

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday in Lent – Year C

**RCL Readings** – Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

**ACNA Readings** – Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91; Romans 10:4-13; Luke 4:1-13

**Introduction.** Lent prepares us for Easter and provides an excellent time to focus on what really counts in our faith and perhaps even to ask how much in tune with the Lord we really are. These times of preparation are not to be underrated. They challenge us to be more disciplined.

**Common Theme.** The overarching message of our readings today is that we need to focus on the Lord and dedicate ourselves to him and trust him. Everything in these readings points in one direction – to total obedience and dedication to the Lord and as such present a very powerful and effective means of knowing the intimacy of the Lord.

**Deuteronomy 26:1-11.** This reading reminds us that the Promised Land of Israel is owned and given by God to the Israelites. They are called to respond to God by acknowledging these facts and then making their offering of the first fruits. The first fruits are significant because by their very name they are declaring there are more fruits to come. The imagery is picked up in the New Testament as Paul speaks of Christ being the first fruit, letting us know that there are others to follow in his steps. Verse 2 is very specific in that it even declares that the very soil of the land God has given is what produces the fruit, and again the New Testament is clear that all we have depends on God. It is not, however, enough just to harvest the first fruits as an offering. There is the physical act of taking them to the Lord. The instructions are very specific and pave the way to our understanding of needing to be totally dedicated to the Lord and doing things his way, however tempting it might be to take a shortcut. As said above, Lent is the time to ensure we are putting things in order with the Lord and asking whether we are doing things properly.

Verse 3 shows that God even gave Israel the words to say, words that continue to remind them that their land is given by God. Our salvation is God-given, and it helps to make the comparison between the inheritance for the Israelites and our inheritance with Jesus. As the liturgy of offering continues in verses 4 to 9, the worshiper is prompted to remember the collective history of Israel: the need to go to Egypt, the suffering in Egypt, the deliverance by God by the demonstration of his power, and finally the arrival in the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. These few verses are loaded with things that the believer in Jesus needs to see and understand if we are to understand fully the death of Jesus. Our own history points to suffering. There is our own suffering when we are deep in sin, reflected in the suffering of Jesus as he prepares to die for us. Just as God delivered the Israelites through demonstration of his power, we too are delivered by God through the death of Jesus and another demonstration of the unparalleled power of God as he resurrects his Son. The Israelites were led to a wonderful land, a land that was not only a place to live but a place that was full of produce on which they could live. How can we forget that we are taken to the Kingdom of God, which is not just a place of safety, but a place of provision and care, all given by the Lord.

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The Exodus of the Israelites beautifully and uniquely shadows the greater exodus from sin to the Kingdom of God won for us by Jesus on the cross. We even have the detail in verse 7 of how the Israelites had to cry to God for deliverance, and we too must speak of our need for the Lord and then declare our allegiance to him. It reflects the need to be free from misery, toil and oppression, just as the person being saved knows that their former life is one that will never prove fulfilling and beneficial in the long run.

Our own story is, in a sense, foretold in the Exodus. Even verse 11 has a parallel. Just as the Levites and foreigners rejoice in the good things that the Lord has given them, the Christian of whatever background should rejoice in the conversion of anyone giving their life to Christ, remembering that even the angels rejoice over a sinner who repents, and both need to note that everything they have begins with and depends on God.

**Psalm 91.** If the above passage reminds us that we must come to God, then this passage speaks of how we can depend on God throughout our lives as long as we dwell, or remain, in the shelter or shadow of God. Verse 1 is expressing how God can overshadow us with his protection, but only if we choose to remain there. Verse 2 speaks of the certainty this protection brings, enabling us to declare that God is a refuge and a fortress, two very strong images of places of protection.

Verse 3 and 4 are almost a repetition of the same theme but expressed differently. Again in verse 3, there is that protective element of the character of God, and verse 4 this time speaks of a covering and refuge dependent on God being faithful. It is totally comparable with the language of Jesus and Paul and the work of the Holy Spirit. The believer in Jesus is totally protected by the Holy Spirit and covered metaphorically in the blood of Jesus, giving total protection against the greatest evils and the devil himself.

From verses 5 to 8 we then see exactly the sort of fear and disaster that need not affect those who trust in God and are reminiscent of Jesus' words in Luke 10 where the believer in Jesus is told they can tread on snakes and scorpions and will have authority over all the power of the enemy. The comparisons are so great that it becomes impossible to argue against the consistency and continuity of God. Verses 9 to 13 go into this in even greater detail with more examples, including the very one used by Jesus concerning the trampling on snakes, verse 13. Jesus would have known the Hebrew Scriptures when he walked the earth and so it should be no surprise to find elements in his teaching that pick up on those very Scriptures.

The promise of God to be with his people in any and every circumstance will carry on through long life (v. 16) leading to salvation. This is again often picked up in the New Testament. Jesus speaks of always being with us to the end of the age (Matt 28:16). We are told the Spirit will always be with us and will tell us what to say when we are in trying circumstances (Mark 13:11) and, of course, the believer in Jesus is guaranteed salvation.

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**Romans 10:4-13.** Paul is very good at drawing comparisons between the Hebrew Scriptures and what is true as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus. This should be no surprise because Paul, by his own admission, is one drenched in Judaism (Phil 3:5). In Romans 10:4, we are treated to a look back at the Mosaic Law and its demands as compared to righteousness by faith that does not question the things of God.

We do well to remember that in the Deuteronomy reading, the words used before the priest were incredibly significant and laid down in Scripture. Paul does the same here. We may question why the exact words are significant, but God is a God of order and it makes sense that he would specify what is to be said and what is to be believed because he is at the root of everything. Justification and salvation go hand-in-hand with belief and proclamation, which all go hand-in-hand with the promise of never being put to shame in verse 11. For the believer in Jesus, not being put to shame is remaining in his care, secure in our faith and salvation, as Israel was secure in the land.

Verse 12 provides the incredible news that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. We forget today how shocking that would have been for some hearers in the first century. As if to reinforce his point, Paul repeats this assertion using different words, words straight out of Joel 2:32. Yet, today there are those who, espousing the most extreme version of replacement theology, think the Jewish people are beyond the love of Jesus. Supersessionism is not scriptural and ignores the clear fact that everything we have in Jesus is firmly rooted in the Hebrew scriptures and even the traditions of the Jewish people (Rom 9:4-5). At the other end of the scale are those who think the Jews are so holy that they do not need to be saved in Christ, who elevate the Jews to a status they do not merit, who want to become Jews as if in so doing you gain special favour with God. This is certainly true amongst extreme holders of this view in the UK, maybe elsewhere too.

**Luke 4:1-13.** It may not be immediately obvious how this reading fits in with the others until we look onto the theme of obedience and keeping to the Word of God. Some people detect a link between the 40 years in the wilderness of the Israelites preparing for their kingdom of Israel with the forty days of Jesus in the desert preparing for the Kingdom of God. Whilst I would not argue against this, the more important thing is surely the adherence by Jesus to the Word of God and his dependence on and trust in God the Father. The fasting of Jesus is where the idea of giving things up for Lent comes, as all Christians make a definite parallel between these events and the period of Lent.

When verse 3 is examined in detail, we see the devil's attempts to make Jesus doubt who he is. That little word 'if' would be enough to throw some into doubt about who they are. All Jesus needs to do is perform a miracle and that will be enough. Verse 4 records that Jesus answers from the Hebrew Scriptures, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "A person will not live by bread alone." We do well to notice Jesus' use of the Hebrew Scriptures. It shows how he valued them and wanted to proclaim them for his own benefit here and speaks against those who would say that we are a New Testament Church living totally separately from what has gone before the coming of Christ. Jesus does not introduce a new God

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with a new Gospel. Jesus brings to fulfilment everything that has gone before and focuses it on his own life, death and resurrection.

In verses 5-7, there is the temptation for Jesus to worship the devil in return for all that Jesus can see from the high place. Today there are many who fall prey to the temptation to absorb and worship anything and everything. The promise of reward from such worship is empty. Nothing can be even close to the fulfilment of worshipping the Lord, and this is why I believe that in Deuteronomy there are strict rules to how an offering is to be made and in Romans 10 strict guidelines on belief and proclamation. The Lord is ensuring that people have tunnel vision towards him and him alone, resisting all temptation to go elsewhere. Psalm 91 too spoke of devotion to God being the way to avoid any kind of disaster. Once more it is from Deuteronomy (6:13) that Jesus dismisses the claims of the devil.

It is highly significant to our study that the third temptation of Jesus comes through the misuse of Scripture and in particular Psalm 91:11-12. Undoubtedly this is why lectionary compilers put Psalm 91 alongside this passage and it makes sense. Let us not lose the thought of those who adapt Scripture to mean what they want it to mean. It would be true to say that ripping verses out of context and misquoting them allows anyone to make the Bible say whatever they want it to say, and this is what the devil is doing. When we put Scripture into its natural context and see how it fits together, as Jesus does, we see a different power, the power of God. With a further reference to Deuteronomy (6:16), Jesus dismisses the claims of the devil. The reading from Deuteronomy 26 and that of Romans 10 have both demonstrated that Scripture speaks the very word of God and that the instruction to make proclamations in a certain way shows how the Lord is seeking to protect people from misquoting and misusing Scripture.

**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 Shoreside 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.