

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12); Psalm 112:1-9 (10); 1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20

**ACNA Readings** – 2 Kings 22:8-20; Psalm 27; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

**Introduction.** The light of Epiphany will soon give way to the wilderness of Lent. Our readings are beginning to prepare our hearts for a season of repentance, which in turn prepares us for Holy Week and the Suffering of Jesus the Messiah. This reminds of us the transitional days before and after Rosh Hashanah during which the Jewish people humbly examine their hearts and repent in the days before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

**Common Theme.** Being a source of light in a world full of darkness through living lives with integrity, repentance, and turning back to God, avoiding ritualistic observance without substance.

**Isaiah 58:1-9 (9b-12).** The theme of the prophet calling out the ethical and moral failings of the people, which has developed over the previous chapters, becomes much more focused here, particularly in relation to ritual observance, in this case, fasting, without godly living and sincerity of faith. The people long for the glorious return of the Lord and blessing, but this will not be achieved through blind ritualistic practice. The Lord does not desire religious actions unaccompanied by righteous living, repentance, and practising justice, mercy, and charity.

The opening verse “Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression”, coupled with the theme of fasting, calls to mind the blowing of the shofar on the Feast of Trumpets, also known today as Rosh Hashanah. The Shofar with its vibrant and often shrill, penetrating sound, is an awakening siren that begins the 10 days of repentance (the Days of Awe) leading to Yom Kippur, when the people repent for the sins of the nation. Although there were many traditional occasions for fasting, the only day specifically biblically commanded to fast on is Yom Kippur. One wonders if the words given by the prophet are specifically focusing on this day, especially given the reference to lifting up your voice like a shofar. The people wonder why their fasting has had little effect and is not bringing about a glorious reversal of fortune, in a time when most of Israel in these early post-exilic days still lay in ruins. However, the root cause of their problems is their lack of integrity and their religious hypocrisy, while ignoring the needs of the poor and those in need of justice.

The good news, though, given through the prophet from verse 8 onwards, is if the people repent and truly “fast” by turning from their selfish ways and administering alms, justice, and mercy, then their light will shine forth like the morning sun. Verse 11 goes on to say they will be like a watered garden, a metaphor readily understood in the Ancient Near East. In a dry, barren, and often parched land, a watered garden is an oasis of light in the surrounding darkness, a place of life, growth, fertile, and rich in the produce of all that grows within. The message is clear; the people can be this source of light, life, and hope, in turn directing all people to God. They will enjoy his blessing by simply being obedient to the Lord in heart, mind, and their daily living, so that their rituals are not just vain

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observances, but ones filled with the integrity that comes from a people who worship and live their lives for the Lord.

**Psalm 112:1-9 (10).** “Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and righteous”.

The fourth verse continues the theme of light, a property of the righteous individual who heeds the Lord's commands. The beauty of the psalm is, like its preceding psalm (111), an acrostic with each sentence after the initial *hallelujah* (*praise the Lord*) beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet all the way from א to ת, following sequentially. There are several examples throughout the Hebrew Bible where acrostic patterns are found, and it is likened to a form of poetry.

In this psalm, the *Tzadik*, or *Righteous Man*, reaps the fruits of a life well lived in accordance with Torah. The special emphasis on his distribution to the poor, his desire for justice, and his trust stand in stark contrast to the wicked who are left to gnash their teeth in their anger on seeing the light of this righteous man's life and example. The psalm is a poignant reminder of the powerful witness of a life lived in a godly way to those around us, and we pray that rather than “gnash their teeth”, those who see the light demonstrated in a righteous life may be inspired to turn to the Lord and come to a place of repentance and reconciliation with the Lord as a result.

**1 Corinthians 2:1-16.** When contrasting the wisdom that comes from the Spirit against the wisdom of the world – the central thrust of this chapter – Paul recalls giving his message “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (v. 3). This suggests his audience were either likely unreceptive or perhaps openly challenged his message. The mindset of the Greco-Roman world, and it seems particularly in Corinth, was one which extolled philosophy and the wisdom of the sages, forensically examining every aspect of life to discern the meaning behind it, and perhaps thereby learning in their philosophical approach how to act accordingly.

For Paul, the use of high rhetoric and the reliance on human wisdom is actually foolishness, and only through the Holy Spirit of God can one hope to truly understand his mind and intention. To attempt to do so without the Spirit is folly and can only lead to misunderstanding, and thereby poor choices.

Verse 9 is of particular interest in this passage, with Paul beginning by stating “as it is written”, a turn of phrase demonstrating his Jewish theological training, the phrase found throughout comparative Jewish literature to indicate something being quoted from an authoritative text or source. In this case, we find no exact match for this in the Hebrew Bible, although arguably Isaiah 52:15 is a close fit, but the saying is found almost verbatim in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas in Saying 17 and in similar sayings throughout a range of apocryphal Jewish and Christian texts. It is likely a wisdom saying commonly used by the rabbis and sages, and Paul uses it to emphasise the point that only true understanding of the heart and mind of God can be revealed through the Holy Spirit. This would fit with the context here of Paul addressing the errancy of approaching life and its challenges with a worldly understanding, whereas those filled with the Holy Spirit live in the sure

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hope of navigating the challenges of life through God's guidance and wisdom, in turn also informing a person's everyday behaviour.

For Paul, his message is clear: rather than an almost forensic analysis of the gospel message using human wisdom, only the Spirit can reveal the truth, and ultimately the message of the gospel can be communicated simply by preaching the cross of Christ. We do not need to engage in academic dialogue, justifying the gospel with highly convoluted arguments to try and convince hearers of its message. It is important to remember that Paul's letters were received and then read out to the faithful; people didn't have their own copy, and so his teachings, advice, and guidance needed to be concise, simple, and readily understood in order that all people could discern the message. For us today, it is perhaps a warning against over-analysing biblical texts designed to be spoken aloud and heard as opposed to read and, in so doing, risking attributing meanings to these texts that were never intended. Always something to consider when studying is that we do not fall into the same trap of applying the wisdom of the world to matters spiritual. Keeping with the lectionary theme of integrity, it is through the Holy Spirit that indwells in all believers that God reveals the truth of Scripture and thereby, in conjunction with study, informs us how we should apply this to daily life and living.

**Matthew 5:13-20.** Salt in the ancient world was a prized and sought-after commodity. We find various examples of the use of salt in scripture, and of particular note are passages such as Leviticus 2:13, Numbers 18:19, and 2 Chronicles 13:5, all of which speak of a Covenant of Salt with the Lord. Salt was used in purification rites as well as a preservative, to lengthen the usable life of things such as meat, in some cases indefinitely. A Covenant of Salt thereby being one that preserves, and is pure and long-lasting.

The value of salt meant that it was often used in trade in exchange for other valuable commodities, including gold. The expression of someone being "worth their salt" comes from a saying of the Roman period where soldiers who had performed well were at times paid in salt.

The opening verses have been heavily debated as to how salt can lose its flavour, or saltiness, and is therefore only fit to be trodden underfoot. Various explanations abound in commentaries, but anecdotal evidence from sources of the period, and from the Talmud, suggest a salt of poor quality was often used in the temple to prevent slipping on slopes, steps, and the pavement in wet weather (Mishnah Eruvin 10:14) in a similar way salt is used today to prevent slippage on icy roads. This salt, after its use in the Temple, was then fit for no other purpose, and so was then taken and scattered on the paths, trodden into the ground by travellers and thereby preventing the growth of weeds and plants on the pathway. Perhaps this is the metaphor Jesus is making when he speaks of this poor quality, used-up salt that is now only fit to be used to prevent the growth of weeds.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Using salt to render ground unusable is known in history, a practice used by a victorious army to plough over conquered land and then salt it, in effect poisoning the soil given the quantity they would use, so that a resurgence of the conquered would be prevented as their land was to all intents and purposes unfit to grow anything, and could no longer support them.

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That the Lord says to his disciples that they are to be salt and light to the world fits snugly into the common theme of this week's readings. Again, the emphasis is that the disciples by their lives, faith and moral standards are to be as both a 'seasoning' in the world drawing out goodness as salt does from food and light being a beacon of the love of God to others that they might, in turn, be drawn to them. There is a warning here too that one who loses their integrity, or adopts an unbiblical life, is no longer a source of seasoning, purity and light, and thereby has lost their intended use in the kingdom, in the same way the temple salt only became fit for use on paths, still useable but for a different and lesser purpose.

The verses that immediately follow reiterate the theme of godly faith and living acting as a torch in the darkness, thereby drawing others to the truth.

As equally contentious are Jesus' next statements on "completing" or "fulfilling" the Law (Torah) in verse 17. This verse is favoured by many who espouse replacement theology to suggest Jesus in effect wraps up the Torah and begins something new. The verses immediately after make clear that was not what he was saying, and in fact he says that not one jot – the smallest Hebrew letter yod – or one tittle – the decorative 'crown' often put on an opening letter of a sentence by scribes – will pass away. This statement is followed by the clear instruction not to relax (loosen) the requirements of Torah. We should also note that the expression to "fulfil the Law" was in common parlance at the time. The meaning was simple, that to "fulfil the Law" was to correctly interpret, apply, and teach it. Jesus of course, through the Holy Spirit, enables believers to have this fuller understanding of the requirements of our God for godly living and their applications, as Paul has already pointed out in our reading from Corinthians.

The final verses repeat this injunction to lead lives so filled with righteous living, that they exceed those of the Pharisees who by many were seen as bastions of piety and holiness.

### ACNA Readings

**2 Kings 22:8-20.** King Josiah's reign, especially in the formative years of his kingship, saw him pursue a campaign to drive out the wicked pagan and idolatrous practices and rituals from his kingdom. This conviction, it seems, stemmed from the rediscovery of the Book of the Law, or "Scroll of the Teaching", found during the refurbishment of the Temple that he commissioned around 622 BC. Scholars suggest that the Scroll was likely large parts of Deuteronomy, dealing with the consequences of not adhering to the Lord's teachings and instructions, and Josiah clearly was immediately moved to address the issues in his kingdom the Scroll of Teaching highlighted. His response is powerfully symbolic – the tearing of his clothes in mourning and repentance for the actions of his people followed by him immediately seeking out the Lord – and is an example for us of a right response to addressing wrongdoing in our own lives and communities – to mourn our sin and repent. He sends Hilkiah and others to the prophetess Huldah, who sends word back to him of

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the consequences of the people's actions, but that the Lord has seen his repentance and he, at least, will not see the destruction of the temple that will come about in due course.<sup>2</sup>

The following chapter shows the level of conviction held by Josiah to make reforms in the land. Although it is too late to sway the foretold wrath of the Lord, he nonetheless is recognised as someone who stood out among his kingly peers for his commitment to the Lord: a single kingly torch that burnt brightly and shined a light on the people so that their wicked practices would be made visible for all to see and so they would have the opportunity to change.

**Psalm 27.** The psalm attributed to David begins with the wonderful verse: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”, now familiar to many given its prominence in many a Christian hymn or worship song. Today, this psalm is often recited by observant Jews in the period leading up to Rosh Hashanah and the 10 Days of Awe when they will focus on repentance before Yom Kippur. This tradition of reading the psalm twice a day is not from the biblical period though and is believed to have developed over the last two to three hundred years.

In many senses, it is an ideal psalm to read approaching the Days of Awe, and in the church year, it could also be used similarly as we approach the season of Lent. The psalm speaks of the central heartfelt praise and trust in the Lord and in his goodness, and the need not to be afraid. The approaching darkness of the enemy is offset by the Light of the Lord's salvation. Despite this praising of the Lord's goodness and protection from the enemy that draws ever closer, the second half of the psalm reveals a plea to the Lord, a crying out that should not be seen necessarily as contradicting the praises of the first half, but rather a reaffirmation of the psalmist's dependence on the Lord. This crying out to the Lord again in many ways reminds us of the principle to pray without ceasing, and that in times of both praise, goodness, and joy, as well as times of stress, anxiety, and fear, we should continue to extol our trust in the Lord's goodness and light, in order that we may continue to prevail upon him.

**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.

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars believe that the house of Huldah was likely to be located somewhere in what we would now call the Jewish and Armenian Quarters of the Old City in Jerusalem.