

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

RCL & ACNA Readings – Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Introduction. We live in a world where people idolise anything and anyone except the Lord. For some it may be an over-reliance on finance and their ability to earn; for some, it is being dependent on their fame and fortune; for others, it revolves around the ever-growing cult of celebrity worship. Even churches have to be wary that they remain focused on the Lord even though there is much vying for our attention.

Common Theme. The common theme of these four passages is very clear – a person is either with God and receiving the blessings of that relationship or not with God and left to their own fate. There are shared images in the Hebrew Scriptures of trees by streams. Whilst these particular images are not present in the two passages from the New Testament, the idea is the same.

Jeremiah 17:5-10. Jeremiah is one of the great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. This section comes from a longer passage of warnings from God. We pick up in verse 5 where Jeremiah deals with a common theme in the Scriptures as a whole, namely trusting in other humans rather than God. To say someone is cursed for trusting in other people rather than God seems a strong statement, yet in the very beginning, God designed us to trust him alone. So placing trust anywhere else is effectively a denial of God. As Jeremiah says, the issue is drawing strength from other people and allowing one's heart to turn away from the Lord. To be cursed is an inevitable conclusion for those who turn from the Lord.

In verse 6, Jeremiah outlines the consequences of being cursed with a description that would be familiar in ancient Israel – a bush in the wilderness. He illustrates this further by speaking of a desert that is parched or a salt land where no one lives. The Dead Sea area springs to mind here as there is nothing living in that area and its Hebrew name is “The Sea of Salt”. As for the wilderness and desert, Israel had its fair share of areas that would fit that description. It is a reminder that biblical truth can often be illustrated from creation.

Not only do those trusting in others not see any prosperity, but they live in direct contrast to those who do trust the Lord (v. 7) In verse 8, that point is illustrated from creation with a description of a tree whose roots go into the water by which it stands. The image conjures up a healthy tree that is never short of what it needs, and we are told that such a tree is so strong that its leaves remain green and it never struggles in a drought. Jeremiah is explaining that dependence on and trust in God leads to a person being able to stand firm whatever life throws at them as opposed to running to others for help as mentioned in the earlier verses. It should remind us how God wanted things to be at creation compared to what Adam and Eve faced after their disobedience.

Verse 9 seems to jar at first with the assertion that the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. However, in Scripture generally, the heart is frequently linked to disobedience and rejection of God. Surely this is why David prays that the Lord would create in him a new heart in verse 10 of Psalm 51. In the same Psalm, David also speaks of God searching him, which is Jeremiah's point in verse 10. These are common themes throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and reflected in Jesus' own words, “Blessed are the pure in heart.”

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Psalm 1. The psalmist deals with the same issue as Jeremiah, the difference between those who trust in God and those who do not. He does the reverse of Jeremiah, speaking of the blessing of trusting God as opposed to the curse of not doing so. The overall idea is the same, that focusing on God at all times is the way to live and again. There is the image of a tree planted by a stream, a tree that never withers. It seems a tall order to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night, but throughout the Scriptures, there is a constant direction to focus on the Word of God. Rather than assuming it means to sit literally 24 hours a day studying the Scriptures, the idea is, surely, to be focused on the Lord whatever you do day or night.

In contrast to the image of the tree by the stream representing the life of one in tune with God, the psalmist presents a picture of chaff blown away by the wind. That picture is powerful in that it shows there are no roots for the wicked, no stability. That inevitably leads to there being no ability to stand firm before the Lord in judgement. The psalm is reminiscent of Jesus in Matthew 25 as he separates the good from the wicked and tells the latter to go away. They cannot stand before the Lord. Verse 6 once again draws that comparison between those who are in tune with God, the righteous, and those who are not, the wicked.

1 Corinthians 15:12-20. This passage also speaks about those who are in tune with the Lord and those who are not by focusing on the resurrection. In the previous section, Paul testified that more than 500 people had encountered the resurrected Christ, including himself. Paul then goes on to deal with those who are denying the resurrection. Paul explains the basic truth that if Christ has been raised, then others will be, and if no one will be resurrected, then not even Christ has been raised.

Verse 14 suggests that he is offering a defence for the message he is preaching as if he has been challenged. It must be believers in Christ who are arguing, otherwise, Paul would have no need to tell them that their faith is useless without the resurrection. Verses 15 and 16 are a repetition of 12-14 as Paul seeks to really drive his point home that the resurrection of Christ goes hand in hand with the resurrection of believers, lest faith be without merit.

In conclusion, Paul makes a clear statement that Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection, implying that others will follow in resurrection. This reference to firstfruits is not just an empty turn of phrase but a reference to the Feast of Firstfruits. The Church has done a good job of understanding Jesus' death within the context of Passover, helped by the Passover imagery of the Gospels and that Paul overtly calls Jesus our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). The eight-day Passover season is actually three festivals occurring concurrently: Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Firstfruits. While the Pharisaical (and now rabbinical) interpretation of Leviticus 23:9-11 puts the Feast of Firstfruits on the day after the first day of Passover, the Sadducees (who controlled the temple in the first century) read "the day after the Sabbath" as the Sunday after Passover. Jesus was resurrected on the Sunday after Passover, as we affirm with our continued tradition of Sunday worship. Jesus, the first fruits of the dead, was raised back to life on the Feast of Firstfruits.¹

¹ For more on The Feast of Firstfruits, see "Yom HaBikkurim - Firstfruits of Spring," Hebrew4Christians.com. https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Spring_Holidays/First_Fruits/first_fruits.html and Jill Shannon and Sid Roth. *A Prophetic Calendar: The Feasts of Israel*, Destiny Image, 2009, 103-104.

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Whilst the theme of this passage does differ in some ways from the two passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul is drawing our attention to the wisdom of trusting God and the message of the Gospel, which lead to a future with Christ and an ability to stand strong in his presence.

Luke 6:17-26. The setting is a large gathering, said to be disciples of Jesus, a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. We are told that they had gathered to hear Jesus and were being healed in his presence (v. 19). Rabbis often attracted a gathering of people who would want to listen and learn. Jesus' teaching in verses 20-22 reminds us of that image of a tree planted by a stream as Jesus outlines the blessing of a life dedicated to the Lord – a life with the values of the Lord, a life that reflects on the law of the Lord as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The verses are a warning that life will not be without its problems – poverty, hunger, weeping, hatred – but each warning is matched with the blessing of being one who recognises the Lord. Together, these give us a vision of a world redeemed by love and of how transformation can happen within discipleship. Transformation and discipleship are clearly long-term goals, just as a tree by a stream will not grow overnight but becomes stronger and stronger day by day.

In the remaining three verses, Jesus outlines what the message means to those who are not focused on the Lord. Life is not to be marked by blessing but by suffering. There may not be suffering at the moment, but Jesus says it will happen – not might happen but will.

Clearly, Jesus is in line with the Hebrew Scriptures and leaves us no doubt that the ultimate fate of those who are walking hand-in-hand with the Lord can never be the same as those who do not pay attention to the Lord.

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 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.