

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

RCL Readings - Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10,22-22:5; John 14:23-29,

ACNA Readings - Acts 14:8-18; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:1-4,22-22:5; John 14:21-29

Introduction. We have reached the Sixth Sunday of the Easter season, known in the ACNA as Rogation Sunday. It seems strange but appropriate to be preparing these notes in the courtyard at Christ Church in Jerusalem!

Common Theme. In this week's readings, there is a theme related to God's dealings and relationships with non-Jewish people. The nations figure quite prominently and we are perhaps being prepared for the season of Pentecost when the Gospel message begins its journey from Jerusalem to all points beyond.

Acts 16:9-15. In this short account, we read of Paul's supernatural call into Europe. Embarking on his second missionary journey, Paul revisits some sites from his first journey in Asia Minor as well as some new places, but in each town, he and the group are forbidden to preach. We could speculate on why, but the clear leading from God is a "No!" to preaching in the regions of Phrygia and Galatia and in Bithynia. In Troas, however, (in today's northwest Turkey) Paul has a dream in which a man from Macedonia asks them to "come over and help us". Some dreams are a little bit crazy, chaotic and meaningless but this one is very clear. The dream impacted Paul enough to encourage him to cross the Aegean Sea to Philippi in Macedonia and preach the gospel to the people there, a complete reversal of his most recent instructions from heaven. Paul's usual mode of evangelism was to begin preaching at the synagogue, but there was no significant Jewish community in Philippi. There were clearly some Jewish followers in town but not enough to make a *minyan*. Paul traces a "ladies prayer group" which met on the Sabbath on the banks of the river. The leader was a woman called Lydia, who sold special purple dye for colouring Jewish religious items. She was from Thyatira where in the mid first century there was a significant population of Jews. She is described as a worshipper of God so may have been Jewish or she may have been a gentile "God fearer" connected to the synagogue. Whichever, she responded positively to the Gospel message Paul preached and she and her household were baptised. She was clearly a wealthy woman (as the reference to "her household" shows) and had a sizeable house as she invites the missionary group led by Paul to stay there. It is likely that this was the beginning of the church at Philippi. It is noteworthy that this was the first predominantly Gentile area to respond to the gospel.

Psalm 67. This short sung poem also has links to the nations. The psalmist takes on the role of an agent of God's representative people. The first verse echoes the Aaronic blessing asking God to be gracious to "us", bless "us" and make his face to shine upon "us". For what purpose? Not for "our" own good but so that his ways may be made known on earth and his saving power be proclaimed among all the nations. "Let all the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you; let them be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth." These kinds of dealings with God are normally reserved for the people of Israel, but the psalmist opens up the opportunity for the

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nations to have a relationship with God, in response to Israel's example outlined in the blessing from Numbers 6.

Revelation 21:1-4, 10, 22-22:5. The reading from Revelation looks forward to the Messianic age. We see a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. As I sit here in the current Jerusalem, a few hundred yards away from a recent terrorist attack at the Damascus Gate and the appalling violent events at the funeral of a local Al-Jazeera journalist, whilst organising a church fair raising funds for the Old City's poor and needy, the two Jerusalems are thrown into stark contrast: this present one with all its human failings and tragedies, a place where it is possible to feel both close to and far away from God at the same time, against the future one where there is no temple, no tears and no troubles. Biblically, the temple is the place of the manifestation of God's presence. If, as the Revelation account tells us, God is permanently and totally present in the city then he is indeed the Temple. The whole city is filled with light, not from the sun, moon and stars but from the glory of God and his lamp the Lamb (v. 23). Whenever we read a reference to the Lamb in the New Testament, it should make us remember Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac where God intervened and provided a ram as an immediate alternative sacrifice to Isaac, but promised a lamb for future sacrifice (Gen 22:8). The Jewish people still await the promised Lamb of God; John the Baptist proclaimed its arrival when he met Jesus and baptised him (John 1:29). The Revelation reading promises that the glory of God, shed by the lamp of the lamb of God, will bring into Jerusalem the honour and the glory of the nations. The lamb will be a source of (living) water in the new city which will feed a tree (of life) whose leaves will bring healing to the nations. All who respond to the Lamb's invitation will be citizens there and bathe in the glorious light. Notice none of this blessing is for the Jewish people alone but for the nations, the "whosoever will" who decide to follow Jesus.

The ACNA adds verses 21:1-4. These extra verses serve to highlight the new Jerusalem as a place where God dwells with mankind. Verse 3 echoes Ruth – a Gentile Moabite no less! – when she said, "Your God will be my God, and your people my people", throwing her lot in with Jewish people. Here John says "God's dwelling place is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people".

Everything in these verses proclaims that the message of salvation as accomplished by Jesus is for everyone who responds positively to his invitation. A relationship with the creator God is now on offer to everyone.

John 14:23-29. These familiar verses from John's gospel complete a trinitarian picture. The first two verses speak of any one of us who loves the Lord and keeps his word will become a place where the Father and Son reside (a temple!) and the helper provided to aid us in our walk of faith and teach us everything to do with it will be none other than the Holy Spirit! Notice in verse 23 "if anyone loves me...." a blessing follows and that "whoever does not keep my words...." does not love me.

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ACNA Reading

The Sixth Sunday of Easter Rogation Sunday from *rogare*, the Latin word for asking or begging. Traditionally, Rogation Sunday precedes three days of active prayer and fasting for one's local parish community prior to Ascension Day.

Acts 14:8-18. The reading from Acts 14 is the account of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra. It recounts the healing of a man who had been unable to use his legs since birth. The Greek pagans of the city saw the miracle and the temple priest lauded Paul and Barnabas as Greek gods and began to offer sacrifices along with the crowds. Notice the preaching did not occur in the synagogue but apparently in a public place. Paul and Barnabas are quick to stop the pagan priest and use the opportunity to preach about the living God who “made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them”. He appeals to them by saying that in the past God left the nations to walk their own ways, but he did not leave himself without a witness as he caused the rain to fall on all, gave fruitful seasons to everyone and satisfied their hearts with food and gladness. Again the account shows God's love for all the nations and his desire to bring them into relationship with himself.

About the Author. Paul Hames became a follower of Jesus in 1979 and became Pastor of an independent fellowship in Leicester, England after 17 years in Procurement Management in the UK gas industry. In 2000 he was appointed CMJ's Regional Advisor in the English Midlands. He also spent two years as Deputy Director with Prayer For Israel in the UK. Between 2005 and 2010 Paul and his wife Janey managed CMJ Israel's Christ Church Guest House working closely with the Hebrew, English, Romanian and Arab congregations and the Heritage Centre. Since 2010 he has worked in the UK as part of CMJ's field team with special responsibility for the Bible Comes To Life Exhibition and CMJ's archive heritage, along with representation work in churches, new age outreach and leading tours to Israel with his wife Janey. They have three grown up children and two grandchildren.