

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
20th Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Joel 2:23-32; Psalm 65; 2 Timothy 4:6-18; Luke 18:9-14

ACNA Readings – Jeremiah 14:(1-6)7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84; 2 Timothy 4:6-18; Luke 18:9-14

Introduction. Some people find it difficult and uninspiring to pray the same prayers over and over again. Praying as a routine can indeed lose its meaning, and a spontaneous prayer life perhaps seems more preferable. However, the rabbis have a saying: “If you prayed today because you prayed yesterday, then you haven't prayed.” This reflects that prayers must always come from the heart of the person praying, whether they be spontaneous and free-form prayers or liturgical prayers and psalms. Jesus prayed both types of prayers and even taught his disciples a liturgical prayer, the Lord's Prayer.

Common Theme. One common theme this week centres around restoration and redemption. In context, Jesus is one chapter away from entering Jerusalem and bringing about full redemption for the world through his death and resurrection. While the Lord initiates the work of restoration, our readings will remind us that redemption involves our participation too.

Joel 2:23-32. At the beginning of chapter 2, the prophet Joel had seen a plague of locusts (unfortunately common in the Middle East) as a harbinger of the ‘great and terrible day of the Lord’. Following a clarion call of warning to repent, the words of the prophet turn to speak of restoration, national healing and universal salvation. Our passage opens with the announcement that it was now time to rejoice in the Lord. Joel uses the image of rain (unfortunately rare in the Middle East) as a metaphor of restoration from drought and also of national redemption. God promised to restore the fortunes of Zion even though he was also the cause of their chastisement and discipline. The Lord is both judge and redeemer.

The Hebrew text of verse 23 is interesting as the words used to describe the autumn rain (הַמִּזְרֵה לְצִדְקָה) can literally be rendered *the teacher of righteousness*. The Dead Sea community understood their leader to be the Teacher of Righteousness and applied this verse as validation of his authority. While this Jewish community knew that their teacher was simply a wise human, they also expected the Messiah to be a wise teacher. According to the Melchizadek document (11Q13) found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Messiah would be God himself. If God was the Messiah, then Messiah must be the ultimate Teacher of Righteousness.

The restoration of national Israel goes further as Joel prophesies a national salvation with an outpouring of the Spirit of God upon all peoples. Everyone, both Jews and Gentiles, who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Accompanying the outpouring of the Spirit is the gift of prophecy for all flesh. Paul reflects this messianic hope when he desires that everyone should prophesy in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:31). On the day of Pentecost, Peter used these passages of the prophet Joel as a proof-text for what was occurring in Acts 2. Other commentators suggest these events are still yet to come.

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Psalm 65. This psalm of David is a thanksgiving hymn on the occasion of a fruitful harvest. God is credited with hearing the prayers of the people (v. 2), visiting the earth with water (v. 9) which results in abundant fields and pastures (vv. 12-13). This would have been a fitting psalm to pray during the harvest Festival of Sukkot. David intimates that the appropriate response to God's generosity and faithfulness to prayer is worship. David begins this psalm declaring to the Lord that the praise and worship of the people was awaiting him in Zion. Indeed the people of Israel had much to thank and praise God for. In this psalm David extends the worship response to include all peoples to the ends of the earth. In the Book of Psalms, salvation and redemption are most often depicted as universal in scope, that is, open and available to everyone in the world. David also acknowledges an even deeper restoration and redemption than an abundant harvest. As Israel beseeched the Lord for national agricultural blessing, David also recognized the individual personal struggle with sin (v. 3) and how the Lord provided the redemption there, too, by atoning for the transgressions of the people. This demonstrates an understanding of the sacrificial system that acknowledges that the work of redemption comes from God and not the sacrifice of the worshipper.

2 Timothy 4:6-18. At the beginning of chapter 4, Paul urges his young protegee to “preach the word in season and out of season”. The time to proclaim the message is always now and never later. For some people, later never actually comes. Paul feels that his own time of mission is drawing to an inevitable close. In Hebrew the verb *to die* is *l'moot* (לָמוּת), however in modern Hebrew we usually use the verb *to depart* or *to be freed*, *l'hipater* (לְהִפָּטֵר), when talking about the death of people. The idea is that we don't really die but that God simply frees us from service. Paul describes his personal service for the Lord as a struggle and a marathon. It was not easy, but he doesn't say it was aimless, and it was not without a reward. Paul looks forward to a “crown of righteousness”, the image being of the victory wreath given to athletes. Paul reminds us in this epistle that as we run the race of faith we do not run alone. Paul calls for his friends to come, perhaps to comfort him, perhaps to give them further instructions in the faith before he departs to glory. In the list of companions that are requested, Paul asks for Mark, the brother with whom he had had a terse falling out in Acts 15:36-40. Here we see restoration of the relationship between brothers of faith. Ever the scholar, Paul also requested his books and parchments, which may have been personal copies of some of the Scriptures.

Luke 18:9-14. We sometimes think that Jesus is preaching this parable of the The Pharisee and the Tax Collector to a crowd of pharisaical non-believers, but he is actually teaching this to his own disciples. Followers of Jesus can often be overconfident in self righteousness. Too often we look down and despise members of other ‘lesser’ denominations. This parable speaks to us! Two men go to pray at the temple. Note that both do not use liturgical prayers; they pray freeform prayers from the heart. At the time of Jesus, the Jewish people prayed both liturgical (like the Lord's Prayer, as an example) and freeform prayers. You can tell people's theology and how they think and feel by how they pray. It's not what goes in your mouth that is important (says Jesus), instead it's what comes out (Matt 15:11). One of the things that comes out of our mouths are our prayers, how and what we speak to God. Our prayers and prayer

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life reflect our thoughts and intentions of our hearts. Prayer in Hebrew is a reflexive verb; we should listen to our own prayers as they will reveal things about ourselves.

The Pharisee in the parable has his own agenda in his prayer, reminding himself of how good he is. Pharisees in late antiquity studied the Scriptures and attempted to obey the commandments to do good deeds. Even Jesus told his disciples to listen to what they teach as they actually teach the truth. They just didn't always put it into practice. The tax collector knew he was not being obedient to God, and he humbly acknowledges his faults and asks for mercy. In contrast the Pharisee, who studied the Bible, should have known that humility was a characteristic required of the followers of God (see Mic 6:8). Jesus teaches us that it is the meek who inherit the earth, not the proud. This simple prayer "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" eventually become known in the early Church as the Jesus Prayer, particularly in the Christianity in the East. Versions of this short prayer have been found in inscriptions in Egypt from as early as the 5th Century. We can draw from this that heartfelt repentance with humble honesty will bring restoration to our relationship with the Lord. Repentance is a gift from God but, like all gifts, has to be accepted and then put into practice.

ACNA Readings

Jeremiah 14: (1-6) 7-10, 19-22. Water is the source of all life on earth and is essential for most of our daily activities. Yet the Lord brought his people to a dry and thirsty land and still called it the land flowing with milk and honey. Other nations had major rivers and tributaries which essentially provided a continual supply of water, but not so for Israel. In Deuteronomy 11:13-14, God links water to morality when he declares that if Israel should follow his decrees then the Lord will bring the rain. Israel's prosperity was linked to its morality. Jeremiah speaks to a people going through a hard, long drought. Verse 7 acknowledges the situation issues from their sinful behaviour which, in the first temple period often centred around idolatry. The prophet Jeremiah leads the people in a call for restoration.

Repentance has multiple components. One component is the admission of guilt, another is the intention to change. The act of repenting also acknowledges God's promises and trusts that he will faithfully fulfil them. So, by repenting and trusting, we remind God of his covenantal promises of redemption. Jeremiah reminds the people that their hope is in the Lord. Surrendering to the kingship of God in humility may also involve a patient hope. The redemption is coming, the rain is coming, and sometimes we need to wait for it with honest hope.

Psalms 84. Psalm 84 is a pilgrimage song that celebrates the journey to worship in the temple in Jerusalem. It is a creation from the sons of Korah, the levitical family with a dark history of rebellion during the wanderings in the wilderness. The history of that family alone is a story of redemption and restoration. Their forefather had challenged Moses' leadership only to be swallowed up by the earth. The descendants of Korah had been restored to service in the temple with full participation as worship

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leaders. The sons of Korah remind us that those returning to Zion to seek the presence of the Lord are indeed truly blessed. Repentance is a journey. In the New Testament, the verb “repent” is usually in the present continuous form, teaching us that repentance is a lifestyle, not a one-off event. There is a blessing in returning to the Lord, leading to a restoration of the joy of salvation. “No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly” (v. 11).

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.