

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

RCL Readings – Acts 1:6-14; Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 4:12-14, 5:6-11; John 17:1-11

ACNA Readings – Acts 1:1-14; Psalm 68:1-20; 1 Peter 4:12-19; John 17:1-11

Introduction. Our readings this week take place after Ascension Day, which was celebrated on the Thursday preceding this Sunday. In some contexts – instead of celebrating the *Sunday after Ascension* – the *Ascension* is celebrated on Sunday, given it is one of the Principal feasts of the church and that more people are likely to attend church on a Sunday. If this is the case, then the readings for the feast of the Ascension would normally be used instead.¹

Common Theme. In our readings today, we see the faithfulness of the Father in the face of challenging times can be depended on. In Acts, we see the apostles reminded of this and the need to move forward; likewise in 1 Peter 4, we see the need to rely on that faithfulness in times of trial. The psalm is a testimony to God's sovereignty over all. In our Gospel reading, we see Yeshua's prayer that his disciples continue to maintain their trust in their heavenly Father and his recognition of not belonging to the world and that we will be strengthened by God's faithfulness in the face of opposition from it.

Acts 1:1-14. After an introduction to Theophilus attesting to the purpose of the Book of Acts, Luke begins by elaborating on the account of the Ascension of Messiah Yeshua, which he used to bring the Gospel of Luke to a close. Here we learn more of this climatic event – as the resurrected Yeshua ascends to heaven – including further details of the conversations that took place. There are two things that stand out for us in this passage both of which give some insight into not only the minds of the disciples but also the clear sense that they are to move forward into ministry and not remain stationary dwelling on the events that have taken place over the recent days and weeks.

In verses six to eight, the disciples ask Yeshua if he will restore the Kingdom to Israel.² Yeshua's response is indicative that they are not to become fixated on the future, rather they are to concentrate on getting on with the business at hand – namely being his witnesses and proclaiming the good news aided by the coming Comforter, the Holy Spirit. I think it is an understandable question to ask – given everything that has happened to the disciples recently and the belief that the Messiah would restore Israel's status as an independent nation.³

Now, however, they need to move on without dwelling on the future, the belief of Israel being freed from Roman occupation, and the mechanics of the how and when of his return. Yeshua is direct;

¹ Please refer to your prayerbook rubrics and the discretion of your bishop as to whether you should move the feast day.

² Note the use of the word 'Lord' at the beginning of their question, a clear recognition of his Messiahship, that the resurrected Yeshua is "Lord of All".

³ The strong wording of the 17th Psalm of the Apocryphal Psalms of Solomon alludes to the Messiah restoring the Davidic Kingship on earth and freeing Jerusalem from its oppressors. It is unsurprising that it had led to an understanding in this period that the Messiah would do just that; free Israel from occupation by foreign powers. They can be roughly dated to the First Century BCE (M.De Longe (Ed), *Outside the Old Testament*, CUP 1986, pp. 160-161), and so may well have been prominent in Jewish thought of the period.

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Sunday after Ascension – Year A

simply put, it is not for them to know the specifics of the future. We see a similar sense of being lost in wonder and pondering when, after the Ascension, they continue to remain rooted to the spot looking heavenward – perhaps waiting for Yeshua to come back down.

The angel's challenge in verses ten and eleven as to why they continue to look heavenward is also coupled with a statement of reassurance for them, that Yeshua will return. Having received this reassurance, the disciples must now trust in God's faithfulness and get about the business of the Kingdom. The closing verses with the disciples gathered in the upper room show us they understood this, being actively engaged in prayer and of one mind.

The fascination of the when and how of Yeshua's return is still something that can impact our Christian lives today. Sadly, some believers can become fixated on the issue – devoting vast amounts of time to the subject to the extent that a bit like the disciples – that they become rooted to the spot and continue looking upward. Whereas it is not wrong to consider Yeshua's return – and even study the passages surrounding it – if it becomes a focus that starts to consume our time and energy then we can easily become distracted by this and pay less attention to the present.

Yeshua does not want us to become trapped in this way, and at any rate, it is pointless to do so as it is not for us to know the specifics as he has clearly stated in this passage and elsewhere in the scriptures. Being witnesses in our daily lives and living as part of the Kingdom today should be sufficient for us. Like the disciples, we must trust in God's faithfulness and promises and move forward in our Christian lives, trusting in the promise that he will return, but focused on the here and now and the tasks at hand.

Psalm 68:1-20 (32-35). The theme of the faithfulness of God – a God who is sovereign and in control – runs throughout the psalm, which is a testimony to the power of the Lord to triumph over any adversity or situation. Such is the sense of God's sovereignty, faithfulness, and victory, that the opening verse is often used today before the procession of the Torah Scroll in the synagogue to emphasize his majesty.⁴ The concluding verses from 32 onwards nicely bookend the psalm by echoing the beginning – namely the power and magnificence of the Lord who gives strength to his people.

Alongside the Lord's greatness is also his compassion and his faithfulness to his people. Emphasis is given to the fatherless, the widow, that prisoners will be led to prosperity, and to the abundance of rain. As is the case in Israel today, rain is seen as a divine blessing, a source of life, fruitfulness, and a highly prized occurrence, and on many an occasion, I have witnessed Israelis praying prayers of thanks while standing in the rain. In Yeshua's day this was particularly true with the average Israeli dependent on the rain for a good harvest in the land, and so the psalmist's inclusion of both God as great and sovereign in his own right, coupled with a heart full of love for his people, and his caring provision, yet again demonstrates the Lord's trustworthiness and faithfulness.

⁴ David Stern, Complete Jewish Bible, Hendrickson 2016, p967.

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

For followers of Yeshua, we can draw strength from the two-fold testimony about our heavenly Father that this psalm provides. Regardless of circumstance or situation, we trust in a Mighty God who abundantly provides for his people, and to whom no principality or power can contend against.

1 Peter 4:12-19 & (5:6-11). *Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. 1 Peter 4.19*

This verse sums up for us the overall theme of 1 Peter and continues the theme of this week's readings of trusting in a faithful God and living in the hope and knowledge of that trust. Sporadic persecutions by the Roman authorities were a hallmark of the 1st Century, and this letter may well have been written during one of these periods to what was likely a Gentile Christian community.⁵

Verses 12 to 14 of chapter four are a sobering reminder not just to the original recipients of Peter's letter but also to us today of the reality of Christian life. Times of testing and trial are part and parcel of living in this world, and we should not be surprised when they come upon us. Yeshua himself was clear in John 15.18-20 that as his followers we are not of this world, so the world will hate us because of it, and so experiencing persecution and testing is ultimately par for the course. Peter does however remind us that if we are experiencing these difficult times because we bear the name of Christ – i.e. because we are identified as Christian – we should consider our trial a blessing because the Spirit of God rests upon us. Tribulations rarely feel like they are a blessing, but if we are to accept as truth the thrust of Peter's first letter, we should at these times remind ourselves that even though we may face challenges, our trust is in a God who is faithful and true, and on whom we can rely despite the circumstances.

The verses from chapter five – beginning at verse six – are also a reminder that we need to exercise vigilance in our lives for the presence of the enemy, especially in times of trial. Perhaps it is a seemingly obvious statement to make, but when we are under oppression if we do not cast our concerns on God and trust in him, then enduring these trials – without turning to God – can make us weak and open to the influence of the enemy who desires to compound our tribulations by drawing us away from relying on the faithfulness of God. Peter is entirely right to draw our attention to this, that we may be watchful for this tactic of the enemy when he chooses to employ it. In our resistance to these snares of the enemy, we can also draw strength that we are not alone in experiencing these trials and temptations, rather many of our brothers and sisters in Christ across the world are also experiencing these periods of hardship and persecution. As one body we draw strength that together we trust in the faithful promise of God, fulfilled through Messiah Yeshua, and ultimately we will stand with him at the end, in whose dominion we will dwell forever and ever.

John 17:1-11. The first half of our Gospel reading concerns Yeshua praying for himself, giving thanks for the ministry he has exercised, and all that he has received from the Father. Knowing this

⁵ The location of the places the letter was sent listed in the opening chapter, along with verses calling on the recipients of the letter to “not be conformed to the passions of their former ignorance” (1 Peter 1.14) suggest a primarily Gentile Church, notwithstanding all these areas had a small Jewish population among them.

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

prayer comes shortly before his arrest and subsequent passion, Messiah Yeshua demonstrates by his own prayer to the Father the need for us to likewise come before the Father when facing times of trial. It is important to acknowledge our belief in his faithfulness to us – praying that we too may glorify his name by how we conduct ourselves in these times of testing – and especially for the need to pray before we enter these times if we know they lay ahead of us.

Yeshua then prays for the disciples, whom he knows will also be facing their own trials, tribulations, and crisis of faith in the coming hours and days. Yeshua prays for them because he knows he is going to be leaving them, and whilst he has been with them he has protected them, he has shielded them, and he has empowered them. I have often thought that in this prayer Yeshua is asking for the Father's protection for the disciples from the events of the Passion – through until Pentecost when they will receive the Holy Spirit – as it is during this intervening period that they will be most vulnerable.

Yeshua begins by relating how he has *revealed* – or in some translations *manifested* – to them the name of God. Hebrew names – including the names of God – all have meanings and often represent someone's character. Religious Jews of the period would not use the name of God as they considered that they were unworthy to pronounce it, but in Yeshua's earthly ministry, he has indeed revealed to those he has been given that they can call God *Father*. Through their time with him, the disciples have been taught that they can know God like a Father; that the character of God is that of a loving Father who is faithful, trustworthy, and true, and that they belong to him.

The closing verse of this week's gospel sees Yeshua specifically praying for his disciples who are not leaving the world but remain in it as witnesses to the world. As he prays, we can see Yeshua's understanding of his followers; the world is full of adverse conditions for his disciples with its own temptations and hostility. His petition to the Father is that – during the world's trials that they will surely face – they remain faithful and continue to place their trust in God.

Why is the world so hostile to the follower of Yeshua? Because the world follows its own religion. Humankind time and time again has arguably shown itself to think not only that it wants to be like God, but that it is better than God, and wants to create God in its image. The world often seems to have its own set of rules and values, many in direct opposition to God's commandments. Yeshua knows that all those who belong to him will need to be able to endure living in this world. They are to remain as his witnesses to be salt and light to the world, to teach all they have learned from him to others, and to transform the lives of the people of the world by revealing the path back to a right relationship with the Father.

Today, the followers of Yeshua worldwide face increasing levels of persecution. As Christians, we represent God his values, his morality, and his standards, and as such we are living testimonies against the immorality of the world. This will bring opposition not just to us, but to whom it is that we represent as part of Yeshua's body on earth. We take comfort though – just as Yeshua prayed for his disciples in today's gospel reading – that he continues to intercede for all those who call upon him as Lord. We too, like the disciples, can know and enjoy the knowledge that we can rely on,

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

depend on, and truly believe in a God whose faithfulness to us knows no limits, and who will always have our best interests at heart. Regardless of earthly circumstances, we can stand assured that whatever we may face in our earthly lives; we will come at the last to dwell with him for eternity and rest in his presence.

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.