

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
13th Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Philemon 1-25; Luke 14:25-33

ACNA Readings – Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-25; Luke 14:25-33

Introduction. The word disciple in Hebrew, תלמיד (*talmid*), means student. We are commanded by Jesus to go into all the world and make disciples/students of all nations. We are to become a holy people of learners. In the Hebraic perspective, learning is not a passive activity; instead, you learn to do. Learning is also not refined to a certain period of our lives, such as in our formative years in school or higher education in a university. Learning is a lifelong activity. We will remain disciples of Jesus all our lives and even into the world to come.

Common Theme. Our readings this week challenge us to accept and understand the cost of discipleship. Being a disciple is more than an intellectual activity. It will have a practical outworking that will inevitably come with a cost; be that emotional, social-economic or political. Ultimately, we will have to make a deeply personal choice to become and remain a disciple of the Messiah.

Jeremiah 18:1-11. The prophet Jeremiah was shown a powerful visual aid of God's sovereignty over his people through the working of uncooperative clay in the hands of a potter. Interestingly, God calls the southern kingdom of Judah the house of Israel in verse 6. Historically, as the northern kingdom of Israel descended into idolatry, there was a migration of components of the 10 tribes to the southern kingdom. By the time of Jeremiah, the kingdom of Judah contained a representation of all the 12 tribes.

As disciples of Jesus, we must accept his authority to mold us through his teaching, instructions and commandments. The illustration of the potter re-working marred clay demonstrates both God's right to judge but also to have mercy. On a national level, Israel is not cast away but passionately reworked. Repentance following disaster is not meaningless. God has let Israel know that he is sovereign in justice and mercy and he can relent, molding and shaping his repentant people to once again look like him and be lights to the nations. Likewise, one of the costs of discipleship is our acceptance for Jesus to rework us when we fall short. That reworking might not be pleasant and most will likely be uncomfortable. But humbly looking forward we acknowledge it will be better for both the Lord's glory and for our witness.

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18. David is known as the "anointed of the God of Jacob and the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam 23:1). David recognizes that we are known by the Lord in an incredibly personal, deep, and intimate way. God cares for each of us so much that he searches and knows us in ways we cannot possibly fathom, even knowing our unseen thoughts. As followers of the Messiah, we have this same intimate relationship. Jesus says that God even knows the number of hairs on our heads. The depth of his knowledge of us is overwhelming. David concludes that "such knowledge is too wonderful for me" as the Lord knows all about us before we were even born. God's knowledge extends both in the past and into the future, for all our days are "written in his book". Part of our walk with the Lord is to come into an understanding of this depth of intimacy. The Lord who calls us to follow him knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows all our faults, all our weaknesses but also all our hopes and dreams. We are fearfully and wonderfully made for a purpose and called to be his disciple. His instructions and teachings for us must surely then be the best for us.

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Philemon 1:1-25. This short epistle challenges us deeply on the issue of true servanthood as a follower of the Messiah. Paul writes to a fellow believer to receive back an escaped Christian slave. Paul does not begin his letter expressing any magnificent titles or claiming any apostolic authority, rather stating simply that he also is a prisoner for Jesus, very much identifying with Onesimus. The Epistle to Philemon is the only letter of Paul in which he does not say he is an apostle. This is a humble request for one Christian brother to forgive and accept back another Christian brother, who happens to be his personal slave. Paul does not ask Philemon to free or pardon Onesimus. Paul does not begin a discourse on the evils and tyranny of slavery. Freedom in Christ does not mean freedom from social boundaries and restrictions. It's a tough lesson. We do not know the circumstances of how Onesimus became the servant of Philemon. Perhaps he was an indentured slave working out financial debt, perhaps a prisoner of war or a former pirate. That is not the issue. Prisoners who come to faith in Jesus while in prison still remain in prison to serve out their sentences. This escaped slave, who should not have illegally and independently sought personal freedom, now accepts his status as a bondservant to Philemon. Humbly he returns to his master in an incredible witness to the cost of discipleship in Jesus. Onesimus will honour and serve his master in a deeper, personal, and spiritual way because he now loves him as a brother in the Lord. Following Jesus means truly learning to serve and bless others and that may entail actually having to be a servant.

Luke 14:25-33. As Jesus continues his journey towards Jerusalem, he is accompanied by what Luke describes as multitudes of people. Jesus had become quite popular through his teaching and acts of power. Jesus challenges the multitude that discipleship is much more than simply accepting an invitation to follow the Messiah. Jesus declares that answering the call to discipleship actually comes with a cost. The Hebrew Scriptures teach us to love God, love our neighbour, love the stranger, and honour our parents. Why would Jesus now say we had to “hate” our families? The words that Jesus spoke probably shocked his hearers. I suspect that was the point. Jesus is using hyperbole, which is saying something in an exaggerated way to have people's attention. A classic example is to say “This book weighs a ton” when it obviously doesn't. Jesus declared in Matthew 5 that he has not come to abolish the Torah. Thus, he doesn't intend for us to actually hate our parents. As a disciple of the risen Messiah, we are to prefer and honour him above other loyalties such as family. We are instructed to seek first the Kingdom and become students (disciples) of Jesus. True disciples make Jesus first and other relationships, while important, are of lower priority.

Jesus also declares that true disciples need to carry their cross. This phrase was packed with meaning at the time of Jesus. Carrying a cross was a walk of shame and always ended in death. Again this is hyperbole as not everyone who follows Jesus will suffer martyrdom, but some will be called to do so. Jesus is challenging us to know that when we choose to follow him we are committing to make him and his teachings our priority, that he will become our King and we will have obligations to him as our King. Jesus is not asking us to become perfect before we follow him. That's the work he does in us. What he is asking is for us to set aside all other loyalties and make his teachings and instructions the guiding principles of our lives. Following those instructions might bring personal suffering and, potentially, a premature death. Are we ready for that?

ACNA Readings

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20. The people of Israel stand on the plains of Moab about to enter the promised land to establish a holy people that reflects the character, justice, and heart of God. The last words of Moses challenge the people of Israel to make a choice having eternal implications. The nation that stands across the Jordan is not the same people who stood at Mount Sinai. Moses admonishes Israel to make a personal choice to covenant with God. With the Torah having once again been proclaimed to the people, it is time to accept the covenant. All treaties have witnesses that ratify the agreement made. For example, all marriages have witnesses or the marriage is not legally binding. Moses calls Heaven and Earth as witnesses for the covenant made between Israel and God. God cannot be the witness in the covenant as he is one of the parties to the covenant. Thus Heaven and Earth are called to bear witness, and the people's response is to choose a way of behaviour, of thinking and believing that leads to life. God and humanity partner together to bring light and witness to the peoples of the world. When we answer the call to follow Jesus we become members of the body of Messiah. We relate to Jesus both as individuals and as a community called to be a holy people as an example of justice, mercy and compassion to the world. Are we prepared to join that community?

Psalms 1. The Book of Psalms starts its collection with the words "Blessed is the man", and this sets the tone for the whole Psalter. The word for blessed also contains the root word for happiness and joy. This first psalm contrasts the path of the righteous with the way of the ungodly. The blessed person is someone who does not do certain things and also does the things of the Lord. The psalmist explains that our ways, our choices and deeds, are known by the Lord. We cannot hide from him and avoid the choice, so we will have to choose to either follow him or someone else. The Lord will know of our choice. Deciding not to choose is also making a choice. God warns us against taking the counsel of the wicked. Embracing their teaching will lead us along the path of unrighteousness. The delight of the blessed person is in the teaching and instructions (Torah) of God. Accepting Jesus as the Messiah, as Saviour and Lord, includes accepting his instructions and commandments. "Blessed is he who hears my words and does them" (Luke 11:14).

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.