

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 56:1-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-24; Matthew 15: 21-28

Introduction. The Jewish people have often been called the *chosen people* – העם הנבחר, *Am HaNivchor* – although they are not the only people in human history to have had that designation. For many, the problem of identifying someone as *chosen* indicates that there are others who are *not chosen*. However, for ancient Israel, it was not that there were *chosen* and *unchosen* races, rather God had chosen Abraham and his descendants for a specific task. The task was to bring revelation to the world.

Common Theme. A central theme that permeates all of Scripture is the love that God has for his creation and the people in it. God has deemed that the knowledge of himself and his dealings with the world are recorded in and through his ancient people: Israel. The Lord has always loved the Gentiles; this is seen through the call of the prophets and the prayers of the Psalms. It is also seen in the command from Jesus to go into all the world. In many of the readings this week, we will encounter God's love and compassion for the Gentiles of the world.

Genesis 45:1-15. This passage is the climactic conclusion to the incredible story of Joseph that has been playing out since chapter 37. Joseph simply and powerfully says two words that reveal himself to his brothers and begin the process of reconciliation and reunion, *Ani Yosef* – I am Joseph! The brothers are stunned and unable to speak. The Egyptian that had previously been using an interpreter suddenly spoke their own tongue declaring himself to be their long-lost sibling with all the memories, the guilt, and the shame of the past rushing to the present.

Within this milieu of perplexed confusion and sheer terror at possible repercussions, Joseph brings us one of the more important theological claims in the whole narrative; in verse eight, he says, “God sent me! God is in control and through his sovereignty what was meant for evil has worked out for the good” (Gen 50:20). This powerful theological truth is reiterated by Paul in Romans, where he says, “all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). *All things* means not only all *good* things but all *bad* things also.

Joseph is also not aloof from the situation as he acknowledges his own role in God's plans; he says, ‘God sent me!’. Since the Creation and the command to Adam to tend the Garden, we see that God works through people, and here he was working through Joseph. Under Joseph's wisdom and prophetic leadership, the land of Egypt had become a blessing for many nations during a period of devastating famine. God and humans partner together to bring blessing, even to the Gentile nations.

Psalm 133. The Psalms of Ascent is a collection of fifteen psalms (120-134) each starting with the superscription שיר המעלות, which means *song of ascent*. It seems to be the consensus among scholars that these psalms became part of the liturgical cycle of prayer used by pilgrims and worshippers during the three pilgrimage festivals – Passover, Pentecost (Shavuot), and Tabernacles (Sukkot).

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This short psalm of David describes the good and pleasant nature of unity amongst the people. It is in the midst of this unity that God commands a blessing. This begs the question then, *what is unity?* David says that unity is when God's people – called the brethren – dwell or live together. God's people are living together in unity with one another and not in unity with the world around them.

Chasing after the world is like chasing after the whirlwind. The world's standards constantly change and move and are always uncertain. Biblical unity is not theological unity; in that unity is not everyone thinking like me. There are some theological non-negotiables, such as: there is only one God, one Lord, one Faith, etc. Not all roads lead to Rome!

Rather than congruent theological doctrine, unity is expressed in practical living together. Colossians describes the people of God as having compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience with each other and forgiving each other (Col 3:12-14). These virtues are practical and behavioural. Unity is also behavioural and it is when the people of God dwell together in loving behaviour that God commands a blessing to be in their midst.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32. The place of Israel as a modern state in the world and its relationship to the sacred history of both Judaism and Christianity can be a divisive subject. I have known many preachers to ignore the issue on the grounds of it being too contentious for the community. Interestingly, this topic was not ignored by the writers of the New Testament 2000 years ago.

In rhetorical fashion, Paul asks, *has God rejected his people – Israel?* Paul answers quite bluntly and firmly, *by no means*. He brings his own personal testimony to bear by sharing that despite having encountered Jesus outside Damascus, being baptized, and becoming his apostle, Paul remains a member of the tribe of Benjamin and an Israelite. These are in the present tense, Paul does not say *I was* but rather *I am*.

Any reading from the Acts of the Apostles reveals that the initial believers in Jesus were all Jewish people with the internal debate whether it was even possible for Gentiles to follow the Lord without becoming Jews. An issue which was settled in Acts 15. The issue of Jewish-Gentile relationships to faith in Messiah and membership in the community begins to become more acute with the introduction of large numbers of Gentiles into the early church.

Demographically this was always going to happen. Even if every single Jewish person on the planet was a follower of Jesus the Gentiles would still outnumber them. What then do we make of this situation? Historically, the early church seems to have ignored Paul's discussion in Romans 9-11 and claimed that God had in fact rejected Israel in favour of the Gentile church. In terms of the sovereignty of God in relation to his covenant people – Israel – Paul acknowledges in verse 28 that concerning the Gospel the Jewish people are not all on board and that many even oppose the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

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However, he then reminds the Romans that they remain loved by God due to the merit and promises made to the Patriarchs. Paul then declares that the “calling of God is irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). This seems to have been missed by many of the Church fathers. Israel was called to be a light to the nations – the Gentiles – and that calling does not go away with the advent of the Messiah. The calling has not been revoked or else it could not be irrevocable.

Paul applies the principle of the sovereignty of God – that all things work together for good to both the Jewish and Gentile peoples of the world. The disobedience of the Jewish people can in some part be a blessing to the Gentiles. The Gentile believers have come to faith from cultures and nations of disobedience to God and yet God had shown mercy on them. If God used the disobedience of Israel to show mercy to the Gentiles, then Paul says the Jewish people can receive the same mercy God showed the nations. The church began with the Jewish people, and the church is not complete if there are no Jewish people in it.

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28. The gospel passage opens with a discussion on dietary laws that I suspect have been taken out of context by many people. Interestingly, the Law of Moses does not actually declare that eating forbidden foods – like pork – puts someone in a state of ritual impurity.

In the modern Jewish world, on Yom Kippur during the prayer service called *Al Chet* – which means *all sins* – there is a long confessional prayer in which the worshipper repents of all sins. The list of sins that are confessed is quite extensive; however, one sin that is not mentioned is the consumption of pork. Pork is forbidden and it would be quite surprising if Jesus taught his disciples to violate what is known today as the *kosher diet*.

Peter claims in Acts ten to never let unclean foods cross his lips, and so I doubt Jesus taught his disciples the opposite. Instead, Jesus goes to the heart of the matter – which is the heart. It is not what goes into your mouth that's important; it is what comes out of it. The state of the heart is truly what makes people unclean and defiled.

Thus, if what comes out of our mouths is so important then the taming of the tongue is likewise of importance. We are constantly reminded in the Scriptures to guard our tongues, control ourselves in gossip, use words for encouragement, and not to bring division, much more so than what should or should not be part of our diets.

The next scene reveals the heart of a Gentile Canaanite woman. Jesus has moved north to the tip of the Biblical territory of Asher, which is today partly in the southern portion of Lebanon. This northern Gentile woman seems to have heard something of Jesus and his ministry. She greets him as Lord – a sign of respect and as the son of David – which has messianic connotations as well as elements of kingship and authority. Jesus' response to her impassioned request for healing for her demon-possessed daughter initially seems out of character. He initially ignores her completely with the disciples asking him to remove the troublesome woman.

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Her persistence gets her an audience with Jesus who then refers to the woman as a dog. Dogs were unclean in the ancient world of the Middle East and they were not used as pets. Instead, you often found them picking through garbage and eating carrion. In the Islamic world today, they remain very much unclean animals to the point where if you have touched a dog you must undergo a cleansing ritual before you can enter a mosque. Jesus is responding to her request for healing by reminding the woman that as a Gentile she is ritually unclean. Amazingly she does not deny that point but rather argues that even the unclean receive something from the table – even if those are only scraps and morsels.

While the Messiah was prophesied to be sent to Israel, the New Covenant was to be made with the House of Israel and Judah. This did not diminish the role of Israel to be a light to the nations. Salvation in the Psalms and in the Prophets was always available to the Gentiles, too. Jesus acknowledges that in his role as Messiah, he has appeared to the Jewish people; however, the Gentile woman knows that the truths and mysteries of God are meant for the nations as well.

The story provides no background for how this non-Jewish woman could know the call that Israel has to reveal God to the world. Perhaps she has Jewish friends, was once married to a Jewish man, or works with Jews. In any case, Jesus commends her faith and her steadfastness is rewarded with the healing of her daughter. The text is unclear as to whether the daughter was present or in some other location. The gospel writer knows though that the daughter was indeed healed at that moment. The light has come to a Gentile household.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 56:1-8. The prophetic call in this passage of Isaiah is for action, justice, and salvation – not only for Israel but also for the Gentiles. Isaiah calls Israel to guard justice and to do righteousness. Isaiah says that the Lord's salvation is close and he is about to reveal his righteous, redemptive activity. There is a sense of anticipation that is meant to spur people to the call for action – which as mentioned in the opening verse is the implementation of justice and righteousness.

The question we could ask ourselves is: *do we have that feeling of expectation that motivates us into action? Or have we become dull in hearing the Word, disillusioned with the situation in the world and becoming complacent in our love and care for others?* Isaiah reminds the people that an initial way to respond to the call to action is to remember the Sabbath – the fourth of the Ten Commandments!

Time was the first thing called holy by God, and thus if it's important to God then it should become important to us. Something else that's important to God is people, and this includes all people whom God has made, including the Gentiles. And so, the prophet declares that salvation is not limited to Israel but is available for the foreigners, the strangers, the distant, and the awkward – essentially for everyone.

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Eunuchs are even mentioned as being able to partake in redemptive activity. While they might physically be precluded from Temple service they can and should still serve God. The prophet Daniel was a eunuch in service to the court of the Babylonian king and he never renounced his faith, ceased in prayer, or succumbed to idolatry. He was rewarded with dreams and visions of the messianic future.

The passage concludes with Gentiles coming to worship God at his temple and holy mountain. God says he will accept the sacrifices and offerings of the nations. If God has accepted the Gentiles, then the people of Israel should do so as well. The call of Israel to be a light to the nations has not diminished in any way. All are accepted before the Lord and all are offered salvation. God will hear all prayers of the faithful.

Psalm 67. The opening lines of this psalm are reminiscent of the Aaronic Benediction, also known as the Priestly Blessing – ברכת כהנים *Birkat HaCohenim* – from Numbers 6:23-27. In the Book of Numbers, Aaron was instructed to bless the people of Israel. In this psalm, the blessing is extended from the people of Israel to the nations of the earth. There is the anticipation that the peoples of the earth will respond with praise once they come to the knowledge that God not only rules over Israel but as verse four says, he rules and guides all nations with equity.

The last two verses tell the worshiper that creation itself will respond to the blessing of God. The earth will respond with bountiful harvests, reflecting the blessing of God to the nations. In Jewish exegesis, the earth was cursed by God following the fall of Adam; although the earth had essentially not participated in the rebellion and had done nothing wrong. Creation was suffering under the curse of the Fall and also awaiting the messianic redemption. Paul hints at this when he says in Romans that creation eagerly waits in anticipation and groans for redemption (Rom 8:19-22).

Romans 11:13-24. The early community in Rome – like many of the other early churches founded by the apostles – was a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. Paul warns the Gentile segment of the community, which may have been a sizeable majority, against arrogance towards the Jewish element of the church.

He brings in two metaphors – dough and branches – to teach that the first fruits of God, the first believers in Jesus, were the Jewish people. The ancient offering of the first fruits indicated that the first fruits of the harvest were holy and special to the Lord. Thus, the Jewish people remained holy and special in the eyes of the Lord.

The illustration of the olive tree with its roots and branches is quite elaborate. In the Hebrew Bible, the olive tree was often depicted as a metaphor for the people of Israel. The people of Israel were called to be a holy people. By extension then the olive tree – at least the foundations of it – are holy. Paul describes Gentiles as having been grafted into the household of faith called the *Commonwealth of Israel* in Ephesians 2:12.

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This should be seen as an act of mercy and grace on the part of the Lord with no place for arrogance from Gentile Christians. Gentiles – prior to the advent of Messiah – had been off worshipping the sun, moon, and stars. But now they could embrace and believe the truth of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and in his Messiah – Jesus of Nazareth.

Paul asks the Gentiles to contemplate the kindness and severity of God in verses 22-24. God always disciplines his people. The Hebrew Bible is replete with narratives of chastisement to disobedient Israel. Paul says we should think about the sternness of God towards the Jewish unbelievers who have been removed from the olive tree in contrast to the kindness and mercy the Gentiles have by being grafted. Otherwise, the Gentiles could also be removed through disobedience, arrogance, and unbelief. Furthermore, God can easily restore Jewish broken branches to the olive tree as Messiah is a Jewish concept, and the natural thing for faithful Jews to believe in is the hope of the Messiah.

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.