

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

RCL Readings – Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

ACNA Readings – Acts 13:44-52; Psalm 145; Revelation 19:1-9; John 13:31-35

Introduction. As I write these notes, the war in Ukraine rages and the world seems to be descending further and further into chaos. It is not new. The world has been through very dark times in the past, but these readings lift our eyes to Jesus and remind us that there is an end in sight, that there is hope.

Common Theme. The readings all revolve around the sacrificial death of Jesus in one way or another. We are shown in Acts how people were coming to faith and how Gentiles were being drawn in. This links with the two chosen psalms, being two great psalms of praise, for what other reaction is there to such a great God. Why is the coming to faith of so many a key theme? Prophecy said it would happen, but it has a purpose in preparing the world for the return of Jesus and the great wedding between Jesus and the Church. None of this could have happened without Jesus, as we see in John. There is a thread tying all these passages together, which is the faithfulness and love of God.

Acts 11:1-18. So many churches have forgotten that the Gospel was first revealed to the Jews and that it was the Jews who brought the message to the Gentiles. Without that basic background, Acts 11 makes no sense. Why would Jews be questioning Peter's actions if the Gospel was a Gentile Gospel first? It is important to know this so that we understand why in verse 2 the Jews are criticising Peter for eating with the uncircumcised.¹ Again, the whole idea of Jews and non-Jews eating together was not necessarily acceptable. Any notion of interfaith, however defined, was yet to come. Even Christianity did not exist at that moment; the term Christian comes a little later in Acts 11:26.

The context and historical background are so important to this account. Peter retells his Acts 10 experience with Cornelius and explains how his mixing with Gentiles came about. He even admits in verse 8, that he was reluctant to reach out to non-Jews initially. He has a vision whilst in prayer in Joppa (modern day Jaffa) of a sheet coming down filled with four-footed animals, wild birds, reptiles and beasts, and is told to 'kill and eat' (v. 7) Why would Peter object? Because there are a lot of dietary laws in Judaism. The rules about what can and cannot be eaten go right the way back to the earliest books in the Hebrew Bible. As a good, observant Jew, there is no way Peter would be willing to eat, for example, a pig. The dietary laws about what could and could not be eaten were one of the things that would mark out the Jews as different, and so accepting people who ate anything meant accepting people who were not part of Israel and not part of the Jewish family. Hence, Peter's objection. He recalls that he was told a total of three times that everything God had made was clean, which he came to understand as the Gentiles needed to hear the word of God. It is possibly stretching a point too far to make a link between Peter denying Jesus three times and being forgiven three times by Jesus in John 21 and now being told three times to reach non-Jews. However, we should reflect on that possibility, especially when it comes to verse 11 recording that three men from Caesarea (non-Jews) stopped outside the house where he was and that he was told by the Spirit to speak to

¹ There would have been areas in which Jews and non-Jews did not avoid each other, perhaps in business. It is important not to think that they were in self-imposed ghettos. When it came to religion or faith and eating, that is when separation would be a must.

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them. Maybe the three times would remind Peter not to get it wrong again. I like to think Peter may have been stubborn because, not only does the Spirit speak directly to Peter but, Cornelius the Gentile centurion also had an angel direct him to Peter. The ground is prepared. Peter would have to be foolish or incredibly stubborn not to go ahead and share the Gospel. As the account continues, we read that the Holy Spirit had come upon them at the beginning (v. 15), another indication of prepared groundwork. Peter admits he could do nothing but go ahead as, clearly, they had received the Spirit and believed in the Lord Jesus. The whole idea of Jews keeping a distance from non-Jews, the dietary laws, and the fact that initially the Gospel went to the Jews lie at the root of what we need to understand Peter's honesty concerning his change of mind and accepting anyone can be saved. It is his story that convinces the others, too.

Psalm 148. There are a number of psalms whose very purpose is to praise and glorify the Lord, and surely Psalm 148 must be amongst one of the finest in this regard. In verses 1-4, we read that there is to be praise in the heavens and among heavenly beings, even the sun and the moon. It should strike home that God created the heavens, the sun and the moon. They are there by the command of God and as such should reflect praise back to him. They are there also first and foremost to show praise to the Lord by their existence rather than to be the light that we are so used to (that purpose is almost secondary). In verses 5 and 6 we are reminded that they too are created beings but that they should never pass away. There is a noteworthy connection with Jeremiah 33 here where we read that God will only break his covenant with David, and by implication the Israelites, if the sun and the moon cease to exist. In the remaining verses of the psalm, we are informed that all creation on earth should praise the Lord, whether in the oceans, on land or in humanity. Nothing exists that should not offer praise to the Lord. Why? Because everything was created by him and indeed for him (Colossians 1 and elsewhere). It should strike us that the basic order of this psalm is the same order of creation in Genesis 1 and that is no mistake. The Bible is clear that God created and that he did so in a considered and orderly fashion.

Revelation 21:1-6. If we forget that God created everything in the beginning, then we do not properly understand a new creation. God is not wiping out his mistakes but giving a new start to what has been ruined by humanity. So in this passage, we read of a new heaven and a new earth. They are creations of God as the first ones had been. They will have a purpose, as the first ones did. In verse 2, the Holy City is described as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. This is a picture that should resonate with all. What bride of any description chose to be a mess on her wedding day? What bride wanted her groom to recoil in horror at the sight of her? Marriage is a key thing through Scripture. In the Old Testament, there is much mention of the people of God, the Israelites, being married to God and how at times he divorced them for unfaithfulness (Jer 3:8) but took them back. The book of Hosea explores this theme in immense detail.

In the New Testament, the Church is to be the bride of Christ, so why then is the Holy City said to be the bride? Because the Holy City is the place where God will dwell with his people and at the moment it is the body of believers, the Church, in which God dwells on earth, just as in the Hebrew Scriptures he dwelt within the Temple in Jerusalem. God has always chosen to have a dwelling place where he can be with his people, whether the Temple, now the Church of Jewish Gentile believers in

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Jesus, or the Holy City where all will gather. Verse 3 speaks of a loud voice declaring the arrival of this city and what its purpose will be, just as in the very beginning it was the voice of God that called into existence everything. The Scriptures start and finish with the voice of God calling things into existence. There will be complete unity between humanity and God, something intended for, but lost by Adam and Eve millennia before. A complete change will happen so that all the effects of the Fall and subsequent curses disappear. The Scriptures start with creation, but the beauty leads into to destruction. The Scriptures end with a creation, where the beauty lasts forever.

It is God himself in verse 5 who says “I am making all things new” and in verse 6 we are left with no doubt that this all takes place through Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. Themes of a breakdown between humanity and God, followed by restoration and then further breakdown have littered the Hebrew Scriptures and run through the New Testament too as Jesus is accepted by some and firmly rejected by others, but the end sees God bringing all things under his control. No wonder we have psalms of praise. The knowledge of Revelation 21 should cause us to sing those psalms of praise we discussed above.

John 13:31-35. As we consider the other readings, the new beginnings, the Gentiles invited into the commonwealth of believers, and Jews accepting Jesus as Messiah, we do well to remember that absolutely none of this could have happened without the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus himself was under no illusions, which is the subject of this passage. When Jesus speaks in verse 31 of “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him”, he is highlighting the fact that he will have to go through his death and resurrection and will then ascend to the Father’s side again.

What does glorify mean? This can be a tough question to answer, but for me, it is the idea that in the death and resurrection of Jesus we see that God has not changed the rules. He is faithful to his instructions from the beginning of Scripture that sin leads to death and a sacrifice is needed. We see too that God is willing to pay that price himself through his own Son and that because of that it is God who will reconcile humanity to himself. Everything is about the work of God and that is what will bring him glory because humanity and all creation will want to praise him, as per the Psalms.

Verse 33 warns that Jesus is about to depart from the disciples. We know for sure from this that Jesus was aware of what he is required to do. It should never be argued that Jesus was caught out by surprise when arrested. He says in the same verse that no one can go with him. There are two thoughts connected with this. Firstly, when the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies in the Temple once a year to offer sacrifice for the people on the Day of Atonement, no one except the High Priest could go in. He had to do it alone. In the same way, Jesus must go and offer his sacrifice on his own, no one can come with him (Heb 9:7). In addition, there is the idea that if Jesus is going to truly glorify God ‘in himself’. There is a deep thing going on within the Trinity here, and clearly, impure humanity could never be part of that. It leaves us clear that our salvation is a work of God alone. Whilst we await the wedding supper of the Lamb we are given an instruction from Jesus, which models his life namely to love one another. It sounds so simple until we recollect that Jesus’ definition of love is complete sacrifice. If we are to follow him then we must lay down our lives for others whether in the literal sense or by putting our needs into the hands of God so we can help others. The reason for this behaviour requirement is that it will speak to the world.

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Acts 13:44-52. In the preceding verses, we read that the Gospel had been preached in the Perga synagogue and people were listening, so much that as verse 44 records, 'On the next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.' There is opposition from the Jews, not because non-Jews are listening to the word of the Lord, but because a crowd had gathered, which is slightly different. The Jews of Perga became jealous that so many Gentiles – more than the usual God-fearers already attending synagogue – were attracted to the Gospel message. So they contradicted Paul and piled abuse on him. They are trying to win the crowd to come around to their way of thinking.

In verse 46, Paul and Barnabas do not mince their words and warn the Jews of Perga that they had rejected God's Word to the point of not considering themselves worthy of eternal life. We see in verse 48 that the Gentiles hear the quote from Isaiah 49:6 and are glad and honour the word of the Lord. This leads them to eternal life, straight into the fellowship of the Lord. The Lord continues to welcome the repentant, whether Jew or Gentile, to this day.

However, wherever the Gospel is a blessing, opposition is not usually far behind. By verse 50, the Jewish leaders are stirring people up to the point of persecution against Paul and Barnabas. There was no 'keep your heads down' philosophy in those days. The Jews of the town were fiercely trying to protect the religion they believed was correct, yet for those being faithful to the Lord, there was great joy. The Apostles made it very clear that separation was the order of the day in a Jewish manner, shaking the dust off the feet. Take note that Jesus himself had advised the disciples in Matthew 10:14 to shake the dust off their feet in places where the Gospel was rejected. Here the dust is being shaken off for those who ought to have given their lives to the Lord, but instead turned against him, preferring the old ways.

Psalm 145. Psalm 145 also concentrates on praise, but instead of the praise of the Lord being an expectation, even a command, there is a voluntary offering of praise in verses 1 and 2. Verses 3-8 generally explain why: God has done marvellous things. He has been faithful to his people, and so one generation should testify of God's praiseworthy works to the next generation. What deeds and works is the psalmist talking about? A lot of possibilities would fill this space, but – as it is the Easter season – let us look to Exodus, where we read how God took his people out of slavery into the Promised Land and, in particular, how the Passover Lamb had to be sacrificed to spare the lives of the firstborn among the Israelites. In several places, the Passover is picked up and the Israelites are commanded to remember each year and commanded to pass on the knowledge of the Passover (Deut 16:1-8; Josh 5:10). The reminder of God's faithfulness in Egypt was always pointing to God's faithfulness to save all of humanity through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus, our Passover sacrifice (1 Cor 5:7).

Verse 12 has echoes of Judaism's main declaration of faith, Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The familiar words – "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" – direct us to turn our attention to the Lord and one of the instructions that follows that command is to teach the children at all times about God. God

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has a purpose for passing on messages throughout the generations and for one generation telling the next of his mighty acts. It is not only so they do not forget, but also so that they learn.

Verses 13 onwards are perhaps described as a justification for passing on the knowledge of God. The verses speak of how God acts towards his people, how he cares, how he restores and how he provides. This is a God who is interactive and involved with his people, not one who ignores them. Hence in verse 21, the psalmist declares he wants to be part of this praise, but not on his own as he exhorts others to do likewise. Personal reflection starts and finishes this great psalm which declares why God is great and reliable.

Revelation 19:1-9. This passage contains a very similar message to the one discussed above but from a different angle. It starts in the early verses with a response from Heaven like a roar. What is it responding to? What God has done – the victory he has won and destruction of that which opposes him. Several times the word “Hallelujah” is shouted, a Hebrew word meaning quite literally, ‘Praise the Lord’. The praise turns in verse 5 into a command that the servants of God on earth should praise him. Here though we enter difficult waters. Who is on the throne? Clearly, it is God, that is not in doubt, but God the Father or God the Son? There are arguments for either, but my personal preference is for it to be the Son and the reason is that as the passage continues it is about Jesus as we see in verses 7 and 8 with the picture of the forthcoming wedding, presented in a different way to chapter 21, discussed above. Here the wedding is of the Lamb. To understand this, you need to look at Psalm 145, presumably why it is chosen to link to this passage because if we have observed the command to pass on the story of God from generation to generation, we would know straight away who the Lamb is and why he has that title at all. We would also understand the significance of the bride and who the bride is meant to be. If in doubt, the final part of verse 8 makes it clear. However, not all will come or even be invited. Only those who are blessed by God himself. Any wedding has a guest list of invitees. The wedding of Jesus to his people is no different.

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.