

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Sunday after the Ascension (Seventh Sunday of Easter) – Year C

RCL Readings – Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:10-21; John:17:20-26

ACNA Readings – Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 47; Revelation 22:10-21; John:17:20-26

Introduction. One of the great festivals of the Church is Ascension Day. It always falls on a Thursday and comes 40 days after the resurrection. Because it's a festival that occurs midweek, it's also one of the least celebrated festivals of the Lord. Yet the ascension of Jesus into heaven is an incredible event to contemplate. Jesus now reigns in heaven at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us before the Throne of God. Upon departing, he promises us the Spirit of the Living God. Truly these things are worthy to be honoured and proclaimed.

Common Theme. The Sunday following the Feast of the Ascension is sometimes referred to as Ascension Sunday. The lordship of Christ and God's rule and reign as king of the Universe resound in many of our readings this week.

Acts 16:16-34. Our reading from Acts begins with Paul and Silas encountering a demon possessed slave girl while heading towards the local synagogue. This slave had the power of fortune telling. The Greek text says she had the spirit of python (πύθων). This snake spirit gave her some sort of power to predict the future. The Hebrew Bible warns us repeatedly against seeking diviners and magicians, such as in Leviticus 19:31. There the Hebrew word for *enchanter* is נָחָשׁ (nachash) which shares a root with the word for serpent – as in the serpent of the Garden of Eden which seduced Adam and Eve into gaining the forbidden wisdom of knowing good and evil. The Bible describes a spirit world that is real – we can contact them and they can contact us. But we are not to engage in seeking this wisdom or omens of the future. There is a demonic connection to the hidden realm, and while we are also defended and protected by unseen angels, there exists an enemy.

This female slave actually bears witness to the apostolic credentials of Paul and Silas in that she testifies loudly that they are, 'servants of the Most High God'. Paul's patience runs thin from her loud proclamations, and he performs a miracle of exorcism and drives out the *python* spirit. The miracle however does not result in a positive witness; instead, it ends them up in prison. Most of the miracles performed in the Book of Acts end in social disasters where Paul is harangued, beaten and almost killed multiple times. Interestingly enough, when Paul doesn't perform miracles in a city, we see him have success in planting a church community there. Miracles are great but they are not the things that save us!

An earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison allowing the prisoners the opportunity to escape, which they do not take. The author of the earthquake is not mentioned, but we still might attribute this to the work of the Lord. Under Roman law, the guards who allowed prisoners to escape received the punishment that was due to the escapees. This is why the jailor seeks to take his own life. He is spared when Paul informs him all the prisoners remained in prison. Sometimes prison is exactly where God needs us to be! The prison warden is so impressed, and probably quite relieved, that he enquires about

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the faith and salvation. Paul's miracle did not bring anyone to enquire after salvation. Enduring prison and being in the right place at the right time – which was perhaps ordained by God (although not explicitly said in the text) – does bring someone to the Lord. Salvation was less individualistic in the ancient world than it is today. A person's salvation was also a community event with whole households embracing the new faith. Salvation in the New Testament is communal not just individual. We are saved and redeemed to be a holy people not an ad hoc mix of holy individuals.

Psalm 97. The psalms were an important part of early Jewish Christian worship and were included in early Christian liturgies. Jesus taught us that it's not what goes into the mouth of someone that's important; it's what comes out. Prayers leave our lips but they come from our hearts; they reflect the truth within us. This psalm begins with the dramatic proclamation that God is king and he rules and reigns. As we pray this psalm in our communities, we acknowledge that God is not the 'passive watchmaker' who started the whole thing and now sits in heaven aloof from his creation. Rather he actively plans, acts and rules over the earth. In a similar fashion, Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Lord, not to sit aloof, unconcerned and removed from us, but to intercede constantly on our behalf. In Psalm 97, God's reign brings joy to the world, as the psalmist says: Let the earth rejoice! Likewise, we also can be glad that Jesus has ascended, not because he has gone away but that he has sent his spirit and he still works on our behalf before the Father. The psalmist reminds us that part of the reign of God in our lives is the forsaking of idolatry and the pursuit of righteousness. Just as God is not passive in his kingship, we should not be passive in his kingdom.

Revelation 22:10-21. The concluding words of the angel to John admonish us not to seal up the words of the prophecy contained in the Revelation. We are to read and study and take heed of the warnings presented to us by Jesus. There is a sense of urgency as the angel notes that the 'time is at hand'. The time to repent is now and not later. Revelation warns us that there is a moment coming when the opportunity for last-minute repentance will be gone. Those that do not want to heed the words of Revelation will continue to do wrong and those who are righteous will maintain their righteous activity as the time of the Lord draws close. It might seem strange to hear the Bible say, 'Let those who do wrong continue to do wrong'. I think the implication here is that eventually fallen human behaviour becomes irreversible, both for good and for evil.

When Jesus was on earth, he titled himself the Son of Man, which is the eschatological character we see in the Book of Daniel. Here at the end of Revelation, he identifies himself as the Alpha and Omega. This title was given to God at the beginning of the Revelation (Rev 1:8). Jesus is thus synonymous with the Father in the mystery of the Godhead. When Jesus comes again, judgment is coming but also rewards. These rewards are given according to the deeds of each person. This does not imply that we are saved and redeemed by works. However, it does imply that a living dynamic faith will have the fruit of works

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and deeds. Jesus says blessed are those who do his commandments.¹ Again, this is not to fulfil a requirement for salvation, but rather obedience is the evidence of faith and we see that faithfulness in the commandments receives a blessing. Lastly, there is the invitation from the community of believers on earth for Jesus to come, at the same time as we come to Jesus. Jesus has ascended to heaven but this is not the final destination of the Messiah. God has always wanted to live and dwell with his people. One of our final actions is to say, 'Come, Lord Jesus'. We come to Jesus and partake of the rewards, the blessings and the living water, at the same time he comes to us to rule and reign and dwell amongst us forever.

John 17:20-26. The Bible records the prayers of many of the heroes of faith. Abraham has a prayer in Genesis 18; Moses has a prayer in Exodus 32, Solomon in 1 Kings 8 and Daniel in Daniel 2. Here Jesus offers a final prayer before his arrest. His prayer includes us, those who will become his followers because of the testimony of the Gospel. The prayer and desire of our Lord is for our unity. If this is his desire and we are his followers, then it is a given that this should be our desire as well. Unity amongst the faithful is not something new. The Dead Sea community called itself the *Yachad* which means unity. And they strove to be united in every aspect of their lives. The familiar words of Psalm 133 declare, 'how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity ... for there the Lord commands a blessing'. Unity is the Lord's desire, but what does unity really mean and what does it look like? I would suggest that unity is not theological. That is, unity is not 1-2-3 everyone think like me! Of course there are some core basics and non-negotiables such as there is only one God, one Faith, one Lord Jesus the Messiah, one baptism, etc. We see these non-negotiables in the Creeds of the Church.

I would suggest though that unity is behavioural. We see in Colossians 3:12-14 where Paul writes, 'as God's chosen people ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against some. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtue put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.' All these qualities that Paul describes as comprising our unity are behaviours. We might have theological differences with members of other denominations but this should not stop us from being kind and compassionate with each other. Our fragmentation and disunity is not the will of the Lord. As Charles Spurgeon once said, 'Sin is the great dividing element'. Jesus said the world will believe that God sent him if we who are followers of Jesus remain in unity. Disunity can only hinder the work of the Kingdom. The unity that Jesus prays for includes the shared intimacy with the Father and the Son. Where two or three are gathered, there Jesus is present too.

¹ There are different manuscript versions of verse 14, thus some translations will read 'those who do His commandments', and some will read, 'those who have washed their robes'. The Greek words are incredibly similar, however I think the context of rewards for deeds implies the correct translation to follow the idea of obeying the commandments.

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ACNA Reading

Psalm 47. Psalm 47 celebrates the rule and reign of the God of Israel and his impending victory over all the earth. It was authored by and for the sons of Korah who were Levites in the Temple. The sons of Korah had a rough beginning in the Book of Numbers with their ancestors' rebellion, but they had a good ending in always being close to God in his holy Temple. Here the sons of Korah do not have a quiet, mild whispering prayer in mind. They urge us to clap hands and shout loudly at the great things God has done. The Lord has done great things and not only for the people of Israel but for the whole earth. Salvation in the psalms is always universal. Verse 8 declares that God is king over all the nations, not just a king over the Jewish people. Eventually, all the rulers and nobles of the world will come to the knowledge that God is the one and only true king. This is an amazing victory promise that can sustain our hope in uncertain times.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a 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.