

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year A

RCL Readings – Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

ACNA Readings – Acts 17:22-34; Psalm 148; 1 Peter 3:8-18; John 15:1-11

Introduction. The sixth Sunday of Easter in the modern Anglican tradition is known as Rogation Sunday. Rogation evolved from the Latin word *rogare* meaning ‘to ask’. In the Early Church, there were times appointed in the rhythm of yearly prayer to beseech God for His blessings, protection over the community, and particularly for bountiful harvests. In the Anglican services in Common Worship, the sixth Sunday of Easter is appointed for asking the Lord for these blessings.

Common Theme. Biblical blessings are often associated with protection and happiness. Blessings are real things; they are not simply polite words to encourage others, but actually come with tangible results. When we beseech the Lord for his blessing we acknowledge that the blessing is real, powerful, and comes from the Lord. If we didn't then there would be no point in asking the Lord for anything. The Scriptures tell us that God gives blessings to people, that people can give blessings to each other, and that humans can also bless God. Jewish prayer life consistently involves first the blessing of God; the prayers begin with “Blessed are You the Lord our God, You are the King of the Universe” and then add the request. As the old rabbi says in *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a blessing for everything. May the Lord bless and keep the enemy as far away from us as possible!

Acts 17:22-34. The Acts passage opens with Paul waiting in Athens for his companions – Silas and Timothy. The rampant idolatry of the city compels him to begin to minister before his companions arrive. Paul proclaims the good news in both the synagogue and market forum, engaging with both Jews and Gentiles. It appears that Paul's message was initially not well received by the Athenian culture. Epicureans and Stoics – schools of Greek thought – both misunderstood the words of Paul as babble and the charge “proclaimer of foreign gods” indicates they could not recognize the Jewish connections of the Christian Faith.

Despite the misunderstanding, the novelty of Paul's message earned him an invitation to the Areopagus – an outcropping of rock linked to the Greek war god Ares. The Areopagus was a place to settle judicial and religious matters. Thus Paul has his day in court. In his defence, Paul references an altar to an unknown god that he had seen in the city.

Surprisingly a segment of the Greek world was already moving towards monotheism several hundred years prior to Jesus. Monotheistic cults of Isis in Egypt – as well as Mythra in the Roman military – are backed up by archaeological evidence of altars in the ancient world without idols and bearing inscriptions Θεος ὑψιστος (*Theos Hypsistos*), Almighty God. The New Testament identifies some of the Gentiles as God-fearers.

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Paul proclaimed that he was introducing the people of Athens to the Creator of the universe, to the God they did not know. His presentation of the resurrection caused a stir, as it still does to this day. Some commentaries complain about Paul's teaching saying it was too intellectual or not biblically based enough. However, I disagree as Paul always preached the resurrection and he does so again here. The result of his preaching only had limited success and only a few names are mentioned as new believers. The lack of an Epistle to the Athenians – in the canon or tradition – might add some credence to the lack of success of Paul in that city.

Psalm 66:8-20. In this unattributed psalm – or song – the people join together to bless the Lord. The reason to do so is an interesting one! In verses 10-12, the reason to bless God is that he has tested us, tried us, put burdens on us, and yet brought us through adversity. The psalmist is not saying let us bless the Lord for all the comforts he has provided for us but actually for the opposite, for the discomforts! The response is not to complain or to boast in adversity, but actually to come and worship the Lord.

Another response is to tell others of our testimony. Verse 16 says to come and hear! Hearing how God brought us through times of testing can truly be an encouragement to others in similar situations. Paul says that faith comes by hearing. Paul's testimony was not of a life of comfort but a life of uncertainty, shipwrecks, trials, and danger. That made his testimony shine all the brighter. The last verse reminds us that prayer is a privilege and should not be something that we take for granted or dismiss as trivial and unimportant. The psalmist blesses the Lord because God hears prayer. It truly is wonderful to know that the love of the king of the universe can be seen in his delight to hear the prayer of his lowly creatures.

1 Peter 3:8-22. Throughout the Epistle of Peter, he has called the people of God to holiness and righteous behaviour. Now he urges us to be of one mind. *And I'm sure that we would all like to be of one mind provided that mind was our mind.* Unity is not necessarily a complete theological agreement but it is behavioural. Peter reminds us that we have been called to be a blessing to each other. Not to repay evil with evil. Even when one of us falls short of the glory – which we all will at some stage – we are to bring support and encouragement and not condemnation or exclusion.

We do this because this is a command from the Lord, that we should love one another. Peter gives us another reason as well, because by being a blessing we will obtain a further blessing. We do things not only for his sake, or for the sake of others, but also for our sake. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that holiness is contagious and so not only does our righteousness have an effect on others, but it also has an effect on us.

When the apostle Paul condensed all of the Christian Faith down into three words he wrote, "... these three things remain, Faith, Hope and Love and the greatest of these is ... not Faith!" Now, before I get labeled as a heretic let me be clear. Faith in the Messiah is extremely important. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, says Jesus. However, the clear words of Scripture remind us that the greatest of

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these is Love, which is an action and should not diminish faith in any way. Too often though, it is forgotten that hope is on this shortlist. And hope, *Tikvah* in Hebrew, is such a powerful word and thing.

In this passage, the apostle Peter instructs us to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that we have. He does not say we need to give a reason for our faith or our love. Why not? I love apologetics so why not be prepared to defend the faith? Probably because this world simply just does not care what we believe and doesn't want us to impose our truth on their truth. And the world doesn't need us to give a reason for why we love people. We are not called to defend why we are nice to people, only to explain why we have hope.

We live in a world that is actually hopeless. We cannot trust in our governments, the media, or the economy as they all fail us at some point. Without faith in God, when we close our eyes for the very last time, that's it! Everything we worked towards – everything we struggled to obtain – is gone. All for nothing! That worldview is very bleak and devoid of all hope.

However, as followers of Jesus, we do not share that bleak worldview. Instead, we have faith that God is on the throne, that he is ruling and reigning and that things will ultimately get better. We have hope! In a world that simply cannot give anyone hope for the future, we can! This is a blessing we can share with the world that is sorely in need of some hope.

John 14:15-21. The Gospels don't just tell us how to get saved, the Gospels are much more than that. They tell us how to live with God as Lord and King over us. Jesus tells us quite plainly that our response to his mercy and love is to love him back through obedience. The Gospel passage opens with another of those conditional *if* statements of Jesus that says, "if you love Me, keep my commandments."

The Epistles of John contain the same words. 1 John 5:3 says, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments and His commandments are not burdensome." The reason for our obedience is not a fear of going to hell, or the potential personal gain of receiving a blessing from the Lord, but should spring from a place of love. There is nothing wrong with a healthy fear of the Lord and while the reason to obey God is because of love, part of the relationship we have with Jesus does involve assurances and blessing from him.

Jesus promises to request the Father to send the Spirit. The King James Version translated the word *Helper* to *Comforter*. Although the meaning of the word comfort in the old English of the day meant to strengthen. The gift of the Spirit of God is incredible, and many a sermon has – and should be – preached on the immeasurable value of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

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ACNA Readings

Psalm 148. The beginning and the end of each of the last five psalms of the book of Psalms (146-150) is the word *hallelujah!* Consequently, they are known as the Hallelujah Psalms. The word hallelujah הלל־לְיְהוָה is written as an imperative, meaning this is not simply a suggestion that we might consider worshipping the Lord if we feel like it, but rather we are being exhorted to praise him immediately. In the opening sentences, the psalmist calls on all of creation to join together in the worship of God.

Clearly, the Lord is personified as not only the local deity of Israel but the God of the universe. And the heavens and earth are invited to send their praise to God along with the angels. This begs the question: How exactly can the sun and the moon praise the Lord as they are inanimate objects? Are we to read this psalm as purely metaphorical?

According to Jewish tradition, the earth is alive. Not in the sense that we are alive, but in the sense that it is a living thing made up of many living things. For example, a plant is a living thing and will die following neglect of care, water, or sunshine. Plants carry some sentience as they will also react to their surroundings – including apparently to music. In Leviticus 18:28, Moses reminds the people that should they defile the land and continue in sin, the land will vomit them out as it had done to the people of the past. The sages note that it is not God who will remove the sinners, but the verse in Leviticus says that actually the land will.

What is the connection to the earth and to sin in Jewish tradition? When Adam ate the fruit in the Garden the Lord judged not only Adam and Eve and the serpent, but the earth too was cursed. What had the earth done? Nothing and yet it was now weighed down by the curse of sin. In Jewish tradition, the earth is sensitive to the presence of sin. Paul reflects on this tradition when he says that Creation itself is groaning for its redemption as it awaits the Messiah. Hence in Leviticus, we see that the earth is sensitive to sin and seeks to remove those people and cultures that profane the land with evil through withholding adequate rainfall and crop failures – which are a couple of the ways the earth vomits people out of the land.

John 15:1-11. Salvation is not solely a judicial concept; that is, a concept that states we are guilty of sin and owe God a debt and during the court scene Jesus pays the debt to set us free and if you believe that then you are saved. While that is partly true, salvation is so much more than a legal transaction; salvation is also belonging.

The Hebrew Scriptures often use images of olive trees, figs, and vines as metaphors for the people of God. Jesus in his Hebraic context uses these familiar symbols, as well, to describe the sense of belonging that we now have as the new people of God. Jesus emphasizes the mutual relationship established with our Saviour. Using the imagery of the vine, Jesus says we are to abide and remain in

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him and conversely he will abide with us. These are conditional statements predicated by the word *if* and they have espoused much theological debate.

The word abide – *meno*, μένω – confers the idea of remaining in a place and not departing from that place. It's a very comforting truth to know that Jesus does not leave us nor forsake us and that he always remains with us. But how do we know that we are abiding in him and not departing from where he is? It's a serious question as the vine metaphor contains a warning of the vinedresser (God) who will prune and remove unfruitful branches of the vine. The price of not remaining in the vine ends in the branches being discarded and burnt. Serious stuff indeed.

Jesus connects true discipleship with obedience to his commandments. If we keep his commandments, then we will abide in the vine and produce fruit. The conditional word *if* sounds problematic when thinking about the grace of God. But only when we consider the grace of God to be a licence to do anything we want instead of grace being an opportunity to accept the kingship of God and enter into obedience through the Spirit. As Hebrews 5:9 says, Jesus has become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

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.