

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

RCL Readings – Isaiah 6:1-13; Psalm 138; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

ACNA Readings – Judges 6:11-24; Psalm 85; 1 Corinthians 14:12-25; Luke 4:21-32

Introduction. It has been said before in these weekly notes that January can feel like a low point in the year. The build-up to Christmas is over, with its carol services and children's nativities, and everything is returning to normal. Sometimes, unintentionally, this can lead to us feeling a bit as though our faith has plateaued, but today's readings give us an insight into the Lord, which should be incredibly uplifting.

Common Theme. Although the RCL and ACNA have alternative readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, the readings do share the encouraging theme of the Lord meeting with individuals in dramatic and powerful ways showing his intimate care for each one of us, which leads in turn to the desire to praise the Lord forevermore.

Isaiah 6:1-13. Isaiah is so struck by his vision that he wants to share it and ground it in history, which is why he dates it to the year King Uzziah died. Uzziah was the ninth king of Judah, and although he was faithful to Torah obedience under the guidance of the prophets (2 Kgs 15:3), he made one fatal mistake in wanting to be king and high priest. Second Chronicles 26:16 states that he entered the temple to burn incense on the altar of incense. It seems more than coincidental that in the year he died, Isaiah had this incredible vision reminding him of who God really is. It is such a powerful vision and so overwhelming that all Isaiah can remember is that the train of his robe filled the temple. There is no description of the robe, or anything else, nor what the Lord looks like. The Hebrew Scriptures teach that no one can look on the face of the Lord and survive, so the latter point should be expected.

Thrones are for kings and judges, so the Lord's appearance on a throne makes sense. The Hebrew Scriptures frequently refer to the throne of God. The angels appearing with God are *seraphim* ("burning ones" from the Hebrew verb "to burn") having six wings. Two wings cover their eyes as they are not worthy to look on the Lord, and two cover their feet.¹ Angels appearing as little people with two wings is not a biblical image. In fact, the *seraphim* are fearsome as they surround the Lord and proclaim his holiness.

There are two possible reasons for using "holy" three times. One is for each member of the Trinity, but this is potentially a little weak. More likely it is linguistic. Hebrew uses repetition to reinforce ideas, so "holy holy" would be used for very holy, but the fact it is repeated three times shows that the holiness of God is without comparison, it is beyond our understanding (v. 3). In the Scriptures, the only use of a thrice-repeated word is "holy" and then only to describe God.

The *seraphim*'s voices are so powerful, as indeed is the praise of God, that the doorposts and thresholds shake (v. 4), surely a reminder that earth is under God and subject to him. Creation reacts in the presence

¹ Feet represent all lower parts of the body. Feet were cleaned by the lowest of the low and in that day it was seen to be potentially disrespectful to show your feet to someone of a higher status.

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of God. Now Isaiah sees his position of lowliness and sinfulness and proclaims his own ruin (v. 5), yet the Lord has mercy. We can safely assume the Lord sends an angel to touch his lips with a burning coal to make atonement as only God can forgive. The lips are significant as Isaiah is to be a powerful prophet, uttering the words of God, not his own (vv. 6-7).

It is the Lord who addresses Isaiah directly in verse 8 with the question, “Whom shall I send?” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, an appearance of the Lord often has the Lord asking a question. It teaches us that God is not forcing us to do anything but drawing us alongside him, so rather than ordering Isaiah to go, even though God has chosen him, he lets Isaiah make his own decision. There is something special about God’s way of dealing with people in this manner. In comparison to the grace Isaiah receives, verses 9-10 tell us that God is displeased with his people and wants them to know. It reads as though there is no hope for them, a tough message for Isaiah to give and a reminder of the authority of God. However, as we move into verses 12-13, we see there is hope that is always present. God will keep for himself a remnant who, despite seeing the destruction of the land, will be the small group from whom God’s holy people will grow. God never leaves himself without a witness in any generation, and he is careful whom he uses.

Psalm 138. This psalm provides a useful connection to Isaiah because we now see the human response to the Lord. It is a response of praise that is wholehearted (v. 1) as well as a personal and individual response. It is worth noting how often an individual is dealing with God in the Hebrew Scriptures, an individual who is usually part of the wider grouping of the children of Israel. There is an expectation (vv. 3-5) that the Lord will answer the individual but equally a prayer that all those in authority around the world would acknowledge God too, not just the kings of Israel and Judah. Thinking of God’s treatment of Isaiah with the burning coal, we see here again that the Lord reaches down to earth (v. 6). He may be King of Kings, but he cares, probably in contrast to most kings who have no idea about the majority of individuals over whom they rule. In verses 7-8, as in Isaiah 6, there is a preservation of life and the hope of being restored. It is a wonderful image of the grace of God.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11. The two lectionaries sit neatly together again in their choice of epistle. In this passage, Paul is reflecting on the effect of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and how that has provided a firm foothold for all who trust in Jesus. In line with today’s theme, we see that the Lord has indeed met with humanity via the cross and is bringing people together under the Gospel banner. From verse 3 onwards Paul reminds his listeners that Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures. There should always be a meeting with the Lord when reading Scripture for it testifies to God’s truth. One of the key points of the passage starts in verse 4 with the assertion that not only was Jesus raised from the dead but that he appeared to over 500 people. It is remarkable how things changed. In the Hebrew Scriptures, more often than not an appearance of the Lord is said to be through an angel, but here Jesus, the Son of God, meets people personally and each appearance is special.

In verses 9-11, Paul gives testimony to the effect of his meeting Jesus and how, though totally undeserving, he is accepted and commissioned by Jesus.

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Luke 5:1-11. Our Gospel portion continues to reinforce how the Lord loves to interact with his people. The Lord is always communicating with his people but this is physically seen when Jesus walked on earth. Luke first shows us Jesus addressing the crowd around the Sea of Galilee (vv. 1-3). However he also has a heart for individuals, and we see that in his direct instructions to Simon (v. 5). In common with Gideon in the Judges reading below, Simon does not realize this is the Lord and so initially questions the instruction but nevertheless does what he is told. It ought not to surprise anyone that the catch was very large; bountiful harvests are a speciality of the Lord as often seen in the Hebrew Scriptures. For Simon, this is a moment of revelation for now he recognises that Jesus is Lord and like Isaiah, falls to his knees feeling completely unworthy. We should note how often the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are in perfect unity showing God to be consistent and faithful. Although not explicitly stated in this passage, later ones tell us that, again like Isaiah, Simon is blessed and commissioned, just as many have been since.

ACNA Readings

Judges 6:11-24. The ACNA chooses a different reading, but there is much in common with Isaiah. An angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and tells him he is a mighty warrior whom the Lord is with (v. 12), but it is clear that Gideon does not realize he is speaking with an angel until much later (v. 22). Verse 13 teaches that despite God's record in the past, Gideon feels that the Lord has abandoned Israel into the hand of Midian. It is incredible that God records in his word the times he is doubted or his authority disputed. We take encouragement that we are not condemned by such thoughts. Verse 14 teaches us that Gideon is told to go ahead and save Israel as a warrior sent by God, yet further doubt is exhibited when Gideon rehearses his own weaknesses (v. 15). In these verses, we must not miss the fact that although an angel is sent to Gideon, we are told clearly in verse 16 that it is the Lord speaking and commissioning Gideon. We see in verse 17 that Gideon suspects it may be the Lord speaking (the use of the word 'if' gives this away), and he asks for permission se.² Once the sacrifice is over, Gideon realizes it is the Lord speaking, but he is told to be at peace – the peace of God which passes all understanding, a peace that is to be sought by all of us as we come to the presence of God. This passage should remind us, even warn us, to be careful as we never know when we might be entertaining an angel (Heb 13:2). Not surprisingly, Gideon is told to set out the offering which the angel touches and it is consumed. The touch of God or a representative of God is once more in evidence illustrating God's sovereignty.

Psalm 85. This psalm speaks of the Lord's abundant care, restoration and forgiveness, all of which are common themes in the Hebrew Scriptures and lay the way for the giving of Jesus. With the acknowledgement of what the Lord has done, there is in verse 4 onwards an expectation of faith that the Lord will restore his people. Interestingly this hope is not taken for granted. Despite having

² All the sacrifices are detailed in Leviticus. It is worth looking through this book to gain a greater understanding of all the sacrifices, which in turn will lead to a greater understanding of the Lord's death.

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acknowledged God setting aside his wrath, we see in verse 5 a question to the Lord asking if that is really the case. In summary, verses 1-7 are a proclamation of the Lord's favour coupled with a request that that favour be shown to his people. Those requests can only be made if there is hope of fulfilment. In the remaining verses, the writer once again states facts about the Lord and what he brings about – love, faithfulness, righteousness – all of which lead to a confident request for the harvest to be good.

About the author. The Revd Mark K. Madeley was born in 1968. He is an Anglican minister ordained into the Church of England in 1993. Having worked in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, Mark moved to Weston-super-Mare (just south of Bristol on the West Coast) in 2012 where he is currently rector of St. Nicholas with St. Barnabas. Mark also owns a travel company, MIB Travel, and since 2010, he has been operating all of the CMJ Shores Study Tours originating in the UK. He is passionate about people going to Israel and learning the truth according to Scripture. He is also president of Christian Friends of Magen David Adom and a vice president of Magen David Adom UK, the UK arm of the Israel ambulance service. He is validated by Durham University as a distance tutor and marks theological and Church history assignments. He is married to Caroline and has two teenage children, Rachel and Benjamin.