

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Second Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Genesis 12:1-9; Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

**ACNA Readings** – Hosea 5:15-6:6; Psalm 50; Romans 4:13-18; Matthew 9:9-13

**Introduction.** We all face difficult times and sometimes we really need encouragement and a reminder that God is in control. Today's readings give us plenty to be encouraged about and it is also the Feast of St Barnabas the Apostle. Barnabas – a name that means *son of encouragement* – was a great support of Paul during his ministry and perhaps serves to remind us of those who support us in our work for the Gospel. Traditionally, he is regarded as the founder of the Cypriot Orthodox Church and is buried in Cyprus.

**Common Theme.** The common theme of these passages is the complete sovereignty of God. We can see clearly that God is in control. He calls people to ministry and equips them for that ministry. Not only that, but the call of God always exceeds our wildest expectations and – at the risk of repetition – confirms his ultimate sovereignty. Each of these passages deals with faith of one sort or another, faith that leads to trust in the Lord and faith that is honoured and demonstrates the sovereignty of God in all things.

**Genesis 12:1-9.** There are so many great passages in the Bible, but this has to be one of the key ones; for it marks so many beginnings, not the least of which is the Jewish faith into which we are grafted. Abram – as he was then – and later Abraham is the first of the Great Patriarchs, remembered often, and always mentioned on the first Sunday of Advent. In his Gospel, Matthew traces the ancestry of Jesus back to Abraham. He is undoubtedly a key biblical figure.

Very little, if anything, is known about his background. He is chosen by the Lord out of virtual obscurity and told to leave everything behind and move to Canaan – something he seems to do without question (v.4). His action is one of faith and trust in the Lord, which sets a precedent for all believers who are to come after him. Paul uses him as an example in Romans (see passage below).

Not only was he required to move to Canaan but he is also told to believe that he will be the father of a great nation, who will be blessed by the Lord, whose name would be great, and that he indeed would be a blessing to others (v.2). We do not know if he had a prior relationship with the Lord so why he should receive this promise is not known, but it demonstrates the sovereignty of God.

The Lord then tells him that he is to become such a pivotal figure that those who bless him will be blessed and those who curse him will be cursed, and through him, all peoples on earth will be blessed (v.3). The Lord sets him up as a key figure. Even today, all Jews trace their ancestry back to Abraham. Christians too are connected to their Jewish cousins and are therefore also blessed through Abraham, whose descendants include Jesus himself.

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These words of the Lord are fulfilled countless times over history. It should be worth noting too that Abram is no young man. Verse four records him as being 75 when he set out with his wife, nephew, and all their possessions – an encouragement to those of riper years that the Lord still has a purpose for each person!

It is at Shechem that the Lord first gives his promise that this land will be given to the offspring of Abram. The promise would be repeated several times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and is never repealed. Although this was a land already occupied by the Canaanites, Abram believes the Lord and builds an altar. The passage does not suggest that Abram queried this promise although we later discover that not only is he old, but he and his wife are childless. He then moves on to Bethel, where he builds another altar before heading to the Negev. Clearly, Abram is trusting the Lord and responding to him. His actions, his faith, and his trust will be referred to time and again throughout the Old and New Testaments. He is a trailblazer, so to speak.

Shechem is not only the site where the promise of the land is made, but it is mentioned 16 times in the Bible as a place of promise, a place of commitment, a place of sin, and the capital of the northern kingdom – following the split at the time of Solomon to name but a few. This is significant because it reminds us that the Lord is consistent. His promise to Abram makes Shechem a significant place and it is therefore not surprising that so many things – such as a renewal of the covenant (Josh 24) – take place there.

**Psalm 33:1-12.** How frequently we are told in Scripture to sing to the Lord, to make a joyful noise, and this is found at the beginning of Psalm 33, but note it is a command directed only at the righteous. Why should there be a necessity to sing and offer praise? It is because the Word of the Lord – which is described as right and true (v.4) – speaks of a faithful God in all his actions. When we acknowledge that fact, we are almost duty-bound to praise the Lord, though, in reality, it is something we would want to do anyway. By contrast, the unrighteous would not recognise the truth of the Lord's Word – nor its power – and thus feel no compulsion to offer praise.

The Lord is a God who is reliable and consistent and in whom there is no unpredictability. He is often said to love righteousness and justice (v.5) and expects his followers to be the same, for he fills the earth with his love. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the main focus is so often on Israel and Judah – or the surrounding countries – but the Lord is said to fill the whole earth. He is a sovereign God, for whom nothing is out of reach.

Verse six illustrates how God is sovereign and how powerful his word is by reminding the reader that the heavens were made by the same Word of the Lord and the stars by his breath. These themes recur frequently throughout all of Scripture. The Word of the Lord is powerful, his breath brings life. He is forever consistent.

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His sovereignty is further defined by a reminder that, for the Lord, the sea can be stored in jars and the deep in storehouses. The Lord is over all things, such that in verse eight, the earth should fear the Lord and all the people of the world revere him. Note that the injunction to revere the Lord is not to the Israelites alone, but to *all people* everywhere. The sovereignty of God knows no bounds. Not only is this injunction introduced with a reminder that God created all things and holds them in his power, but it is followed by the same in verse nine. Later, in Romans 2, Paul tells people that they know the Lord by his creation.

Verse 10 continues the theme of the sovereignty of the Lord in that whatever nations have planned, the Lord can foil them and whatever people dream up to do, the Lord can stop it. He is all-powerful. As if to drive home the point, verse 11 explains the opposite, namely that any plans or purposes of the Lord stand forever, no matter how many generations should follow. When we look back to the Genesis reading, it is reassuring to know that the promises made to Abram in that chapter cannot ever be overruled by anyone. A decision made by the Lord remains his decision forever.

**Romans 4:13-25.** This passage highlights Abraham. The Jewish people of the day thought that their security was in obedience to the law and the sacrificial system. They thought that they had further security being the children of Abraham. Paul is clear that is not the case. Verse 13 tells us that Abraham did not receive the promise that he would be heir of the world (Gen 12) through the law but through the righteousness that comes via faith. The teaching in Genesis 12 is clear that it was ever thus. The reason is clear (v.14) that law would reduce faith to nothing and without faith the promises of God are worthless.

An explanation is given in verse 15, namely, that the law brings wrath – in that it highlights sin – because without the law there is no sin. Put another way, we understand sin because it is that which the law forbids.

By contrast, God's promises are received by faith, through grace. They are not earned. If they are earned, then the emphasis is on the one doing the earning. If they are by grace, the emphasis is on the giver, in this case, the Lord. In Genesis 12 the Lord had promised many descendants to Abraham and the rest of verse 16 brings that promise to the fore as there is still a guarantee for Abraham's offspring.

It is interesting now that Paul links both those who are of the law with those who are of the faith of Abraham. The Jewish people had their identity in the law, but Paul shows that Abraham was a man of faith. Verse 16 indicates that the promises of God are for all – not only the Jewish people – all who come by faith are included. Genesis 12 is all-inclusive too, not limited to just the Jewish people who come to faith having had the law, but the Gentiles too who have not had the law. Abraham is thus the father of all because God's Kingdom includes Jews – with the law background – and Gentiles without.

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Verse 17 has a reference back to Genesis 12 and an explanation again that it was his belief in God that counted. It was God that appointed him the father of all, and lest there should be a surprise at whom God is including under Abraham, it is to be remembered that God gives life to the dead and brings into being what was not! The link here is with verse 19 where rather graphically Paul describes Abraham as being as good as dead at the age of 100, and Sarah's womb was technically dead because of her age, yet the Lord brought life from it. His power is limitless.

Abraham has a solid faith. Against all the odds, he does not waver in his beliefs, but in fact, became stronger and believed fully that God had all the power necessary to fulfill his promise. Verse 22 then highlights one of the key points of the passage. Abraham's unwavering faith and trust were credited to him as righteousness. Abraham is a trailblazer and Paul now tells in verses 23 and 24 that the belief and faith of Abraham is a model for all (see Gen 12 above). Anyone who now believes in God the Father, and believes that Jesus, the Son of God was raised from the dead, will also be credited with righteousness. How is this possible? The answer lies in verse 25 with a reference to the central truth of the Gospel that Jesus was handed over to death for our sin and raised to life for our justification.

**Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26.** The calling of Abraham is a pattern repeated at various points throughout the Scriptures and not least by the Lord Jesus himself. In Matthew's Gospel, we read that Jesus called Matthew. All we know about Matthew is that he was a tax collector, but that would have made him very unpopular amongst the Jewish people and so it is good to be reminded that no one is beyond the reach of the Lord. Like Abraham, Matthew seems to leave everything and follow without any questions.

The calling of God – however it comes – is a powerful thing and it is irresistible. I have heard many a sermon on the calling on Matthew, but few, if any, have kept the verse in its context and remembered that Jesus then ate with lots of tax collectors and sinners – interesting how tax collectors and sinners are bound together, a reminder of their unpopularity. The fact that Jesus can sit and eat with them – when many a Jew would not have done – reminds us yet again of the love and care that the Lord has for all, yet that seems to be a hindrance rather than a blessing to the Pharisees who question why Jesus is doing such a thing.

The Pharisees seem to have missed the point that God loves those he has created, and cannot accept their sin. As always, Jesus has a great answer and reminds them that the sick need a doctor. As a doctor brings healing, so the Lord brings forgiveness. God cares greatly about those who are in need of forgiveness and those are the people that the Lord wants to call to himself. In line with the Hosea reading, Jesus then teaches that his attention is not focused on the performance of sacrifices – which can be just a religious ritual – but on sacrifices done with the right attitude that show repentance for sin. We see in the Hebrew Scriptures that genuine sacrifices before the Lord were acceptable. Now the focus is

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on the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus and how we respond, which is the means by which we receive the mercy of God.

The second section of today's reading has another link to the story of Abraham. It was mentioned before that Abraham was as good as dead and Sarah's womb was dead because of their respective ages, yet from them, God brought new life in Isaac (Rom 4:19). In Matthew 9, we see that a synagogue leader comes to Jesus in faith asking that his daughter be raised to life. The key point in this sentence is the faith of the synagogue leader. Like Abraham, he believes, and it is that belief that causes Jesus to go with him as requested. Faith is honoured.

On the way, Jesus meets another person of faith; this time a woman subjected to twelve years of bleeding. The bleeding would have made the woman unclean in the eyes of all the Jewish people around her and after bleeding for that long, word would have got around and she may even have been ostracised from her community. She is perhaps the opposite of the synagogue leader, who would have been a person that was well-known and respected. The woman would be aware that anyone she touched would be made unclean, yet she has the courage to touch the edge of Jesus' cloak. This would have been a serious offence in the eyes of some, yet Jesus does not condemn her. Instead, recognising she has faith in him as a healer; he commanded her immediate healing.

It is wonderful that Jesus stopped, and took time to deal with the woman whilst on his way to the synagogue leader's home where again faith is honoured as he brings the dead girl back to life. From this section, we learn that the Lord is patient with those who approach him, delights in the faith that is shown to him, and treats all people equally.

### **ACNA Readings**

**Hosea 5:15-6:6.** The selected passage begins with the final verse of the Lord's judgement against Israel. There should be no chapter division between five and six because what follows is intrinsically linked as Hosea encourages Israel to return to the Lord – a return indicating that they had clearly drifted away from the Lord.

In verse one, he speaks of the fact that Israel has been torn to pieces and injured – which means judged – but that they can be healed and helped to recover. The Lord is offering to reverse what has happened to Israel. However, the restoration is not instantaneous; it is not until the third day that they will be restored (v.2). This is a vivid reminder that Jesus – who restores all things – was raised on the third day having paid the price for sin.

By verse three, we learn that there is a need for Israel to acknowledge the Lord. Their restoration is not automatic. It is not without action on their part, but at the same time, the Lord's appearance is as certain

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as the winter or spring rains which water the earth bringing refreshment and new life. As the creator of all things, it is no surprise that attention is drawn to creation. The reliability of the Lord is beautifully contrasted with the failure of his people.

Both Ephraim – later mostly Samaria – and Judah – the southern kingdom – are fickle. They may demonstrate love but it disappears as quickly as the morning mist of early dew. It does not last. The Lord is patient but there comes a time when his judgement is revealed and in verse five, they are told that they will be cut to pieces.

It is of particular interest that the cutting tool is the Word of the Lord. The Word of the Lord is always referred to as significantly powerful throughout Scripture. The Word of the Lord is what caused creation (Gen 1); the Word of the Lord is “Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Ultimately, we see in John's Gospel that Jesus is the Word of the Lord, so there should be no surprise to see the Word described so powerfully here.

The Lord is always consistent. In verse six, we see another familiar message, mentioned through the Scriptures that the Lord does not want religious practices – here sacrifice – but mercy and an acknowledgement of God. Once more, Scripture shows us a consistent God for whom faith and trust have always been the key. Any idea that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New can never be substantiated with a proper understanding of Scripture.

**Psalm 50.** A mighty God who is sovereign has power over all things and verse one starts on that note with a reminder that the Lord can speak over and summon the whole earth. As so often, creation is used to illustrate the point. From the rising of the sun to where it sets indicates an understanding in those days of the extremities of the earth – the farthest point east from the farthest point west.

However, Zion – a name often used to denote Jerusalem – retains its focus at the centre of the world as the place from which God shines (v.2). God makes himself known (v.3). He is not a god who remains silent. He is the God that causes a reaction, here described as fire and tempest, powerful images again from creation. The continual links between the Lord and creation show his sovereignty over all things. His power even reaches to the heavens (v.4) as well as the earth, as the Psalmist wants us to understand that nothing is beyond the control of God.

The Lord has a purpose in summoning people, but as before, he only summons those who are consecrated. He is over all and has a special people set aside for himself. A covenant exists between them (v.5) with the heavens proclaiming his righteousness and justice, which may well signify a desire to show them as a witness to the faithfulness of the Lord.

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Verse seven develops the theme of his sovereignty with an indication that the Lord is also a judge, in that he can testify against Israel. They should have been in covenant with him, but they had broken that covenant and so God speaks against them even whilst reminding them that he is still their God. It is important to remember that God's promises cannot be broken and so the connection between God and his people is always there even if they are in rebellion. Verses eight to thirteen may well have been surprising to the original hearers of the Psalm. Again, reminding them that he is sovereign over all things to the extent that he even knows every bird (v.11).

He states he has no charge concerning the sacrifices that are offered. The sacrificial system was so intrinsic to the identity of Israel that they may have expected the opposite comment from the Lord but the suggestion is that God does not actually need them (v.13). Instead, in verse 14 he wants not animals, but thanks offerings and vows that are fulfilled. God fulfils his vows; his promises are never broken. He expected his followers to do the same, but he knows his followers will not always do the right thing. They are free to call on the Lord (v.14) when in need and will find him to be the one who will rescue them.

Such is the relationship between the Lord and those who are his people. There is a direct contrast, however, shown in verse 16 when God addresses the wicked, those who are not his. They may pay lip service to God – reciting his laws and covenant – but they should not be doing so as it will be to no avail for it remains just lip service. Those who do not want the instruction of God, do not want to listen to God. Sadly, it is a theme all too familiar today. Their actions speak against them too for they join in with thieves and adulterers.

Instead of speaking good things, they speak evil (v.19), speaking against family members and having the audacity to think God was like them (v.21). These verses about the use of the mouth remind us of the warnings in James in the New Testament, once more showing the continuity of a faithful God. So in verse 22, the Lord warns them in no uncertain terms that they are in serious danger, the exact opposite position of those who give the thank offerings and who in turn receive salvation.

**About the author.** The Rev 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.