

Sermon Notes from CMJ
18th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Esther 7:1-6, 9-10 and 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

ACNA Readings – Numbers 11:4-6, 10-17, 24-29; Psalm 19; James 4:7-5:20; Mark 9:38-50

Introduction. ‘Keep your friends close and your enemies even closer’ is an ancient proverb. It is not in the Bible, rather it is attributed to an eastern philosopher called Sun Zhu who wrote a book called *The Art of War*. In practical application, it means: know your enemies well – and that is some decent advice. Ignorance is not always bliss; actually, it can be dangerous. However, when it comes to the real Enemy, the reverse is true: we don’t want the Devil anywhere near us.

Common Theme. The Enemy has been defeated, yet he still roams around like a roaring lion. One of the themes of our readings this week concerns the tension between the dangers (both physical and spiritual) we face from evil and the blessing, hope, and assurance we have in the presence of the risen Lord.

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22. In the Jewish lectionary (the inspiration for our Christian lectionaries), the book of Esther is read three times during Purim. Purim is the holiday created to celebrate the redemption from Haman’s plot to destroy them, as seen in today’s passage (Esth 9:20-22). The apocryphal book of Maccabees records Purim as part of the Jewish calendar, so we can assume that Jesus also celebrated this festival with his family. On the surface, this is a story of the celebration of good over evil set in the lives of Esther and Mordechai, yet lurking in the background is an even greater evil. One of the obvious ironies is that there is an atmosphere of celebration of God’s redemption, yet where is God? He is not mentioned in the text at all. God works his redemptive plan even when we do not see it. Throughout the book of Esther, evil lurks close at hand through the character of Haman, but redemption likewise is always close at hand, even if unknown. Esther is quickly brought into the palace of the king and is in perfect position to bring about the victory over Haman’s evil machinations. Haman is defeated by the very plan he had hatched to destroy Mordechai; he is hung on his own gallows. This is the same theology we see in the cross of Jesus. The Enemy is defeated by the very thing he thought had won him victory; for Jesus, the seeming defeat of the cross turns into the victory of the cross. Evil may constantly lurk close and unseen, but redemption and hope are closer.

Psalm 124. The opening verses of this Psalm of Ascent declare in repetition, thus signifying some importance as it declares God’s active presence working on behalf of Israel. ‘God was on our side’ is the reason for Israel’s redemption from calamity. The phrase ‘God was with us’ (*Adonai haya lanu* in verses 1-2) is the past tense of the present tense phrase ‘God is with us’, which is *Immanuel* in Hebrew. In biblical Hebrew, the past tense is also read as present tense, so the intention is to say that God was and also is still with us. The opening verses also contain a declaration and confession. David says, ‘Let Israel now say’. Salvation, redemption, and the good news are not something we are allowed to keep silent. The appropriate response to salvation is to declare the truth and give glory to God who saves. The psalm reminds the worshipper that both evil and redemption lie close at hand. The evil is not defined, and

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David uses the image of water to stress the danger completely engulfing the people of God. David notes in verse 7 that the danger is not only physical but that it is also spiritual when he says, ‘Our souls have escaped as a bird from the snare’. It is not just our temporal bodies that are saved from danger. David concludes the prayer with the confidence of the continuing help of the Lord. Though the Maker of heaven and earth might not always be seen, David acknowledges that he is always there. Salvation is always close at hand.

James 5:13-20. James presents three situations in which prayer is very appropriate. ‘Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.’ The first situation is when times are difficult. Prayer helps us to continue to lead lives that are faithful to the calling of the Gospel, especially when times are hard and troubles come. Getting onto a pattern of prayer is something we should do before we encounter difficult times, although if truth be told, our prayer lives often increase their fervour during times of trouble. James also urges us to pray when times are good. ‘If anyone is happy? Let them sing psalms of praise.’ It is when things are going well that we are in danger of forgetting God and thinking that we are self-sufficient. Prayer grounds us in a relationship with the living God and reminds us that we live, not because of ourselves, but because of his mercy and grace. Thirdly, there are the prayers for the sick, together with the anointing of oil. Oil was considered in the ancient world to have healing properties and was used for all sorts of anointing, ceremonial as well as medicinal. In the Good Samaritan story, we see that both oil and wine are used with bandages to clean the wounds of the beaten man (Luke 9:34). James is suggesting that the elders provide both medical care with the oil as well as spiritual care through prayer. Verse 15 says, ‘The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well’. Does James really think prayer is all that is needed for healing? If that’s true then why did the Church establish hospitals all over the world and set out to cure the sick? The Greek here is in the future tense, which can also render in a continuous sense. Healing then can take place in the present time as well into the future. The prayer is offered in faith; faith in God as healer is implied. Sin and confession are also paired with the faithful prayer of healing. Confession can lead to an unburdening of the spirit that even secular psychologists suggest is healthy for the individual. Many of our liturgies include a public confession which is followed by a public pronouncement of the assurance of forgiveness. Confession is very powerful, and we do well not to ignore it.

Mark 9:38-50. In context, this passage follows the account in which the disciples had failed to deliver a demon from a possessed person. Now they witness someone not of their inner circle having success in his exorcisms. Obviously, the disciples are a little frustrated, perhaps a little bewildered, and maybe a touch jealous, so they seek to forbid the man from continuing. Jealousy at the success of someone else’s ministry cannot be a good thing. Who was this man? How did he know to cast out demons using the name of Jesus? Why was he having success if he was not one of Jesus’ followers? Does he have the Holy Spirit or not? The text itself does not provide any answers, and commentaries are essentially guessing. Perhaps he was one of John the Baptist’s disciples. Perhaps he was one of the 72 unnamed disciples that Jesus had sent out two by two and simply was not part of the core group of 12 disciples.

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What Jesus does say is, ‘Do not stop him. . . For whoever is not against us is for us’. This is very similar to the event described in Numbers 11, in which Joshua wants Moses to forbid Eldad and Medad from prophesying (see ACNA note on Numbers 11 below).

It is easy to say, ‘God’s ways are not our ways’. However, I suspect that we, in honesty, have a limited view of the kingdom of heaven. God’s view of his kingdom is more extensive and far-reaching than ours. God knows who is truly for and who is truly against him. Jesus says whoever serves even something as simple as water in his name retains their reward. The phrase ‘in my name’ denotes loyalty to the one named. Loyalty is demonstrated through service, which in the example is a simple cup of water.

Jesus then uses hyperbole to shock his disciples (vv. 42-49). Jesus is not advising people to actually self-mutilate, although there have been some segments of the church that have engaged in misguided self-flagellation. At the core of the hyperbole is sacrifice. The question is, What will we be prepared to sacrifice to enter the kingdom of heaven? If something is truly hindering us, will we be prepared to put it aside for the sake of the gospel, salvation, and the Messiah? It’s a serious discussion, not to be taken lightly, in which Jesus includes the potential alternative destination as the lake of fire. ‘Everyone will be salted with fire’ initially seems like a strange saying. Salt as a biblical concept has strong sacrificial overtones which, as we said, are at the core of the hyperbole. Salt was used in the temple sacrificial system ever since the Torah was written. All sacrifices are to be seasoned with salt (Lev 2). Early Christianity actually had a traditional use of ‘blessed salt’. The Church Fathers describe various uses of sacramental salt during prayers, catechesis and communion. Some very old books of common prayer have prayers for the blessing of salt alongside the blessing of holy water.

ACNA Readings

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-17, 24-29. How can it be that a people who know the presence of the Lord – having seen his awesome might and power, heard his voice and rejoiced in daily miraculous provision – still complain? Well, they do... and so do we! Each of us could probably relate a story or testimony of the Lord’s provision, blessing, or miraculous intervention in our lives. Yet when faced with a new challenge, we can quickly lose that assurance we once had of God’s presence and help. The Israelites ask, ‘Who will give us meat?’ This is an interesting question in context, as surely the answer would have been ‘God provides!’ After all, they had manna provided on a daily basis; they held a miracle in their hands every day. There is definitely a lack of gratitude going on. Moses then gets in on the action and starts complaining too but about the Israelites. God’s reaction is to provide, revealing so much about his character. Seventy elders are to join Moses to share in the Holy Spirit and to serve the people. The Spirit inspires the elders to prophesy, even if it is only for the initial occasion. However, the total number of elders who actually receive the Spirit is 72, with Eldad and Medad not being at the tent of meeting with the other elders. They still receive the Spirit and prophecy. The Spirit is beyond location, confinement

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and geography. Later, the prophet Joel and Paul will say that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh, and then everyone will prophesy. This number (72) appears again in Luke when Jesus sends out his disciples, sharing his Spirit and authority in the manner of Moses.

Psalm 19. ‘The heavens declare the glory of God.’ This is absolutely true, although acknowledging the existence of a divine creator does not explain much of his character. Knowing that God is real is not the same thing as knowing God. For that, we will need the Word of God. The universe reveals there is a creator; the Word of God reveals God’s character. David says in this psalm that the law of the Lord is perfect. Law often has negative connotations in Christian (particularly Protestant) exegesis. The word ‘law’ is a poor translation of the word *Torah*. *Torah* comes from the verb ‘to teach, to guide and to instruct’. The actual word for ‘law’ in Hebrew is ‘*hok*’. The Torah does include a fair few ‘*hokim*’ or ‘laws’, but it also contains much, much more than that. The Torah reveals God’s heart, what he does and doesn’t like, what he has done, what he is doing now and what he is going to do. By definition, any instruction and teaching from God must be perfect. Paul reflects this sentiment when he says, ‘The law (*Torah*) is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good’ (Rom 7:12). David says God’s rulings are to be desired more than gold. David was wealthy – perhaps not as wealthy as Solomon – but David knew what gold was and what it could achieve. Wealth and treasures have their uses, but they cannot instruct and teach. Rewards do not come from wealth, rewards come from the keeping of the teaching and instruction of God.

James 4:7-5:20. The ACNA lectionary includes a larger reading from the Epistle of James in which James urges practical action and attitudes from the community of faith. Evil is close at hand and needs to be resisted through submission to God. The devil will flee, and God, who has always been there, will manifest his presence by drawing close to those seeking a closer relationship with him. On one hand, this is very personal between the believer and the Lord. However, there is an immediate extension to the community of believers. James urges us to maintain an attitude of humility with each other and appeals strongly to us to not gossip nor slander our brothers and sisters in Jesus, for gossip and slander go against the teaching and instruction of the Lord – the *law*, as it were. We have been taught to ‘love our neighbour’, and this is demonstrated through practical and humble action. Faith, in Hebrew, is a verb.

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.