

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

16th Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15; Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16; 1 Timothy 6:6–19; Luke 16:19–31

ACNA Readings – Amos 6:1–7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:11–19; Luke 16:19–31

Introduction. The Jewish New Year begins at sundown on the eve of 1st Tishrei (25 Sept 2022) and ends after nightfall on 2nd Tishrei (27 Sept 2022).¹ Rosh Hashanah (the head of the year) is also called *Yom Teruah* (Lev 23:23–25), which means the Day of Blasting (of the Shofar trumpet) because on this day God called the nation to attention and to prepare for the Day of Atonement on the tenth of the same month. Jews see this day as starting the year, in which they crown the Lord as the king of the universe. The 10 days following, up to Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), are days of repentance and renewal (the Days of Awe/*Yamim Nora'im*).² Rosh Hashanah feasts traditionally include round challah bread (studded with raisins) and apples dipped in honey, as well as other foods that symbolize wishes for a sweet year. Other Rosh Hashanah observances include candle lighting in the evenings and desisting from creative work.

Common Theme. In a comparable way, our readings today call us to stop afresh and soberly evaluate our lives and acknowledge God as our Lord, Judge, and Redeemer, in life and in death. We are accountable to him and should recognise that our lives, our resources, and our property all belong ultimately to him. We should use them in his world for the good of others, particularly the needy, and so for his eternal glory. We should live in the *now* in the light of the *then*, in the *present age* in the light of the *coming age*! Trusting in riches or in mortal humanity is ultimately vain, but trusting in God—that is, “godliness with contentment”—guarantees our safety and security through all the vicissitudes of life, sheltered under the wings of the Almighty! To use Paul’s words: “In this way, [such people] will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Tim 6:19).

Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15. Future Restoration. The reading opens with a moving formula which is repeated a number of times in the book, like a trumpet blast: “The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the tenth year of...” (7:1; 11:1; 18:1; 21:1; 30:1). Like Jeremiah, God calls us today and every day to open our hearts to his word and to act upon it as Jeremiah did, even if it is challenging.

In synagogues nowadays, Jeremiah 32:6–27 is the *haftarah* reading (from the Prophets) which follows the *parashah* reading (from the Torah) of *Be-har* (Lev 25:1–26:2), which relates the laws concerning the redemption of property in sabbatical and jubilee years (JSB). These passages encourage God’s people to understand that ultimately, the land, indeed the earth, belongs to the Lord (Lev 25:23), so we should live as his stewards in his world.

¹ Note, this is according to the Jewish *civil* calendar. The month of Passover, Nisan, commences the *religious* new year, and then Tishrei is the *seventh* month in this religious calendar.

² More detail and a prayer guide is available on the CMJ UK website: <https://www.cmj.org.uk/days-awe-2022>

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The date given here, the tenth year of King Zedekiah, would be 588 BCE, when the Babylonian army invaded Judah a second time to put down the Judean revolt. Zedekiah imprisoned Jeremiah for treason because of his claims that God had given Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (JSB). NET says of the prison: “Though it was a place of confinement (32:2; 33:1; 39:15) Jeremiah was able to receive visitors, e.g., his cousin Hanamel (32:8) and the scribe Baruch (32:12), and conduct business there (32:12). According to 32:12 other Judeans were also housed there.”

Jeremiah's attempt to redeem his family's land in Anathoth becomes a metaphor for God's promise to restore Jerusalem, the house of David, and the Levitical priesthood once the punishment is over (JSB). Leviticus 25:25–28 indicates that a person might sell property to pay a debt, but family members had the first right to redeem the land. Ruth 4:3–4 also illustrates the legislation in practice. NET says: “The LORD wanted Jeremiah to demonstrate his assurance of the future restoration . . . by buying a field as a symbolic act that the Israelites would again one day regain possession of their houses, fields, and vineyards (vv. 15, 44) . . . Given the Babylonian invasion, buying the field, did not make any sense (thus Jeremiah's complaint in v. 25) other than the fact that the LORD intended to use Jeremiah's act as a symbol of a restored future in the land.”

The sale price of (literally) “7 shekels and 10 pieces of silver” could not have been very high, as the sum quoted for a slave was 30 shekels (Exod 21:32), or, in Leviticus, the compensatory payment for a 20–60-year-old male who was dedicated to God was 50 shekels, but for a male 60+ it was just 15 shekels (Lev 27:2, 3, 7). “The low price may be explained by the fact that the sale takes place during a siege” (JSB). NET further says: “The significance of the symbolic act performed by Jeremiah as explained here was a further promise . . . of future restoration beyond the destruction implied in vv. 3–5. After the interruption of exile, normal life of buying and selling of fields, etc. would again be resumed and former property rights would be recognized.” In a similar way, Jesus tells us to “lay up treasure in heaven,” to use our earthly resources to invest in eternity! And Paul says in the Epistle reading: “In this way, [such people] will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life” (1 Tim 6:19).

Interestingly, the name Baruch son of Neriah appears on a clay bulla purportedly found inside a house in the city of Jerusalem that was destroyed during the Babylonian siege. Many believe that this bulla was originally used in ancient Israel to seal a document and belonged to the same scribe of Jeremiah mentioned here. However, some believe it is a recent forgery. You can read arguments for and against in Rollston and Eames (Rollston, 2016; Eames, 2020). Either way, it does demonstrate the ancient practice of “sealing.” Important people possessed their own “seal,” which they pressed into clay poured over the string binding a scroll, as in our reading. Also, the practice referred to in verse 14, of storing documents in clay jars to preserve them in the dry climate, has been exquisitely validated in the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the caves at Qumran and elsewhere, after two millennia!

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Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16. Sheltered in Shaddai. This beautiful psalm is about the LORD’s protection in many life-threatening situations. As we face death or death-like situations, we are assured that the Lord is our shelter, shadow, refuge, fortress, shield, and rampart! The comfort and assurance are delightfully captured in the expression “under his wings you will find refuge” (v. 4).

For most of the psalm (vv. 1–13), a lead speaker, maybe a priest, assures the one seeking assurance: “he will certainly rescue you ... he will shelter you ...” (vv. 3–4), and then at the end, it closes (vv. 14–16) with the Lord personally promising his deliverance, so confirming the speaker’s words: “Because he is devoted to me,” says the LORD, “I will deliver him.”

During the covid pandemic, many churches and individual believers took this psalm as God’s special promise, particularly vv. 5–6: “You will not fear ... the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.”

Some believe the opening words about “the shelter of the Most High” refers to the temple. If so, the psalm was an entrance psalm and used in temple liturgy. The terms in the opening verse for the Lord (*Elyon* and *Shaddai*) are old epithets used by the Canaanites for the head of their pantheon (JSB), but the most ancient portions of the Hebrew Bible maintain that these terms only truly can be applied, as here, to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

1 Timothy 6:6–19. Laying up Treasure for the Coming Age. This passage focuses on two themes: the importance of godly living and the danger of riches. We can be sure that there is great gain in godliness when combined with contentment. In contrast, there is real peril to one’s well-being in riches. In the end, we brought nothing into the world and we can take nothing tangibly from it (with allusion to Job 1:21 and Eccl 5:15).

We are called to make a good confession, which in this context is the acknowledgement (as in John 18:33–38) or the refusal to deny (as in Matt 27:11–13) that Jesus is the Messiah (JANT). How gracious and courageous was the confession of Yeshua when on trial.

JANT gives a series of relevant cross-references for the wording of the doxology in vv. 15–16, showing the roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and later Jewish writings: King of Kings (Deut 10:17; Dan 2:37; 2 Macc 13:4; 3 Macc 5:35; 4 Ezra 7:12; Philo, Spec. Laws 1:18. Also see Rev 17:14; 19:16); Light (Ps 36:9; 1 Jn 1:5; Philo, Life of Moses 2:70); Who no man can see (Ex 33:20); Unapproachable (Exod 19:12; Lev 22:2). Also, in verses 17–19, for storing up treasure (see Matt 6:19–20; T. Levi 13:5; and m. Pe’ah 1:1 “capital in the world to come” as the fruit of righteous acts now), and for the warning against trusting in riches (see Ps 62:10; Prov 23:4–5; Jer 9:23; Ps 52:7).

NET argues that the translation of verse 10 by many versions as “the love of money is *a* root of all *kinds* of evils” is unlikely. The definite nature of the phrase suggests the right reading should be “the love of money is the root of all evils” and if this is so, as there are clearly some evils unrelated to money, “it

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should be read as a case of hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point)” (NET, notes 12 & 13). You be the judge!

Regarding “fight the good fight,” NET says: “This phrase literally means ‘compete in the good competition of the faith,’ using words that may refer to a race or to a boxing or wrestling match: ‘run the good race’ or ‘fight the good fight.’ The similar phrase in 1 Tim 1:18 uses a military picture and is more literally ‘war the good warfare.’”

These last two weeks, we have all been reminded of one person who epitomized the truths in this reading, Queen Elizabeth II. She was one who accepted the charge laid upon her, fulfilled the duties of monarchy for the good of the people over seven decades, and who most definitely gave a good confession to the King who she served, living a life of godliness and contentment, despite her exalted position and wealth. How true is the title of the book, *The Servant Queen and the King She Serves* (Bible Society), and how fitting to the theme in our readings and to Rosh Hashanah.

Luke 16:19–31. Two Destinations. This story is part of Jesus’s “Going” to glory in Luke’s narrative. Gooding says about the whole section (Luke 13:22–17:10), which includes our reading: “It is, of course, only natural, that as Christ’s journey brought him ever nearer to his own destination of glory, he should remind people ever more frequently of the two possible destinations that await them at the end of their journey through life: inside the Father’s house with its banquet of joy and satisfaction, and outside the Father’s house with its eternal frustrations and pains” (Gooding, 258). As background to our reading, read Luke 13:22–30 and reflect on those who were locked out of the kingdom of God, the kingdom that includes Abraham, and also read 14:7–24 regarding entering the Messianic banquet.

The Pharisees who mocked Jesus’ teaching on the right attitude to money were not said to be rich but to be “lovers of money” (16:14), which is a different thing. Jesus now explains how such lovers of money can find themselves unintentionally on the wrong side of a great gulf (like the people in 13:25–30, who found themselves on the wrong side of a shut door, despite all their appeals; Gooding, 275).

This story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is unique. It is not strictly a parable (parables use earthly metaphors to refer to heavenly realities) as it speaks directly about eternal realities. Only the incarnate God could have spoken of such things. The language at the end is certainly figurative, as it imagines a conversation taking place in the posthumous realm. It is also unique in that the story names the poor man (but not the rich man), indicating the significance of Lazarus from the point of view of God and the storyline.

The reference to Lazarus being taken to “Abraham’s bosom” takes our mind back to the earlier teaching of Jesus (13:22–30) about the kingdom of heaven, which includes “Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets.” NET says: “The phrase ‘carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom’ describes being gathered to the fathers and is a way to refer to heaven (Gen 15:15; 47:30; Deut 31:16)” (NET, note 74). Here probably, as in chapter 13, the subject in mind is the eschatological banquet, with Lazarus reclining

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at Abraham's side in the banquet, as John did, with Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23). It is interesting that the Hebrew form of the name Lazarus is "Eliezer," which was the name of Abraham's closest servant (Gen 15:2).

The rich man, in contrast, dies and finds himself in "hell." The Greek word is *Hades* "comparable to the Hebrew word 'Sheol' (Isa 14; Tob. 3:10; 4:19; Wis 1:14, and elsewhere)" (JANT Luke 10:15 note). Sheol was the place where the dead were gathered (Ps 16:10; 86:13). In the NT, Hades has an additional negative force of awaiting judgment (Rev 20:13; NET).

Jesus in the story makes the dramatic point that "Moses and the prophets" provide all the necessary guidance on how the rich should live in relation to the poor (e.g., Deut 14:28–29; 15:1–3, 7–12; Isa 3:14–15; 58:3, 6–10, Amos 2:6–8; Mic 2:1–2; Zech 7:9–10). The issue is not the existence of the necessary guidance but the rich man's refusal to take it seriously! The rich man did not need to be convinced that there was an afterlife or judgment or hell, but needed to be convinced that his neglect of God's law was serious enough to land him in hell! So with us. "If our moral judgment is so irresponsible that it can make light of the Bible's warnings of our guilt before God ... no amount of seeing of apparitions will convince us that we personally were in danger of perdition unless we repented" (Gooding, 277). This is the point of Rosh Hashanah and "days of awe," to call us to consider our eternal destiny, to repentance and to return to "God, the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords."

NET makes the point that "the irony and joy of the story is that what is denied the rich man's brothers, a word of warning from beyond the grave, is given to the reader of the Gospel in this exchange." Also, "The concluding statement of the parable, *they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*, provides a hint that even Jesus' resurrection will not help some to respond. The message of God should be good enough. Scripture is the sign to be heeded" (NET, notes 95 and 98). You and I have the necessary warning in this reading, but will we heed it?

The implication is that Lazarus, who ended up in Abraham's bosom, must too have been a son of Abraham, the father of men of faith. He did not end up there because of his poverty, just as the rich man did not end up in hell because of his riches, but with both, it depended on their moral decisions, and their response to God's clear word (Gooding, 278).

ACNA Readings

Amos 6:1–7. Hard-Hearted Rich. This reading is a scathing criticism of the rich and elite in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The opening verse suggests Amos saw the same complacency in the elite of "Zion," that is, Jerusalem, in his home kingdom, as well as here in the north (Alter). They saw themselves as the eminent amongst the nations and better than those around them (v. 2) but did not see they were putting off the evil day and bringing ever nearer a reign of disaster or terror (v. 3).

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NET starts verse 2 with “They say to the people” as it considers the verse “as the boastful words, which the leaders (described in v. 1) spoke to those who came to them (v. 1b).” And continues: “If these words do come from the leaders, then this verse underscores their self-delusion of power (compare 6:13). The prophet had no such mistaken sense of national grandeur (7:2, 5).”

Their indolence is amplified in verses 5–6 describing them as lying on “beds of ivory.” This may mean “ivory-inlaid beds” (Alter). Lounging on couches here is referring to their demeanour at their banquets. Interestingly, and recently, a unique trove of ivory fragments has been found in the City of David in Jerusalem (Times of Israel, 13 Sept 22). The news article actually refers to our passage: “Ivory appears in the Bible in numerous locations, referring to extreme opulence, such as King Solomon’s “large ivory throne” (1 Kings 10:18), King Ahab’s palace adorned with ivory (1 Kings 22:39) and firebrand warnings from the prophet Amos to stop lolling on ivory-inlaid beds and couches (Amos 6:4).”

Their extravagance is further exemplified by their drinking from bowls, not cups, and anointing themselves with oil like kings! They have no concern for Joseph’s (=Israel’s) disaster, and they are totally unaware that the end of their leadership would be “at the head of the exiles” on their journey into captivity! Alter makes a poignant point: “Amos, a farmer and pastoralist, is no doubt repelled by the indolent life of luxury he observes among the northern aristocratic class, but he also has in mind the exploitation of the vulnerable that is the source of the wealth.” Amos’ concerns remind us of the same concerns of Jesus in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Psalm 146. Trusting not in Mortals but the Immortal. Psalms 146–150 form the concluding doxology of the Psalter (JSB). Here the psalmist exhorts the worshippers not to trust in mortals but in Jacob’s God, who is both creator and redeemer of the needy.

Verse 3 refers to people as *ben adam*, a son of man, or a representative human being, and then verse 4 says literally: “his spirit goes out, he returns to his soil (*adamah*).” This takes our minds right back to God’s judgment of Adam in Genesis 3:19: “until you return to the ground (*adamah*), for out of it you were taken; for you are dust (*aphar*) and to dust (*aphar*) you will return.” So, the psalmist says, don’t trust in those who will end up dying and all their plans will come to nothing but in the Creator and Saviour.

The Lord God is the one we should trust, as he cares for the oppressed, the hungry the fettered, the blind, the bent, those who act justly, the sojourner, the orphan and the widow! But, “he makes the way of the wicked twisted” (literally)—he makes their path tortuous in the sense that he makes them pay the harmful consequences of their actions (NET). Once again, we are faced with the awesome importance of trusting in the only God and living in the world with his same care for those in need.

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About the author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.