

Sermon Notes from CMJ
23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34

ACNA Readings – Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:1-16; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28-34

Introduction. Jesus says it is not what goes in your mouth that is important; it is what comes out. Many things come out through our lips, such as prayers, praises, conversations, blessings and the occasional profanity. Hopefully most of what we say is actually good, beneficial, and encouraging. The most important thing we might ever say in our lives is the oath of loyalty to God and our declaration of faith that Jesus is Lord.

Common Theme. Our readings today reflect on oaths of love and loyalty to God, to family, and to other people, perhaps even to strangers. The psalm will encourage us to trust the Lord. Gentiles will give oaths of loyalty to Jewish people, and Jesus will remind us of the greatest of oaths: to love the Lord our God.

Ruth 1:1-18. In canonical context, the book of Ruth serves to explain the origin of King David. Moses had forbidden intermarriage with the Moabites in Deuteronomy 23:3. On a literal reading of the Torah, children of Moabite descent are to be excluded from the assembly of the Lord. Simple as that! The question then is, how do you explain the lineage of King David whose grandmother is Ruth the Moabite? In the rabbinical discussion which followed, some rabbis concluded this prohibition only concerned males, as the word Moabite in Hebrew in Deuteronomy is in the masculine form. Others argued that Ruth is no longer a Gentile as she converts to Judaism when she makes her oath in verse 16: ‘Where you go I will go, where you stay I will stay, your people will be my people and your God will be my God.’ The argument against her conversion is that she is always called a Moabite throughout the whole book, even after she marries Boaz in chapter 4. Ruth provides us with a great example of true loyalty. Her mother-in-law is Jewish and a widow. Widows were a very vulnerable group in antiquity as they did not retain property rights, particularly if they had no sons. The prophets would later admonish Israel for lack of attention and concern for the poor, declaring that true religion was the caring of widows and orphans. Without the means for financial support or a strong social network, Naomi had little to offer her daughter-in-law. Yet Ruth willingly left her homeland of Moab and chose to accompany Naomi into an uncertain future. Her love and loyalty are on display both to Naomi and to God.

Psalm 146. This psalm is one of the final five psalms that begin with the imperative ‘Hallelujah!’, that have become known as the Hallelujah Psalms. They all start and end with the call to praise, indicating the never-ending worship of the Lord. The psalmist incorporates a lot of the messianic imagery of the prophet Isaiah. Relating to the theme of oaths of loyalty, 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, and it is to him that we should profess our love and loyalty. The psalmist proceeds to bring evidence of

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God's goodness and creative power. God made the heavens and the earth. God provides food and sustains all his creatures that he called into being. God rescues the captives and heals the sick. It is the Lord who cares for the widows and orphans, the ones at the bottom of the socioeconomic levels. As opposed to the great and renowned of the earth, the Lord will live and reign forever. If there is anyone worthy of our allegiance with oaths of loyalty, then surely it is only the Lord. Praise the Lord!

Hebrews 9:11-14. I am not sure why today's passage in Hebrews stops at verse 14. Verse 15 should be the natural conclusion to what the passage is building to, that through the Messiah's own blood he has become the 'mediator of a new covenant'. The author of Hebrews uses a Jewish exegetical technique called *kal v'homeh*, from the lesser to the greater, to describe how the blood of Jesus is superior to the standard sacrifices performed in the earthly temple. If standard sacrifices suffice for the purification of the flesh, then how much more will the blood of the Messiah purify not just the flesh but also our souls and consciences. It is easy for commentators to assume that the 'dead works' mentioned here refer to Torah, the law of Moses. However, the 'dead works' cannot refer to the commands of God, for the commandments include such things as acts of loving-kindness. Loving your neighbour as yourself is not a dead work but a good thing to do and declared by Jesus to be the second greatest commandment. Paul wrote in Romans that the Law (Torah) is holy, just, and good (Rom 7:12). I align with the commentators that suggest the dead works are the sins that weigh down our souls and consciences, inhibiting our true worship of the living God.

Mark 12:28-34. The context to the question now asked of Jesus – which is the greatest commandment? – is the previous discussion between the Sadducees and Pharisees on the issue of the resurrection (Mark 12:18-27). The Pharisees had liked Jesus' answer then, and so a teacher of the law approaches him with another issue. There are 613 laws in the Torah, and in the Second Temple period there was debate as to whether all the commandments were of equal weight. Rabbi Akiva said that, 'Love your neighbour' was the fundamental principle of the whole Torah. When asked the question 'What is the most important commandment?' Jesus replies with the *Sh'ma* recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength.' The Greek New Testament has added the word 'mind', which is not in the original Hebrew. There are many explanations for this, but without going into too much detail, the Hebraic perspective saw the heart as the place of love, reason and thinking. For the Greek world, one thought with one's head and not the heart. It should be noted that the injunction to love is an imperative and not a suggestion. The word 'hear' in Hebrew is also the word for 'obey' in the Bible. Modern Hebrew has created a new word for obey, but in the Old Testament the word 'hear' means both hear and obey. We are commanded to love, thereby indicating we have a choice in the matter, the choice either to obey or not to obey what has been commanded. Love, according to the Bible, is a choice. Love is not an emotion nor is it something that you fall into without freewill. That's something else! Lust is an emotion but love is a command from the Lord. Technically, then, you can love anyone – even, as Jesus says, our enemies. Jesus adds that 'love your neighbour' is the second greatest commandment. Both commands are already in the Bible: to love God and love neighbour. Jesus

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combines them using a Hebraic exegetical method called *gezerah shewa* (meaning *equal category*, or as the Encyclopedia Judaica says, similar laws similar verdicts). In Hebrew, both the commands begin with the Hebrew word ‘*V’ahavta*’, which is a rare form of the verb ‘to love’. Jesus connects the two commands via the ‘Velcro’ of the common word and reveals loving God and loving your neighbour to be the fundamental principles of the Torah.

ACNA Readings

Deuteronomy 6:1-9. ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord alone’ is more than a commandment. It is an oath of loyalty. It is a declaration said twice a day by Jewish people. In doing so they announce to themselves, to those around, and to the principalities and powers that God is their King, and they will go forth and act like it all day. How will you act like God is your King? Through the action of love! Love is not a matter left to impulse or feelings. Love is a commandment from God. We are to love God irrespective of personal emotional feelings that hinge on chemical reactions or human relationships. Love is a choice and not relegated to whether we had too much chocolate or had a fight with work colleagues. This command from the lips of Moses to love also reveals what God really wants from us: for us to love God and keep his requirements. He could have commanded countless other things from us, but for God the priority is love from his creation. Note that, in Revelation 2:4, the complaint God has against the Church in Ephesus is that they have lost their first love. Jesus highlights that love of God is linked to obedience when he calls us to love him and keep his commandments (John 14:15).

We are commanded to love God with all our heart, soul and strength. It is usually obvious to see a connection between love and the heart, perhaps even with love and the soul, but what is the meaning of strength? How do I love God with my strength? What did strength mean to first century Jews? Here, the Targums help. Targums are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. Most people in first century Israel spoke a vernacular Aramaic rather than Hebrew for everyday language. Aramaic became dominant after the return from Babylon. While Hebrew did remain in use, it was not the most common tongue. Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible were read aloud after a reading of the Hebrew version in a synagogue. The first recording of this taking place occurs in the book of Ezra, following the return under the Decree of Cyrus. One such Aramaic translation is called the Targum of Onkelos. The Targum of Onkelos translates Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your property.’ Strength to the hearer in the first century meant your property. Your strength was everything you had: your time, your spouse, your money, your house and possessions. How will you love the Lord your God? You will love God with everything you have, and you will hold nothing back. This is a choice we have to make as we respond to the command of the Lord. Will we indeed love God in this way? Or will we choose something else? To whom will we give our love and loyalty?

Psalm 119:1-16. Psalm 119 is well known as the longest psalm in the Bible, but the author remains a mystery. The psalm is an exceptional devotion glorying God and his word. This psalm refers to the

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Scriptures so many times; almost every verse mentions the Torah, the commandments, or the Word of the Lord. In some form or another, the Scriptures are mentioned in 171 of the 176 verses. The psalm is divided into paragraphs following the acrostic pattern of the Hebrew alphabet. Verses 1-8 all begin with the letter *aleph*, and verses 9-16 all begin with *bet*. The psalm has several themes, but the consistent theme is one of devotion and loyalty to God and his instructions. The psalmist is telling us to trust God and his Word. When we do, the psalmist says we will not be put to shame, and we will maintain a level of purity. The psalmist encourages us to place the Word of God on our lips so that our mouths will speak and teach the way of the Lord. What comes out of our mouths is important, thus we should keep the word of God close to our lips.

Hebrews 7:23-28. Throughout the Epistle of Hebrews the author has stressed the greatness and superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over that of the Levitical priesthood. Chapter 7 is essentially a *midrash* on Psalm 110:4: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’. A *midrash* is a Jewish form of commentary or exegesis on a passage or verse of scripture to expand our understanding, sometimes employing word play, allegory, or stories. In chapter 7 the author of Hebrews has suggested Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and Levi because of the tithes paid to him by Abraham. Then he argued that the order of Melchizedek is superior because the Levitical priesthood ultimately made nothing perfect under the Law, while Melchizedek was never a priesthood operating under the Law. In today's passage, the writer of Hebrews provides another reason. The Levitical priests were ‘many in number’, with the constant need for replacements due to their inherent mortality, while the Messiah is permanently the high priest due to his everlasting divine nature. The Mosaic priesthood endured constant change and inconsistency with successive priests being ‘better or worse’ than the former ones. By the time of Jesus, the Temple system had become quite corrupt. The office of the high priest was no longer a position held until death but was bought and sold as a political role. In contrast, Jesus has an unchangeable priesthood as he endures forever. His permanent status and role as high priest makes Jesus our permanent intercessor, and he is able to save for all time. The redemption and salvation offered by Jesus the Messiah is as unchanging as he is.

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.