he mentions all Israel as one man.”

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that he chose Israel.”<sup>9</sup> God chose Abraham and his descendants to bless the nations scattered at Babel. However, the people of Israel struggle to keep covenant with God and find themselves scattered, too. This servant of God, representative Israel, will gather Israelites and Gentiles together to God and will be exalted above the rulers of the earth.

For a deeper look at both corporate Israel and Jesus the Messiah as the Servant of God, see *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen* by Mark Kinzer.

**Psalm 67.** The opening line of this psalm sounds as if the psalmist is praying the Aaronic Blessing (Num 6:23-27) over himself and the people. Yet, instead of claiming the promise of peace, the psalmist desires to see the salvation of God known among all the nations (v. 2). He envisions all the peoples of the earth thanking and praising God (v. 3) glad that justice has finally come to their nations (v. 4). Taking a cue from the gathering theme in Isaiah 49, verse 6 can be read metaphorically as well as literally. Yes, God makes the earth bring forth produce for the people to eat, but in the context of the prayer in verses 2 and 4 for the nations to come to God for salvation and justice, we can see the earth yielding a harvest of souls from among the pagan nations. In verse 7, the prayer for God's continued blessing recalls God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2, “I will bless you ... and you are to be a blessing.” When the nations are blessed by the people of God in the name of the LORD, they will come to revere him.

**Acts 1:1-8.** Luke summarised his Gospel as containing “all that Jesus began to do and teach.” The highlights: Jesus is the Lord's salvation for all peoples, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” and the “glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32, cf. Isaiah 49). Jesus comes to announce the good news to the poor, free the captives, heal the blind, and proclaim the year of the LORD's favour (Luke 4:16-21, Isa 61:1-2; 58:6). Luke also tells us Jesus is the Prophet Like Moses<sup>10</sup> that leads an “exodus” (Luke 9:31) from Jerusalem. He enacts and seals the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31 in his own blood (Luke 22:14-20). He declares himself the Son of Man from Daniel 7:13-14 who approaches the Ancient of Days and receives eternal rulership (Luke 22:69). Jesus is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (Luke 22:37) who dies on behalf of sinners. “After his death he showed himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (Acts 1:3).

Before his ascension and enthronement at the right hand of the Father, Jesus tells his followers that they are to wait to be baptised with the Holy Spirit. βαπτίζω (*baptizo*) is to immerse, to submerge, or to

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 329, Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> cf. “Listen to him” from Luke 9:35 and Deut 18:15.

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drench.<sup>11</sup> Jesus is promising to soak, drench, the disciples in the Holy Spirit. Up to this point in the biblical narrative, the Holy Spirit has been reserved for God's anointed leaders: kings, priests, and prophets. Now, all students of the Messiah will have access to the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. This is not a sprinkling but a soaking that transforms lives, as evidenced in Acts 2 by the changing of Peter from a fearful deserter to a bold preacher of Jesus' message of the Kingdom.

This Holy Spirit will empower and motivate disciples to be bold witnesses for Jesus' messiahship "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." This geographic phrase has become a metaphor for missional strategy from city, to region, to regional neighbour and beyond. I encourage us to see in these verses an ongoing call to proclaim Messiah to the Jewish people. The gospel has spread to the ends of the earth, and many among the nations have come to trust in the God of Israel. Now that the Gentile disciples of Jesus far outnumber the Jewish disciples of Jesus, let us remember Jerusalem and Judea, both literally in the Land of Israel and representative of our Jewish neighbours. Jesus came first for the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and yet most Jewish people believe Jesus is not for them.

And how can they trust in someone if they haven't heard about him? And how can they hear about someone if no one is proclaiming him? And how can people proclaim him unless God sends them? — as the *Tanakh* puts it, "How beautiful are the feet of those announcing good news about good things!" (Rom 10:14-15 CJB).

Let us not forget Jesus' brothers in the flesh when we proclaim the gospel, "since it is God's powerful means of bringing salvation to everyone who keeps on trusting, to the Jew especially, but equally to the Gentile" (Rom 1:16 CJB).

About the disciples' question in verse 6: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Nowhere in Jesus' answer is any implication that they are no longer to expect a literal fulfilment of the land promises and kingdom promises laid out in the Torah and the Prophets. Jesus only says that the timing of such things is not their (nor our) concern. Consider Isaiah 49, the first reading for this day's lectionary. To accept the first seven verses of this Servant Song and see Jesus in them but then ignore or negate verse 8 does violence to the text and its message:

"Here is what *ADONAI* says:

'At the time when I choose, I will answer you;  
on the day of salvation, I will help you.

I have preserved you, and I have appointed you  
to be the covenant for a people,  
to restore the land and distribute again

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<sup>11</sup> "G907 - baptizō - Strong's Greek Lexicon (kjv)." Retrieved 31 Jan 2023.  
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g907/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

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its ruined inheritances to their owners...”

For an exploration of Jesus's relationship to Israel's land and kingdom promises, see *Jerusalem Crucified, Jerusalem Risen* by Mark Kinzer.

**Matthew 9:35-38.** Disciples attached to a rabbi have dedicated themselves to imitating the life of their master. We see Jesus here going from place to place, teaching, proclaiming the coming of God's just kingdom and healing “every kind of disease and weakness.” Still, there are so many people. Our first reaction might be to be overwhelmed. But our rabbi's response is compassion. He sees into the hearts of the people: “they were harried and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus is not overwhelmed by the crowds of broken people. He sees they are ready to receive his love and message, and his heart burns for each single soul.

When Jesus sees the people as scattered sheep, he is identifying himself as Moses' successor (Num 27:17) and as YHWH himself, who in Ezekiel 34 promises to seek out his sheep, having relieved the undershepherds of their duties. Even in Jesus' day, the appointed shepherds of Israel do not recognize God's Anointed and even mistake him for Satan (Matt 9:34).<sup>12</sup> Even as Jesus is the LORD come to shepherd his own sheep, he is also ready to call new undershepherds.<sup>13</sup> When Jesus asks his disciples to pray that God would send labourers to gather the plentiful harvest, he is preparing them for that task. In chapter 10, he will send out the 12 to imitate him in ministry.

As this is World Mission Sunday, this passage is calling us to pray for labourers. It is also preparing us to step up and answer the call. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to send us out to imitate Jesus: to bind up the broken hearted, to heal the sick, to proclaim freedom to the captive, to proclaim God's favour for all who will accept it.

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Mangum, ed., *Lexham Context Commentary: New Testament, Lexham Context Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), Mt 9:35–38.

<sup>13</sup> Mangum, *Lexham Context Commentary*.