

Sermon Notes from CMJ
15th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:31-37

Introduction. For the ancient Biblical writers, doing something defines both the action done and the doer. This holds true for both God and his creation. God is good because he does good, and what is good is known to be good by its being done by God. In Jewish hermeneutics, when this is applied to humans, you do the truth, not simply believe in the truth. If you believe something to be the truth and you act the opposite, then not only is this hypocritical but it also reveals that, deep down, you don't really believe it to be true. The relationship can go the other way as well; our actions can have a powerful influence on the development of our beliefs. So act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

Common Theme. One of the themes of our readings this week revolves around our attitude and behaviour towards other people, in particular those very different from ourselves, be they from a different socio-economic bracket or ethnic group. Our actions are inextricably linked to our faith. Beliefs do not inherently make you a better person, your behaviour does!

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23. We begin with a collection of wisdom from the Proverbs. We read that both rich and poor are counted as equal before the Lord, who shows no partiality. A person's wealth does not hold back justice and judgement from God. Each person reaps what they sow. The one who does receive a blessing from the Lord is the person, independent of social standing, who is generous to the poor. Previously, in Proverbs 19:17, we learnt that 'he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord'. Putting into practice the 'royal law' – to love our neighbour through generosity to the poor and the disenfranchised – is evidence of a living faithfulness to the Lord.

Psalm 125. Like the other 15 Songs of Ascent, this psalm was prayed by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. A pilgrimage is a physical expression of a faithful heart. These prayers could have been prayed by worshippers remaining at home. Chanting and praying these psalms during the walk to Jerusalem is indeed faith in action. The opening verse is a promise that the believer 'who trusts in the Lord' will 'stand forever.' Usually, the word 'trust' in Hebrew is אָמֵן from where we get the word 'amen' (אָמֵן). However, the root of the word 'trust' in verse 1 is בטח, which means 'security', 'safety', and 'sureness'. It is also the root for the word 'promise' (הַבְטָחָה). For example, the 'promised land' in Hebrew is הָאָרֶץ הַמְבֹטָחָה. Obviously, our trust cannot be totally in the Lord if we are actually trusting or seeking security in something else. Many things vie for our attention in this world, offering promises of security and success. Like grass, they are all fleeting, here today and gone tomorrow. However, the only thing that truly does provide a sense of assuredness is the Lord, whose faithfulness is reflected in the prominent stability of Mount Zion, the Temple Mountain in Jerusalem, the destination of the pilgrimage. God is a solid rock. He can keep us safe and secure, and he is faithful to his promises to do good to his people. The Lord is good because he does good. Of this we can be totally sure.

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James 2:1-17. The Hebrew Bible describes the Lord as showing no partiality nor taking bribes (Deut 10:17). God does not show favouritism and neither should those who profess to believe in him. James highlights the treatment of rich and poor members of the ‘assembly’ or ‘meeting’ (v. 2). Translations hide the fact that the Greek word is synagogue (συναγωγή), revealing that the congregation is a community of Jewish followers of Jesus. This passage of Scripture teaches that not only should we avoid discrimination and practice egalitarianism, but it highlights the contrast between a living faith and a lifeless faith. This is summed up in James’ question: can faith without good works save you? Our faith in the Lord should be expressed in our behaviour through *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God. We should endeavour to imitate all of God’s character and embrace all of God’s instructions in Scripture. James warns us to guard against selective obedience of God’s commands. Obeying the command not to murder does not give us license to disobey the command against adultery. God cares about his whole law, including the prohibition against favouritism.

On a separate note, the term ‘glorious Lord Jesus’ (v. 1) in the Greek has echoes of the Jewish understanding of God’s presence on earth through the Shekinah, where the majesty and brightness of God’s presence are described as glory. It demonstrates that behind our Greek text there is Hebraic thought.

Mark 7:24-37. Jesus travels to the areas around the Phoenician ports of Tyre and Sidon in present-day Lebanon. While they were Gentile, Hellenistic cities, they both had large Jewish populations. The area is also not outside the borders of the land promised to Abraham, with Tyre, in particular, being within the territory of the tribe of Asher. This keeps in line with Jesus’ statement that ‘he has come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. Mark tells us that Jesus had preferred to minister inconspicuously, but this proved futile. He was approached by a Syrophenician woman (whom Matthew calls a Canaanite, Matt 15:22) interceding for her daughter. Jesus seems to initially try to dissuade the woman from seeking his assistance. For her part, the Syrophenician has the humility to acknowledge her standing as a Gentile. She does not react in an arrogant fashion. Her faith is persistent, and her request is granted. Faith is shown here as something more than mere belief in something. Faith directs a person’s actions. In this case, it is the faith to be persistent, knowing that Jesus can cast the demon out. This encounter also reveals that Jesus shares his power with both Jews and Gentiles. There is no favouritism, however, the text also confirms that the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham to bless the nations would begin with the Jewish people. Paul expresses the same point when he writes in Romans 1:16 that ‘the Gospel is the power of salvation to everyone, first to the Jew and then to the Gentile’. Paul also challenges the Gentiles not to be arrogant and ‘consider yourselves superior’ (Rom 11:18) but to humbly acknowledge that they are supported by their Jewish roots.

From the north, Jesus moves about the Decapolis region, an area of both Jewish and Gentile populations. Many of Jesus’ miracles here firmly announce the arrival of the messianic kingdom. The Gospel passage

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ends with the statement that Jesus does ‘all things well’. The faith and faithfulness of Jesus are displayed through his teachings and his actions. Those actions are not second-rate, shoddy workmanship. The faithfulness of Jesus is clearly seen through his divine activity that he does so very well.

ACNA Addendum

Isaiah 35:4-7. Isaiah brings a prophetic call to those whose hearts are fearful from their present trials. The Lord will come and save. When God’s salvation comes, miraculous power comes with it. He will heal and perform miracles among the sick, and all creation, including the earth itself, will be affected. Everything that seems wrong becomes right. Dry sands become streams of water; deaf ears can hear and blind eyes can see. These images were used by Jesus in Matthew 11 to describe to the disciples of John the Baptist that the messianic age had indeed arrived.

Psalm 146. This psalm is one of the final five psalms that begin with the imperative ‘Hallelujah!’ and have become known as the Hallelujah Psalms. The psalmist incorporates a lot of the messianic imagery of the prophet Isaiah. Relating to the theme of no partiality, the psalmist admonishes us not to place our ‘trust in princes’. There is a tendency to have greater respect for wealth and power than we ought to. Our presidents, kings and governors are in reality men of flesh like ourselves. In the end, they will all disappoint, and their endeavours will all come to a close. Our trust and hope should be in the Lord. The psalmist brings evidence of God’s goodness and power. As opposed to the great and renowned of the earth who will eventually die, the Lord will live and reign forever. If there is anyone worthy of honour and glory, then surely it is only the Lord. Praise the Lord!

James 1:17-27. The epistle of James is addressed to the ‘twelve tribes living in diaspora’, signifying that the primary recipients were Jewish followers of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. James has long been misunderstood and often been characterized as an epistle that ‘leans towards works righteousness’. Martin Luther argued that it should be out of the canon of Scripture, calling it the ‘epistle of straw’. However, verse 17 stands against this thinking as in it James states that both the perfect gifts and the generous acts of giving – that is, good works – come from God. It is not that people are doing good things to ‘earn salvation’ but rather God provides the generous activity that needs to be done and the perfect gifts in which to do them.

James has a lot to tell us regarding the ‘control of the tongue’, particularly in chapter 3. Throughout his epistle, James links hearing and doing together with speaking. In this week’s passage, we are encouraged to be ‘Quick to listen and slow to speak’ (v 19). It is possible that James may have been familiar with the apocryphal book of Sirach, which expresses exactly the same idea: ‘Be swift to listen and slow to answer’ (Sirach 5:11). Our first priority should be to hear the voice of God and to listen to Jesus. From our hearing of the teaching of Jesus, we internalize it into our hearts and from there develop the appropriate responses, leading us to good works and good speech. James will encourage us all to be

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‘doers of the Word’. James will warn us that ‘unbridled tongues’ reflect a ‘deceptive heart’. In this sense, the tongue is incredibly important. James continues to say that worship without a controlled tongue or proper concern for the poor, the widows, and orphans is worthless. Worship and true religion stem from the heart and are lived out in practical expressions, active love, and good speech. These are themes seen clearly in the Prophets, such as Isaiah 1:17 and Jeremiah 22:3. They are not new thoughts, just too often forgotten.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master’s program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.