

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

RCL Readings – Genesis 45:3-11,15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50;
Luke 6:27-38

ACNA Readings – World Mission Sunday – Isaiah 61:1-4; Psalm 96; Romans 10:9-17; John 20:19-31

Introduction. It has been remarked on in the sermon notes before that the weeks after Christmas can be perceived as a low point in the liturgical year, the middle of a period that is neither Christmas nor Easter. In the RCL, as we reach week seven of Epiphany and begin the third week of February, there is that feeling of turning a corner. The season that began with Epiphany – the manifestation and revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles, (represented by the Magi) – is next week bookended with the Transfiguration, an event that can be regarded as the manifestation and revelation of Jesus to his own Jewish people (represented by the disciples Peter, James and John). Where does that lead us this week?

In the ACNA calendar, this Sunday is World Mission Day and the readings – very different from those in the RCL – reflect a call to mission.

Common Theme. As we will see there is, as always, a common thread running through both sets of readings – namely the Sovereignty of God, and there is certainly nothing “low point” about that! Reading about the sovereignty of God, seeing it in action and dwelling on its depth, width and wisdom should lead to heights of glorious praise and thanksgiving! Let us dive into the refreshing pool that is the Seventh Sunday of Epiphany!

Genesis 45:3-11, 15. Joseph, the much-maligned brother of the 12 – the overprivileged and full of himself brother – is now co-regent of Egypt, one of the most powerful Old World empires the world has known. He grants an audience to his visiting brothers who are seeking food aid to help their (and his) nation of Israel through a famine. Joseph reveals himself in the throne room with the words “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” Joseph shows his love and compassion. Despite all the intervening years and events, he is still concerned about the wellbeing of his father, but he also exclaims “I am Joseph” as he reveals himself. Joseph is often seen as a type of Jesus. Could there be a “pre-echo” here of Jesus’ “I am” sayings? The unrecognised brother is finally revealed to his brethren.

For Christians with a desire to see Jewish people recognise Jesus as their promised Messiah, this is a particularly poignant image – the unrecognised Messiah being revealed to his brothers after the flesh! The narrative continues with Joseph talking about the famine and alluding to the seven years of his earlier dream. He concludes with an invitation for his family and the Israelite people to settle in Goshen, a fertile Egyptian province. As he converses with his incredulous brothers, he emphasises the point that all of his trials and tribulations which came about as a result of their ill intentions have been turned to good by God. “It was not you who sent me here, but God!” In those ten words, we see Joseph absolve his brothers of blame and show that God is sovereign in all things.

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Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40. This is one of David's Psalms, probably written at the end of his life, and it falls within the category of wisdom literature most often associated with the Proverbs. It is a treatise in song form addressing the problem of wicked people prospering. It is written in Hebrew as an acrostic, a series of questions each of which begins with successive letters of the Hebrew *aleph-bet* and concludes with God's resolution of the question asked. It is a song of patience and taking comfort in the Lord. "Fret not," "trust in," "delight yourself," "commit your ways to," "refrain from," "be still," and "wait patiently" are all imperatives, some repeated, that ring through the first 11 verses. Verses 39 and 40 tie up the questions and frustrations felt when considering the wicked. "The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their stronghold in times of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take refuge in him."

David shows us that we may struggle with wickedness, both that which comes from within us and that which comes from others and affects us. However, if we are prepared to take refuge in God, we will see that trial and tribulation – in the context of eternity – is only for a short time and that we will be vindicated and experience justice. The wicked may think they prosper, and sometimes we may think so too. Yet, in the end, God will make the distinction between the righteous and the wicked in his good time. God is sovereign!

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50. In this chapter of Paul's letter to the believing community in Corinth, he too addresses a question "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" There is a consensus opinion that the letter was written around 53 CE, 20 years or so after Jesus' ascension. Only a few disciples met with the risen Lord, so it is unlikely that anyone from Corinth saw or touched his resurrection body. We know from the Gospels that his new body was different but that his followers still recognised him when he chose to reveal himself. (Echoes of Joseph here!) These stories about those who met him would certainly have been circulating by word of mouth among the newly established church communities. So it is quite understandable that the question of "what kind of body is the resurrection body" would be asked, but having explained the resurrection in the previous section of his letter, undoubtedly as a follow-up to face-to-face teaching on the subject (see 1 Cor 15:1-3), Paul grows impatient with those who ask the question. He answers it with an agricultural illustration of a seed dying after it is sown but before it can grow again. The new plant is the same species as the seed but different in appearance and function. He compares the human body to animal bodies, bird bodies and fish bodies. He marks their differences and then compares our un-resurrected body to our resurrected body in terms of perishable and un-perishable, dishonourable and glorious, weakness and power. He compares our fleshly ancestor Adam as a man of dust from the earth to our spiritual ancestor Jesus as a spiritual man from heaven. We have borne the image of the first one but we shall also bear the image of the second one. The process of change from one to the other is a mystery we cannot comprehend. The new body given by God is one that he chooses (cf. v. 38). We have no say. It is God's sovereign will.

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Luke 6:27-38. This is a section of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. It is similar to the better-known Sermon on the Mount, but the description of the topography in each account leads us to believe these are two events with a common theme – Jesus explaining how we are to live life as good followers of God. In the same way that the Good Samaritan story asks “who is your neighbour and how do you treat them?”, this section of Jesus' teaching asks “who is my enemy and how do I treat him?” According to Jesus, the enemy is the one that hates us, curses us, abuses us, strikes us, steals from us, begs from us. The counterintuitive responses are to love them, bless them, pray for them, offer them the chance of a second strike, give those who steal more than they have stolen, and give more generously to those who beg. All these responses fly in the face of normal human responses. There may be some hyperbole invoked to drive home the point, but Jesus makes the point very strongly and very clearly – respond differently. Our job as believers is to win more followers, and we cannot do that by being just like those in the world. He says that if we love those who love us, no benefit accrues – even sinners stick together! Here Jesus reveals something of himself as he says that if you take the radical route that I am modelling for you, “you (like me) will be like sons of El Elyon, the Most High God”. Act like Jesus in the face of those who hate you and, in his sovereignty, God can change the hearts of the wicked.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 61:1-4. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.” These are the familiar words that Jesus read in Nazareth near the beginning of his earthly ministry. The passage is a prophetic pointer to the things that Messiah will accomplish and the things those who become his followers will accomplish. Isaiah highlights society's marginalised people – the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the bound, the mourners – and proclaims that the day of the Lord's favour is near. Jesus doesn't pick up on the day of God's vengeance in his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth as that was not part of his earthly ministry, but Isaiah marks it clearly as part of God's long-term plan. It takes us back to the reading in Psalm 37, where God will prevail over the wicked and justice will be done. It also promises hope for those marginalised ones. Instead of mourning ashes, their headwear will be beautiful. Instead of anointing oil for mourning, they will have the oil of gladness (cf. Ps 45:7, Ps 104:15, Heb 1:9). They will be clothed in a garment of praise rather than a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. This is a beautiful illustration that is often misunderstood. To Europeans and Americans, the oak is a huge tree, venerable and ancient, strong and deep-rooted. But in Israel the oak is the Mediterranean scrubby oak, a short stocky species still common today on the Mount Carmel ridge and in Bible times across the whole country of Israel. Anyone who has visited the Holy Land and seen the scrubby oak will know it is not a stately tree – it really is scrubby. The soil on Carmel is thin and rocky and not especially fertile. The tree gets its strength by sending its roots along rather than down and grasping hard onto the rocks. It often appears that the rock becomes part of the root and vice versa, so closely are they bound. Surely this is a better illustration of the relationship between those who are called oaks of righteousness and their *Maoz*

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Tsur (Hebrew for *rock of salvation*), the Messiah. The prophet says they will become restorers of ancient ruins. This could be a picture of those faithful Israelites who have rebuilt the ruined towns and cities of Israel over many generations, but there is surely an allegorical reference to those who become faithful followers of Messiah Jesus being catalysts in the renovation and restoration of those who have been ruined by sin. God's sovereign will is that none should perish or be lost from his presence, and he can make apparently adverse circumstances flow to ensure his will happens so long as we are willing to allow him to act. In our mission work, God is sovereign.

Psalm 96. This is a glorious psalm of praise and worship to the God of Creation. The words are again prefixed by imperatives – “sing to the Lord”, “tell of his salvation”, “declare his glory”, “ascribe to the Lord”, “worship the Lord”, “say among the nations”. Every one of these commands is followed by a series of reasons why people should follow them. Every reason affirms that God is the King of the Universe and that it, and we, are subject to his sovereign will. Consider his sovereignty, express it in words, proclaim those words and people will respond, says the psalmist. It is a perfect foil for the reading from the epistles that follows.

Romans 10:9-17. Here we find Paul in the midst of justifying his mission and calling to the people of Israel and anyone else who cares to listen to and respond to his message. Verse 9 says “because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This is a two-part transaction. In the original Greek, the word *pisteo* (translated "believe" here) corresponds with *emunah*, the Hebrew word for faith. The outworking of Jewish faith is very active. The word *emunah* has an active feel about it: you have to do something with it. You can't have *emunah* sitting on the sofa! So Paul says, *Do confession with your mouth* but also *Do belief with your heart*, then you will be saved. You cannot have faith without belief and confession. As Frank Sinatra sang “Like a horse and carriage” or “love and marriage”, “you can't have one without the other”. Not a perfect analogy but I thought you might like a singing break! The fact remains that confession and belief together lead to salvation, and that goes for all people, not just Israel. “The same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

To call on him, you need to believe in him. How can you believe in him unless you have heard about him? How can you hear about him unless someone preaches the message, and how can someone preach unless they have been sent? How beautiful are the feet of those called to preach, says Paul, quoting Isaiah again. Yet not everyone that hears the message of those with beautiful feet responds to it positively. Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. There is a whole obstacle course of circumstances that must fall in line in order so that a positive response results from the hearer. If any one element is missing, the message is not complete. This shows us that when we share the good news about Jesus, it is not what we say, how we say it, whether the hearer actually listens, or whether they respond that saves them. It is only in the sovereign will of God that saves people and brings them

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into a living relationship with the Creator. And if we are called to preach, what should we say? We can do worse than use Psalm 96 as a foundation for our witness to the blessings of God.

John 20:19-31. Finally, we come to Jesus' appearance to the disciples after his resurrection. His anxious, apprehensive followers are meeting behind locked doors for fear of the authorities. Jesus appears among them supernaturally, avoiding the door and windows. He commissions them to be sent out to continue proclaiming his message. He breathes on them signifying them receiving the Holy Spirit – in Hebrew the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the *Holy Breath* or *Wind*. This is a significant moment in the story of God's salvation plan as Jesus gives the disciples the authority to preach his word and the wherewithal to overcome their fears. One of them, Thomas, is missing. When the group next meet, he is dismissive of their claims to have seen Jesus. He becomes forever known as Doubting Thomas. It has been said however that doubting is not disbelieving. When Jesus appears among them again, he invites Thomas to examine his wounds by sight and by touch, but Thomas can see enough that Jesus' resurrection body is different to his pre-resurrection body and yet he can still recognise him. His legitimate doubts have been allayed and his questions answered.

In a moment of divine revelation, Thomas proclaims Jesus as "My Lord and my God". Jesus responds by saying, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed". Jesus pronounces a blessing on the overwhelming majority of his believing followers down the ages (that includes us!) who have never seen him and yet believe. In God's sovereign will, Thomas was missing from the first meeting, and because he questioned the story he was given, he received a special revelation at the next meeting which in turn is a blessing that flows down to each of us who believe today. I've never seen Jesus, but I am honoured to be especially blessed by him because of it! It should give us confidence that no matter how inconsequential our witness may seem to us in his sovereign will, God can use it to bring other people to faith in him.

Like so many aspects of theology, the sovereignty of God is a huge sweeping subject that has exercised the minds of many great thinkers down the centuries, and yet it is so relational and intimate that it seeps into the most mundane parts of our everyday lives and becomes a pivotal part of our eternal journey.

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 UK'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 Janey. They have three grown-up children and two grandchildren.