

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

RCL Readings – Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:7-16; Luke 20:9-19

Introduction. The Fifth Sunday in Lent is the last Sunday before the Easter period begins. In the past it was known as Passion Sunday, the Sunday before the commemoration of the Lord's Passion (Holy Week) begins.

Common Theme. The readings reflect a looking forward to God-ordained things centred on Jesus rather than looking back at the things that worked before – those things that may now hold us back from walking in a way that models a godly life and gives us a powerful testimony.

Isaiah 43:16-21. This section of Isaiah was written at the time when the Babylonians were at Jerusalem's gates. In chapter 39, we read how King Hezekiah regretted showing the Babylonian envoys all that was in the Temple, his palace, and his storehouses. Jerusalem, despite all the faults of its royal rulers and priesthood, had been the centre of worship for the Jewish people but was now under threat from a powerful enemy. Past power and influence are of no account, and the prophet has predicted judgement and destruction. Chapter 40 however begins an extended section of poetic praise, worship, and exhortation that culminates in this week's verses. After the lengthy introduction in chapters 40, 41 and 42, Isaiah begins our reading in the middle of chapter 43 with words that evoke two images of the Exodus story – God's provision of a path for the Israelites through the sea and his destruction of the pursuing Egyptian army. It is as though Isaiah is saying look back and see that the Lord is powerful and will give the victory to the Jewish people. Yet, as soon as these two images are written down the prophet changes his emphasis and quotes the Lord saying in verse 18, "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" He speaks of new paths in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, images that still evoke the stories of Moses. Concerning the references to wild beasts, at this period in Israel's history, wild beasts were seen as inhabited by evil spirits and the wilderness was their living space. Earlier in chapter 34, Isaiah describes this inhospitable landscape and its animal (spirit) inhabitants. The wilderness was not a place to go to by choice. It was hostile and frightening, but it was a place in which the inhabitants of Judah had found themselves. Still, despite the list of all the peoples' denial of God in the verses that follow our reading, God describes Israel as a "people whom I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise". The People of Israel ignore God, rebel against him and his law and yet he still names them as his living representatives amongst the nations and calls them to declare his praise.

Psalms 126. This Song of Ascent again reminds God's Jewish people about what he has done before to restore their fortunes and calls on them to proclaim his works so that even among the nations it may be said, "The Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad". The restoration may refer specifically to the return from Babylonian exile or it may be a more general restoration as in Psalm 14:7, Job 42:10, Psalm 85:1, or Lamentations 2:14, where the restoration may be personal or national. Whichever applies, partway through the psalm there is a hinge, a pivotal moment as the writer asks for renewed restoration. But it will be better. It will be like water streams in the desert. Again, we see a picture of abundant life in the

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wilderness, this time in the form of new watercourses which feed the planting and reaping – signs of permanence, establishment and of God's ongoing blessing in a place of chaos, fear and hostile inhabitants. The new thing is better than the old.

Philippians 3:4-16. The Hebrew Bible readings focus on God's people living the life he ordained through being obedient to his word and law and through walking in faith based on that obedience. As we turn to Paul's letter to the Philippian church, we find the apostle changing the emphasis of the basis of the walk in faith. He highlights his worthy credentials – he was circumcised on the eighth day, which means he was inducted into a covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is able to trace his family back to the tribal line of Benjamin, upon whose tribal allotment Jerusalem was built, and to describe himself as

- a Hebrew of Hebrews – a dyed-in-the-wool, good Jewish boy!
- an avid observer of the law – a Pharisee, zealous for that same law and violently supportive of the law to the point of persecuting those he believed to be in theological error
- blameless in his previous understanding of righteousness.

Yet he proclaims that none of these is of any consequence. All that matters is knowing and having faith in Jesus the Messiah. In a short burst of personal testimony, Paul looks back at the old ways, announces that they are ineffective, and highlights the new and living way that mankind can have a covenant relationship with almighty God – through faith in his Son, the Lord Jesus. He makes a lot of himself not having attained the goal and that he continues to strive for the finish line. In doing this, he is making the point that faith is not inert but active and requires an act of will from us to “make” faith happen. We do not simply sit and steel ourselves to “have faith” but we actively pursue the objectives God sets before us whilst relying on him to give us the strength. This is the same way that a runner must make for the finish line, using his inner strength. It is a very Jewish concept to “do” faith rather than “have” faith; it is active, not passive. Like Paul, we should all bear in mind that it is Jesus and not us that brings us into a righteous state and not our own work!

John 12:1-8. The gospel verses in the Common Lectionary appears, on first reading, not to be linked to the earlier readings. We find Jesus at the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary in Bethany a week before Passover and the day before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Lazarus has been raised from the tomb; as well as the invited dinner guests, a crowd has gathered to see the “miracle man”. The meal was clearly a special one as John recounts how the guests were reclining at the table, something done only at a feast or celebration. Custom and hospitality rules tell us that the guests would have washed their feet before reclining. Mary, one of Lazarus' sisters, takes a sizeable portion of sweet-smelling – and expensive – nard ointment and anoints Jesus' feet with it and wipes them dry with her hair. This would have been a shocking and surprisingly intimate public act. John records only Judas' reaction. He complains to Mary that the ointment could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. John comments that Judas was not really motivated by compassion but by greed; he was already helping himself to the contents of the disciples' money supply! Jesus steps in to defend Mary, stating that she has used the ointment wisely. There will be few opportunities left to anoint him but many more

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opportunities to feed the poor after he has gone. It is in this support for Mary's unorthodox actions that we see the link with the other readings. We remember that we have encountered Mary and Martha before in Luke's Gospel. Martha was working to clean the house for guests, prepare the meal, and do all the traditional hospitality tasks. Her sister meanwhile sat at Jesus' feet and listened intently to his teaching. Martha complained, and Jesus said, "Mary has chosen the better option, and her reward will not be taken from her". Jesus is stating in both stories that the old ways are becoming obsolete and there is a new and better way that has Jesus as its centre. It seems the story of the nard is a follow-on and a reinforcement of Jesus' earlier encounter with the sisters.

ACNA Reading

Luke 20:9-19. This is the parable of the wicked tenants. What a terrible bunch of people! A vineyard is left in the care of tenants whilst the owner is away for a long time. When the owner's servant comes to collect the harvested fruit, he is beaten and chased away empty-handed. So too with two subsequent servants, shamefully treated and sent away. The owner sends his son thinking he will be respected, but the tenants capture him and kill him so they can inherit the vineyard. What will the owner do? Kill the tenants and hand over the vineyard to others. *Surely not!* say the shocked crowd, *that's not how it goes!* Jesus fixes them with a stare and quotes Psalm 118:22: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone!" The people listening suddenly realise that the pantomime story of the wicked tenants was aimed at them. They are the killers of the servants (rejecters of the prophets) and now they have the son in their midst! Will they accept the new thing or continue to look back to the old ways?

As we prepare for Holy Week we remember that Jesus' death on the cross was the most important of those pivotal moments in history. With his death and resurrection, everything that had gone before was changed. No longer is it possible to achieve salvation through works alone. Actually, it never was but a relationship with God rested on being obedient to the law. Now salvation rests on the faithful acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

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.