

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-32

ACNA Readings – Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:11-20; 1 Corinthians 14:12-25; Luke 4:21-32

Introduction. The collect (prayer) in the Anglican Church for the Fourth Sunday in Epiphany reminds us that it is a good time to remember that there are many and great dangers in this world, which means that sometimes we find it hard to remain steadfast. However, the Lord is there for us to strengthen and protect us, and maybe even carry us through those times. Our readings will illustrate the fact that God is there for us at any time of our life, no matter how young or old we are.

Common Theme. Although the RCL and ACNA differ slightly in their choice of readings, together they address the ideas in the collect that God is there for us in the midst of all difficulties. It is up to us to react in the right and proper way, with love for each other, and, more importantly, love for and trust in God.

Jeremiah 1:4-10. This passage records the call of Jeremiah, and whilst it may not be obvious how it fits with the theme at a first glance, Jeremiah addresses the Lord with his own problems and learns quickly of his need for dependence on the Lord. The passage records that Jeremiah was known to God before he was even formed in the womb (v. 5) Scripture records in many places that God knows us long before we even start to exist, and there are several places where we are told that the Lord watches over us in the womb (e.g. Ps 139). It is important that we understand that although Israel is a chosen people, God knows and cares about the individuals within that nation. In Jeremiah's case, he is told that, more than just being known, he was chosen by God to be a prophet to the nations. A sovereign God appoints his own servants, reminding us he is in control, which is important in connection with the theme.

Jeremiah addresses the problems that he feels he faces, namely not knowing how to speak and being too young (v. 6). This illustrates his ability to be comfortable addressing God honestly, but also that he trusts God to find a solution. The response from God is another common theme of both the Old and New Testaments in that God tells him not to worry, giving him an alternative view of things and an encouragement not to be afraid because God is in control and that if he gets into trouble, God will rescue him (v. 8). Whether God is speaking to his people as a whole or to individuals, he is always reminding us that he is a powerful, sovereign God who has everything in his hands.

Verse 9 illustrates the direct interaction between God and Jeremiah, a touch from his own hand. All of the major people in the Old Testament record somewhere that they have been either touched by or had a personal revelation from God. It is not an unusual event. More than that, the Lord endows Jeremiah with power – another theme of the Scriptures as God passes on his authority to those who are to serve him, thus having the ability to deal with problems and dangers as they arise.

Psalm 71:1-6. The psalmist is a stage further on than Jeremiah in that he has already put his trust in God. He has understood the need to turn to the Lord (v. 1) and does so without question, confident that nothing will come back on him and cause him shame. He is confident enough in his relationship with God to ask to be rescued and confident enough to ask God to listen to him individually. Sometimes there is a false assumption that the Hebrew Scriptures deal only with the people of Israel

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as a group and that the New Testament is where the personal relationship with God is developed. This teaching is false. Here, as elsewhere, we are told that the Hebrew Scriptures are strong on the God of personal relationships. Thinking back to our common theme, the psalmist knows he can trust God to be his rock, his place in which he will be safe (v. 3) from the endless dangers he faces from his enemies, those who are wicked, evil and cruel (v. 4). There is an interesting difference between the psalmist and Jeremiah, which we note in the last two verses as the psalmist reflects back on his experience of God's protection, firstly from youth and then further back to his birth, acknowledging yet again that God is there from our very beginning.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13. The chosen epistle for the day is possibly one of the best-known parts of Paul's writings. For that reason, it is not necessary to go through this epistle verse by verse because he is explaining in a series of illustrations that no matter how gifted a person is, their gifting is worth nothing without love. The key point here is that love is a picture of God and that it is the love of God that triumphs. Within that context, Paul makes it known that he expects himself to develop as he grows older and that, eventually, he will come face to face with the Lord. Although it is not immediately obvious how this epistle fits into the theme, it is an instruction on our characters and how to function within our gifting, which in turn will help us to cope with anything and everything thrown at us. The ending of the passage again highlights how God is with us from beginning to end, a theme that runs through the whole of Scripture.

Luke 4:21-32. The lectionary writers choose a very appropriate Gospel reading, reminding us that even Jesus himself faces opposition. The scene is his hometown of Nazareth, but it is a changing scene, a scene of amazement at Jesus' teaching (v. 22), a scene of expectation that Jesus will perform miracles as they have heard he did in Capernaum (v. 23), but it becomes a scene of hostility when the people take great exception to what Jesus says and threaten to throw him off a cliff (v. 29). No one who stands firm for the Lord should expect any different treatment to that which Jesus himself receives. Why does the scene change? It changes because Jesus challenges the hearers with the fact that they will not recognise him for who he truly is and refers them to Hebrew Scriptures' teaching that they ought to have known already. He chooses Elijah first, one of the greatest prophets Israel had known, and points out that during a famine it was not to the many widows in Israel that God sent Elijah but to a widow in Zarephath. What would have angered his hearers is being reminded that the great Elijah did not go to their own people, but to a foreigner. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a strong focus on the children of Israel, and that led to exclusivism among some to the extent that God could not be seen to reach out to those who were not their own, yet Jesus is challenging that assumption (v. 25-26). As if to drive home the point, he then turns to Elisha and again gives the same message, that with many in Israel with leprosy, Elisha focused on the Syrian Naaman. (v. 27) These verses highlight the care of God for individuals, again showing it to be in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as a New Testament teaching, and that being reliant on God is the safest thing to do.

ACNA Readings

Psalm 71:11-20. The ACNA chooses a later part of the Psalm. Here we read of the psalmist actually being in trouble and pursued (v. 11) and praying for that support from God, although praying in

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confidence (v. 12), a confidence that becomes very clear in verse 14, probably based on the knowledge that God will deal with his enemies (v. 13). His confidence is such that he knows he will speak positively of God, which is testimony to the reliability and faithfulness of God (v. 15-16). His confidence in God is so strong that, despite the enemies in the earlier verses, he knows his praise and testimony of God will be from the cradle to the grave (v. 17-18). The last two verses teach us that God allows us to go through trouble, but he is the one who restores us and turns things around.

1 Corinthians 12:14-25. The ACNA chooses the previous chapter of 1 Corinthians. It is a passage that instructs people on not pushing themselves forward as sole agents but recognising their position within the body of believers, namely that they are dependent on everyone else and cannot survive alone. It matters not how important or unimportant a person is; they need others and, in turn, are needed by others. We can conclude from the choice of this passage that fellowship with others is essential, which surely helps us to understand how we can survive whatever life throws at us. God has protected us within the body to ensure we face nothing alone. It is part of God's overall love that, despite being individuals in his sight, we are never without support.

About the author. The Revd 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 Shoreside 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.