

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

RCL Readings – Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

ACNA Readings – Malachi 3:6-12; Psalm 96; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Introduction. In the broadest terms, the British Royal Family tends to create two camps. Some love them and want to follow all they do to the extent of camping out in the streets for a glimpse of a member of the family at special events. Others think the British Royal Family is a complete waste of taxpayers' money, and so there is no use in them being around. They would happily ignore them. However, it cannot be denied that the British Royal Family has an effect on a lot of areas as they do bring in income for the UK, and they cause people to make a decision about whether we should still have the Royal Family or not. In a much greater way, God causes a response. There are those who long to be with him, spend time with him, and meditate on everything he says, and those who choose not to follow God, believing he does not even exist.

Common Theme. The readings all touch on a relationship with God and how it should be practised. There are lessons in understanding who God is from one's own relationship with him to noting how he has an effect on all things. The readings also show that knowing God demands a response which may be praise and worship, and it might need a complete change of lifestyle as people realise they are out of step with God.

Exodus 33:12-23. Christians are used to the idea of speaking to the Lord directly so we need to put this passage in its context. Direct speaking to the Lord was very rare in the Hebrew Scriptures yet Moses talks to God as one friend to another. Here in verse 12, he seems to be very direct in the way he addresses the Lord by telling him that he has not told Moses whom he will send with him. Moses is even bold enough to remind the Lord that he had said Moses had found favour with the Lord.

So in verse 13, Moses can actually ask the Lord to help him know him more and find favour, before reminding the Lord that the nation is his. Thinking of the understanding of the Lord in the Hebrew Scriptures, this exchange is so direct that it deserves comment because it illustrates how comfortable Moses felt addressing the Lord and thus proves he had a good relationship with him.

In verse 14, the Lord assures Moses that his presence will go with him, and he will have rest. Today that would not seem too unusual because Christians believe the Holy Spirit resides in us so wherever we are, the Lord is present, but again there was no such certainty in the days of the Hebrew Scriptures and very few people indeed would experience this closeness of the Lord.

Why then does Moses say in verse 15 that the Lord should not send them on if his presence is not with them? Is Moses doubting the Lord? Is he questioning the Lord? Or is he making sure that he understands the comments the Lord is giving? It is difficult to know for certain and it is possible that a combination of those would be the true answer. Verse 16 brings some insight into that no one will know that the Lord is pleased with him and the people unless God is with them. It is God's presence that will mark them as different from all other people on the earth. In the Hebrew Scriptures, it is

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always the case that the presence of the Lord needs to be with the people for them to be secure. When the Lord steps back, they are vulnerable and experience exile or defeat.

In verse 17, the Lord seems happy to dialogue with Moses and promises to do what Moses has asked for since he is pleased with Moses and knows him by name. It is worth repeating again because it cannot be overstated; the relationship between the Lord and Moses is almost unique in the Hebrew Scriptures yet so familiar to Christians following the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Moses asks God to show him his glory. The Lord responds to Moses' request with an amazing offer. Moses will see all of the Lord's goodness pass in front of him. He will hear the Lord proclaim his name to Moses and he is told that God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy and compassion on whom he will have compassion, all of which speak of the sovereignty of the Lord. The theme of the Lord having mercy and compassion on whom he chooses is not just limited to this instance either. Although not expressed in these words, they become themes throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

The exception is Romans 9-11 where the theme is very much developed as we see a division between the Jewish people who accept Jesus as Messiah and those who do not. So often New Testament teaching cannot be adequately understood without referencing the original Hebrew Scriptures as God is unchanging from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. God does, however, limit his revelation to Moses, refusing to show Moses his face because that would mean certain death. As we look through the whole of Exodus the relationship between the Lord and Moses is unique, strong, and withstands problems, but it has limits since God retains his ultimate sovereignty.

So that Moses does not miss this memorable event, the Lord tells him where to stand (v. 21) and remarkably protects Moses (v. 22) by saying that he will place Moses in a cleft and cover him with his hand. If Moses had looked at the face of the Lord, he would have died. It is the Lord who makes sure this cannot happen. It is the Lord who arranges for Moses' eyes to be shielded. The Lord cares greatly for Moses by protecting him from an error that could cost him his life. Moses is, however, allowed to see God's back (v. 23). This must mean that the Lord is appearing in a form that will be recognisable to Moses, another remarkable point in this incredible passage of God and Moses talking one-on-one.

Psalm 99. This Psalm links well with the Exodus reading above for it reminds people that it is the Lord who reigns and that this is such a significant truth that the nations must tremble. It is a statement about the power and sovereignty of God that causes even those who do not know him to be in fear and should build the confidence of the Israelites and help them to trust him. Lest there be any doubt, they are reminded that the Lord sits enthroned between the cherubim – as compared to a human king who would be amongst advisors – and that even the earth will shake before the Lord. From Genesis 1 through to Revelation 22, we read of God creating the world and all that is in it and we read frequently that the Lord is sovereign over all of creation. There is no wonder that the earth will shake because creation knows its Lord.

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Verse two informs us of the overall sovereignty of God. Not only is he great in Zion, but he is exalted over all nations – hence their need to tremble in the previous verse. Such is his universal greatness that people everywhere should praise his great and awesome name for he is indeed a holy God.

Verse four leads us to another statement about the Lord. He is King, a mighty king who loves justice. This is then unpacked in the following verses, which change from statements about God to an address directly to God. His justice establishes equity and is seen in what he has done that is just and right. There is proof of who God is by what he has done, therefore the natural response is to exalt him (v. 5) and worship him. Again this section ends with an affirmation of the holiness of God.

Often Scripture looks back. God is always telling people to remember his ways and his faithfulness. Verse six follows the same pattern of reflection as the Psalmist reminds his readers of the great Israelites of old. Moses and Aaron were among the Lord's priests – referring back to the time that the Israelites were in the midst of the Exodus. He then points his readers to Samuel, taken from a period when the Israelites were established in Israel. In both cases, it is said that these men called on the Lord and were answered by the Lord. In both cases, the Hebrew Scriptures testify to the faithfulness of the Lord and are examples from which the Psalmist's audience can draw strength and encouragement.

In verse seven, the Psalmist recalls how God spoke from a pillar of cloud – an image from the Exodus narrative – and demonstrates that at that time the people are said to have kept his statutes and decrees. This is linked with verse eight where it is written that the Lord answered the Israelites and forgave them but punished their misdeeds. Within these two verses, the Psalmist is pointing people to God – what he did and how the people responded. Although the Psalm does not state this, it would be hoped that the people would remember a faithful God who forgave them and finally led them to the Promised Land. Surely, it is logical that they are encouraged now to turn to God in the same way and trust him.

The Psalm starts with the fact that God is sovereign and it concludes with an injunction to exalt the Lord and worship him at his holy mountain. Sandwiched between a statement of fact and an injunction are the intervening verses, which explain why God is holy and sovereign and how the people should respond.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. As Paul begins his first epistle to the Thessalonian Church, he thanks God. So often when listening to intercessions, we find that requests are put to God whilst thanksgivings are sometimes overlooked. Yet, the believer has an enduring thankfulness to God for what he has done in the Lord Jesus, which should never be forgotten. Neither should it be forgotten that fellow Christians are a cause for thanksgiving too as we share in the death and resurrection of the Lord and should thus encourage each other, and pray for each other, as seen here in verse two.

Paul is explicit in his reasons for thankfulness which are threefold. Firstly, the work the Thessalonians do, as a result of their faith. Secondly, their work has been prompted by the love of the

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Lord, and thirdly, that they endure all things because they have hope in the Lord Jesus. These tenets are apparent in the Hebrew Scriptures and show a continuation of the work of the Lord. If we look at the Hebrew Scriptures, we see how the Israelites are praised by the Lord at times for remaining faithful to him, even when they are suffering.

As a Jew of some standing, who knew the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul would have always been alert to the sovereignty of the Lord, and we see that picked up here in verse four as he states that the Thessalonians are a people not only loved by God but chosen by God. The Israelites knew they were chosen by the Lord and Paul teaches in the New Testament that the Lord is choosing those to be included in his kingdom.

Evidence that God has chosen the Thessalonians is attributed by Paul to the gospel which came not only by words but by power too as the Holy Spirit convicted them in their faith. The word of God demands a response from the heart and the Holy Spirit enables that to happen, which is all part of the sovereign plan of God. Clearly from the end of verse four, Paul had spent time among the Thessalonians and seen the effect of the Gospel; so he can speak as eye-witness. Not only that, but he had given them an example to follow by his own lifestyle as well as pointing them to the Lord, as we see in verse six. This is the evidence: Paul believes his lifestyle is a reflection of the Lord's, and that he is, therefore, a good example to follow.

The verse continues with a reminder that they accepted the gospel in the midst of severe suffering, yet found joy in the Holy Spirit. Having imitated the Lord and Paul, the Thessalonians are now reminded in verse seven that they are themselves a model to believers in Macedonia and Achaia. In fact, in verse eight, Paul praises them even further presumably still in the spirit of thanksgiving, because they have spread the gospel not only in Macedonia and Achaia but far beyond that. They are known as a people of faith, and thus they are a living example of the power and effect of the gospel and Paul has had that fed back to him as he explains in verse nine. There should always be thanksgiving for other believers when they are encouraging others to live in faith.

As Paul expands verse nine, the Thessalonians are praised for rejecting the idols they once worshipped before turning to the Lord. This resonates again with the Hebrew Scriptures. Idols had so often destabilized the Israelites and made them take their eyes off the Lord; when focused on the Lord, they were always in a much better position. With the revelation of the Lord Jesus, we see that same theme continuing through the New Testament, and the Thessalonians are praised for rejecting the idols and waiting for Jesus to come from heaven. Jesus who was raised from the dead; Jesus who will save his people from the terrors that lie ahead. Paul praises the Thessalonians in the context of thanking the Lord for them, he praises them for holding firm and reminds them not to deviate from following the Lord.

Matthew 22:15-22. It is well documented in the gospel accounts that Jesus clashed with the Pharisees and that the Pharisees were trying to trap him; the opening verse of this passage states exactly that. At the time of the gospel, the Israelites were under the occupation of the Roman Empire

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and were forced to pay taxes to Caesar. Clearly, this would not have been a popular thing because they were funding their oppressors, and the tax collectors were known to have been corrupt. It is interesting that two of the people mentioned in the life of Jesus were tax collectors. Matthew the Gospel writer and disciple was one, as was Zacchaeus who climbed the sycamore tree to see Jesus pass through Jericho. One big problem was that sometimes Roman Emperors were seen as gods, or gods in the making.¹

So in a bid to trap Jesus, they try to lull him into feeling they are on his side by praising Jesus for being a man of integrity, who teaches the way of the Lord truthfully. Put in the simplest terms, he is said to be a good Jewish rabbi, who is not swayed by public opinion. Having tried to lay the trap by praising Jesus they land the question of whether the tax should be paid to Caesar or not. It is a reasonable question in the circumstances, but they want to expose Jesus. They know that if Jesus answers that taxes should be paid to Caesar, he will be seen as an enemy of the Israelites, who will then be expected to turn against him. Yet, if he answers that the tax should not be paid, then he would be declared a trouble causer and reported to the Roman authorities. It looks like a no-win situation for Jesus.

Not surprisingly, Jesus is able to see beyond the question and in verse 18 Matthew tells us that he realized their intent was an evil one; hence he addresses them as hypocrites trying to trap him. Jesus asks for a coin and is given a denarius, which footnotes to the text describe as a day's wage for a labourer. It was a Roman coin depicting an image and inscription of Caesar. Asking them whose head is on the coin, it would have been impossible for them to reply with anything other than "Caesar's," as recorded in verse 21. With this confession from their own lips, Jesus is able to answer that people should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to the Lord what belongs to the Lord. In so doing, Jesus protects himself against either of the possible accusations that could have been levelled against him. Not surprisingly the Pharisees walk away and leave Jesus.

ACNA Readings

Malachi 3:6-12. Any relationship is reliant on the two parties playing their part. No relationship can survive if it is all one-sided, and here in Malachi 3, we see exactly that problem. The Lord states clearly in verse six that he has not changed. He is the same Lord he always has been, and he declares the proof for that, namely that the descendants of Jacob are not destroyed. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with references to the Lord having the care of his people in his heart.

However, in verse seven we learn that despite the care of the Lord, the descendants of Jacob have continually turned away from the decrees of the Lord and not kept them. The Lord has kept his side of the agreement; the descendants of Jacob have broken their side. Yet, from Genesis through to Revelation, there is always the chance of repentance, and here is no different. The Lord tells them to

¹ Julius Caesar was deified after his death and a temple was built in his honour. Later Roman Emperors were also deified and there was a cult in the Roman Empire that saw them as gods even before they had died. This stands alongside the fact that they were hated anyway as oppressors.

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return to him and he will return to them. It sounds so simple, yet the human heart is naturally turned away from the Lord, and even following the death and resurrection of Jesus believers still struggle to stay on track at times.

Malachi now writes as if the Lord is in debate with his people, and so we read what God says the descendants of Jacob will say to him, “How are we to return?” This is quite a loaded question because whilst at one level it is a simple question, at another level it implies that they do not understand what they have done wrong and so have no power within themselves to break free of the idols and return to God. The word is almost a protestation of innocence.

Verse eight is the Lord's reply and it is quite simply that they are robbing God. Once more the next question assumes that the descendants of Jacob do not realize they are robbing God, so God is quick to answer with just four words, “In tithes and offerings.” Tithes and offerings go right back to the Pentateuch where the Israelites were to give a tithe to the Levites who were not given land during the time of Joshua. They were reliant on the offerings of the people, which were seen as an offering to the Lord in that the Levites served the Lord. God has never repealed that commandment and so not tithing is serious. In fact, it is so serious that in verse nine the Lord says they are under a curse because they are robbing the Lord.

It was said above that repentance is always an option and so in verse ten, the Lord gives them that chance. He effectively tells them to bring into his storehouse everything that they owe him so that there will be food in God's house. It is one simple act on their part and the relationship will be restored. God is gentle, however, and he anticipates an objection from the descendants of Jacob that this will put them in a difficult position. This is clear by the fact that the Lord tells them to test him; the only place in either the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament where the people of God are challenged to put him to the test. God is promising them that if they do this one act of returning to him what they have robbed from him, he will open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so many blessings that there will not be enough room for the blessings. This is some promise. The Lord is showing that he will restore their relationship fully and the promise of such a significant blessing must surely mean that the Lord sincerely wants them to repent.

His promise goes even further in verse 11. Not only will they receive blessings, but they will also find that anything that would devour their crops and vines will be repelled by God and none of their fruit will be wasted. The covenant between them is one of protection for the people of God. His hand on them will be so evident that all nations will call them blessed. This is an important point because Israel was supposed to show the world the truth about God. They should have been his servant of revelation as a witness to the nations. They can only fulfil that duty if they are truly in partnership with the Lord.

Psalm 96. Praise has always been part of the people of God's response to what he has done whether in the world or in people's lives. This Psalm begins by capturing the incentive to sing to the Lord, but it is addressed to all the earth and not just to his people. It is difficult to know the Psalmist's motives

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for that, but what the Lord does – for example in nature – does benefit all people and so all people owe him a debt of praise. For example, when it did not rain in Israel in the time of Elijah, everyone suffered. When it did rain, everyone benefitted.

Verse two seems more specifically to his people because there is an injunction to proclaim God's salvation, which one who is not part of the people of God would struggle to do. However, the proclamation should be on a daily basis as God continually reaches out. In verse three, the idea of proclamation is developed further in that it is to be done to all nations – not just Israel – and God's deeds are to be made known to all people, again not just the Israelites.

Today Christians are used to the idea of God having followers in all nations, but in the Hebrew Scriptures, the chosen people were the Israelites and we know from Acts of the Apostles that it took some time for them to realize that non-Jews were included in the plan of God.

Verse four gives the reason as to why the praise should be offered. It is because God is so great and above all gods. This does not mean that the Psalmist acknowledges the other gods are real, but that he knows nations worship other gods and they are of no consequence when compared to the true God of Israel. This is expressly stated in verse five when the Psalmist is clear that the foreign gods are idols – compared to the God of Israel who made the heavens. The God of Israel is so great that splendour and majesty are before him and strength and glory are in his sanctuary. It would surely be right to assume that these comments are there as a reminder to the people of God and as a way of showing those who are not the people of God why their gods – who are idols – are not worth comparing.

Verse seven is a repetition of the injunction for all nations to know God, although it is worded differently from verse three. This time the injunction is to know the glory and strength that belong to the Lord God of Israel. The following verse builds on that with a statement about the name of the Lord, perhaps familiar to Christians through Philippians 2, where Paul teaches that the name of Jesus will cause every knee to bow and every tongue to confess him as Lord. Put another way, there is such power in the very name of God – his name speaks of his glory and sovereignty.

As the greatness of the Lord is developed in this Psalm we reach the point where there has to be a response to God, which is seen in the second half of verse eight, where people are told to bring an offering and that they come right into his courts to do so. It is possible to draw near to God rather than stand away from him, even though the idea of a one-to-one personal relationship is yet to be revealed. Not only does the praise of God lead to a response with an offering, but worship is an inevitable result to the extent that the whole earth should tremble before him.

Do the gods who are idols lead people to such a response? Although not stated, surely the answer must be *No*, which is why there is such a strong focus on the character of the God of Israel. Verse ten reiterates the need for proclamation when it comes to God. In no uncertain terms, his people should be making it known that God reigns and because of that there is security, here the firm establishment

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of the world. The Psalmist also speaks in the second half of verse ten that judgement comes from God and the world would do well to remember that fact.

As the Psalm begins to close, there is a reminder that it is not just the people who benefit from knowing the Lord. The heavens rejoice and the earth is glad. This reminds people of the greatness of the Lord and that his power and influence are well beyond just the land of Israel and Judah. He even affects what happens in the sea. In those days there was nothing like scuba diving and submarines. No one knew exactly what was in the sea – it was an unknown territory for the most part – yet God has influence and causes a response, a reminder he is so much greater than humanity.

Verse 12 shows how creation itself responds to God; fields are jubilant and trees sing for joy. The Psalmist demonstrates that not only does God's sovereignty reach beyond the known world; it affects everything that can be seen. It is an indication of God being a creator God, a reminder of who the people are supposed to be worshipping and why. Verse 13 broadens the appeal by explaining that actually wherever you look in creation, there is a response to the Lord; as he is sovereign over all things. So if he is such a sovereign God, then the second line of verse 13 is a wake-up call. God will judge the earth. It is not for nothing that he is sovereign. He is a judge but a fair one as the rest of the verse points out.

About the author. The Rev Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shoreside Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.