

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

RCL Readings – Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80: (1-6) 7-19; Philippians 3:14-21; Matthew 21:33-44

Introduction. We are two-thirds of the way through the season of Pentecost and the teaching of Jesus is becoming more urgent, warning people to accept the Lordship of God. Before we seek to chastise others over their lack of faith or lack of fruit, we first have to make sure that we ourselves have indeed made Jesus king.

Common Theme. We are in a relationship with the living God. It truly is a gracious and wonderful thing to have that personal relationship. Many of this week's readings suggest that we should not become complacent in our salvation. The Lord has done great things for us not because we deserved it, but because he loves us. In return, he expects things from us too. If we have heard the Word of God, then our obligation is to put it into practice.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20. The Ten Commandments – known in Hebrew as the Ten Words – are at the core of the covenant that the Lord has made with Israel. The first verse makes it quite clear that these are not the words of Moses; this is God who is speaking. The Torah is not a human document created by the whim of men but has a divine origin. What's important about this concept is that morality is not decided by human society, which is fickle and subject to change. What is true and right one day is wrong and false the next! These divine words stand in contrast to the shifting patterns of human culture.

In popular imagination, we tend to think of the commandments as being presented to the people of God by Moses on tablets of stone. Before that though they were spoken. The voice of God was heard by all the people gathered at Mount Sinai. In Exodus 20:18 we read that “the people saw the thunder and the lightning.” However, the Hebrew text literally says the people saw voices and fires in the plural; the words written are *kolot*, *voices*, and *lapidim*, *fires*. The Jewish sages comment that when God spoke fire descended from his mouth and each fire was a different voice for one of the many nations of the world. This tradition is the backdrop for the Pentecost event in Acts 2. Interestingly, the Jewish tradition is that the Ten Commandments were given during the Feast of Shavuot – which is Pentecost in English. In Exodus 20:19, the people request that Moses speak to God on their behalf as they fear they will expire at the sound of God's voice.

Nahum Sarna – a Jewish scholar noted for his work on Genesis and Exodus – described the Decalogue¹ as the only example of a covenantal relationship between a deity and a people. That is no other nation in history has an event in which the god speaks and forms a relationship with an entire community and not simply through a single prophet or group of oracles. These words are unique in form and style. Anything that comes from God is by definition good and for the well-being of the people to whom it is given – even discipline. Paul reminds the community in Rome that the law – Torah – is holy, just, and the commandment is holy righteous and good (Rom 7:12).

¹ The first five books of the Bible.

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Further, the Ten Commandments are part of the Torah portion called *Yitro – Jethro* – which includes Exodus 18-20. The Jewish sages note that there are only two Torah portions named after Gentiles and the Ten Commandments are included in one of them. From this, they conclude that these words are for all creation and not only Israel.

Psalm 19. David opens this psalm proclaiming that the heavens reveal the glory of God. In poetic form, the expanse of creation has a voice that sends forth a message of the greatness of God. Verse two says day after day they utter speech. The Hebrew word used is *יָבֵט* – *yava* – and gives an image of a continual, forceful, gushing spring – like the Gihon spring in Jerusalem. While David admits that the elements of the heavens do not have independent voices like humans, they do convey a language that gives evidence for God.

In verse four, David notes that the glory of God is evident to all the world and not only to the people of Israel. Then in verse seven, we move from praising God through the witness of creation to praising God through the revelation of his word. The heavens have declared the glory of God and so have the Scriptures. The glory of God is seen in the purity, holiness, goodness, and righteousness of the Torah. There is nothing contained in the sacred writings of other religions that can compare to the commandments that God gives.

In summary, the law of the Lord is perfect and is of the highest value that people should seek to obtain. Better than gold and sweeter than honey are the metaphors David uses to describe their worth. Gold is a precious metal that formed the basis of all economic wealth, and honey is a taste sensation that provides a pleasant experience. For David, the Word of God is greater than all material wealth and the experience of applying the words of God in our lives is better than any experience that the world could provide.

Philippians 3:4b-14. The context of this passage is the debate, in the early church, regarding the necessity for Gentile circumcision. There are many other passages in the New Testament that deal with this same issue. The council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 produced an encyclical indicating that the only requirements for Gentiles were several aspects of food consumption and the prohibition against immorality. To the community at Philippi, Paul claimed he had every reason to boast about his Jewishness. In his curriculum vitae, Paul notes his lineage from the tribe of Benjamin and his role as a Pharisee — in the present tense. Paul says he is these things not that he was these things.

Since becoming a believer in Jesus Paul is still very Jewish and that means he is still very much circumcised. These credentials, though, are nothing compared with faith in Jesus the Messiah. *This should be the principle that we also have.* Our racial backgrounds, our personal histories, our current levels of education, and our social status are nothing compared to knowing Jesus. This does not mean that they have no value, or that they are not useful. They are indeed. However, our joy is ultimately not found in our culture but in the personal relationship that we have with the risen Messiah.

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Matthew 21:33-46. The context of this parable is the triumphal entry. Jesus has come to Jerusalem amidst high expectations and overwhelming crowd support. Jerusalem is full of tension and hype. While in the temple, he is challenged by the Jewish leadership regarding his authority. Perhaps the leadership is concerned about a potential rebellion and the devastating effects this might have on the population, not to mention the loss of their livelihoods. Perhaps they are worried the exuberant crowds will seek their resignations for corruption.

Instead of leaving Jesus, they openly challenge him and in response, Jesus provides several parables using the image of a vineyard. The vineyard is a common metaphor for Israel and there is a strong allusion to Isaiah 5:1-7. In the Parable of the Tenants, it is not unreasonable for the owner of the vineyard to expect fruit in its due season. That is, after all, why the owner has planted and maintained a vineyard in the first place. Usually, parables do not contain any quotations from the Scriptures.

In a unique fashion in this parable, Jesus quotes from the Psalms. The stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone. There is a midrash on Psalm 118 that describes the building of the Temple of Solomon. The construction was done in as much reverential silence as possible, so all stones for the temple were cut and dressed off-site and brought to Jerusalem. Once the stones arrived, they were set in place by the workmen. One particular stone arrived but did not seem to fit anywhere. Not in the walls and not in the foundations, thus it was cast aside as a mistake. As the temple drew near to completion, the workers discovered they needed one final stone to place in the last supporting arch. This arch would hold the whole temple together, it was called the *capstone*, or the *rosh pina* in Hebrew. As they looked around for a stone that would serve they discovered the stone they had initially rejected was indeed the one they actually needed. This is quite possibly one of the more important public self-disclosures by Jesus in Jerusalem. The rejected stone is paired with the rejected son in the parable. The Jewish leadership may not have referenced Jesus as the capstone, but they definitely knew that the parable was directed at them and that they were the tenants in the vineyard who had failed to provide the owner with fruit.

It's easy to throw stones at the temple leadership in the Gospels without taking into account our current culture and leadership. It's too easy to forget that the parable applies equally to us. We are surrounded by a culture of death that encourages abortions, breaks up family structures, and promotes the idea that children are not really a blessing but instead damage the environment. Let's look carefully at the prevailing culture and ask if it produces anything of eternal value or what the fruit that the Lord requires from us. The parable contains a warning of judgment. The owner of the vineyard will come and expect fruit in its season. Let's be challenged by this parable to be good stewards of the kingdom of God. And to be encouraged to speak into our culture words of life and hope and words of family and blessing.

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ACNA Readings

Isaiah 5:1-7. The prophet Isaiah delivers a powerful poetic song, in which God is metaphorically cast as a landowner and farmer. The owner of the vineyard is described as well-beloved. Ancient Israel also knew God to be a loving person. Much of the material in the song clearly influences the parable of the tenants by Jesus. In the parable, the owner of the vineyard prepares the soil, digs a winepress, secures the property with a wall, and builds a tower. Here in Isaiah, the farmer does exactly the same things. Everything was done correctly to expect that the seasonal fruit would be good, but this was not to be the case.

The people of Israel and Jerusalem – who are the vineyard in the song – have failed to obey God and have not produced a good witness to the nations. In verse four, Isaiah notes that the blame is not with God; it is with the people. There is no excuse; the Lord has provided and done everything for his people. As in the parable of the tenants, there is a judgment coming for the fruitful. It would be hubris of us to consider this warning as simply an ancient prophecy against Israel. The Lord is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and so the themes of Isaiah should resound in our lives too. God has given us the Holy Spirit, and he expects us to produce the fruit of the Spirit. To whom much has been given much is required.

Psalms 80: 1-19. Attributed to Asaph, this psalm presents God as a shepherd who will rescue and restore Israel after the devastation of some foreign threat. The Lord is shown to be a sovereign king who has directed the sacred history of the Jewish people through his saving redemptive activity. God has brought deliverance from Egypt and planted his people in the Land.

As in the prophet Isaiah and in the Parable of the Tenants, Israel is described as a vine that has performed poorly. The vine had taken deep root and filled the land – presumably the land of Canaan. Yet, God had taken away his protection and Israel had become subjected to the designs of her enemies. The exact reasons why are not mentioned in the psalm; although repentance and restoration are called for; thereby the presumption is of some national sin.

The psalmist calls on the Lord for help to be restored through someone whom Asaph calls the man of your right hand and the son of man. The Lord will bring about his redemptive work through the participation of human activity. Later, these terms take on messianic qualities and not simply human, kingly leadership.

Philippians 3:14-21. The apostle urges the community in Philippi to press forward towards the finish line and not become complacent in their faith and walk with the Lord. Those mature in the faith should understand the calling we have to live the gospel and not simply believe the good news. In this, Paul uses himself as an example of someone to imitate. This is not to say that Paul thought so highly of himself as to be almost a perfect model of Jesus. What I think Paul is saying is that as we become mature in our faith we understand even more the need to continue to “work out our salvation in fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

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In our maturity, we understand the need to become even more mature! Contrasted against the mature believers are those whom Paul feels great sadness for – those whom he terms as enemies of the cross. These people Paul describes as quite self-indulgent in all things worldly. They have embraced the culture of self-satisfaction – much like today's world – which will only lead to their inevitable destruction. It's quite a bold and stern warning, which we would well not to ignore.

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.