

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
15th Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

ACNA Readings – Amos 8:4-12; Psalm 138; 1 Timothy 2:1-15; Luke 16:1-13

Introduction. This Sunday is the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost and ordinary time continues to stretch before us in the liturgical calendar. Sometimes ordinary time in real life seems aimless, even endless, or something worse. Yet God is still present, despite what our circumstances may indicate to the contrary.

Common Theme. There is a general sense of doom and gloom across most of the lectionary readings, both in the RCL and the ACNA readings. Glimmers of hope and promise shine through, but only just. The passages that do not conform to this dark theme are no less problematic, being challenging for other reasons. Sometimes life is like that. Scripture can demand to be wrestled with, and faith requires simple obedience.

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1. This scripture portion from Jeremiah is bleak, quite in keeping with the picture of Jeremiah being the wailing prophet. As an aside, Jeremiah 8:13–9:23 is the set Haftarah (the concluding reading from the books of the Prophets) for the morning synagogue service on Tisha B'Av. Tisha B'Av¹ is a day of mourning by the Jewish people for the destruction of both Temples that once stood in Jerusalem.

In this passage Jeremiah desperately longs for comfort from the Comforter (8:18). He is hearing the cries of his exiled people (8:19). Importantly, he has not distanced himself in prophetic pronouncements as he refers to “my people”. Their collective suffering prompts soul searching as they recognise God’s absence (8:19). This suffering is not short-lived either. The times and seasons come and go (8:20). Jeremiah again displays profound empathy. Because his people are crushed, he is crushed (8:21). He is not going to gloat and say, “I told you so!”. He is horrified and mourns when what he has uttered comes to pass (8:21). His reference to balm in Gilead drives home the theme of complete hopelessness (8:22). The region of Gilead was known for its perfumes and, in particular, a balm that was used on wounds for healing. Things are so bad with this wound that there is not even a healing balm available. Jeremiah is searching for the way back, for everything to be made right. Yet all he can do is weep “a fountain of tears” (9:1).

The word for balm is *tzari* (צָרִי), very similar to *tzeireh* (צִירֵה), the name of a Hebrew vowel. The vowel *tzerieh* is said to represent teshuva or repentance. So some Jewish commentators connect repentance with a healing balm. They quote Jeremiah 8:22, “Is there no balm (*tzari*) in Gilead?”, and answer with a teaching from the Talmud (Yoma 86a:14) that says, “Great is *teshuvah* (repentance) for it brings remedy to the world.”²

¹ The Ninth of Av on the Hebrew calendar; late July-early August on the Gregorian calendar.

² Aaron L. Raskin, "Tzeireh — Understanding," Chabad.org. Retrieved 9 Sept 2022, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/137294/jewish/Tzeireh-Understanding.htm.

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Psalm 79:1-9. This psalm is also about lament and despair. It follows a similar pattern of other psalms that are about national lament. First, there are questions and complaints (79:1-4). Then there is prayer and supplication (79:5-11). Finally, there is a statement of hope and praise (79:12-13). In Psalm 79 the complaints are aimed at God (79:1). The atrocities that have happened are described in much detail (79:1-3). The argument is presented that God's people have become objects of scorn to the surrounding nations (79:4). The focus then becomes these other nations and when they will get their dues (79:6-7). Essentially the psalmist is saying, yes, we understand what has happened, but God you've gone too far, stop it, play fair and look to the other nations. If you continue like this, says the psalmist, you are opening yourself and us to mockery (read beyond v. 9). The psalmist displays a robust honesty in interacting with God that we can learn from and appreciate. Worship need not only be platitudes and niceties but can express hard, confusing realities.

1 Timothy 2:1-15. This is a passage best skipped over in an age of political polarisation and cancel culture. To read and digest it is to be presented with a difficult challenge. Paul urges that "requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone" (2:1). Christians should pray for a range of people, not only those we like, love or who are in need. This is in keeping with Jesus' own teaching that we pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:28) as well as those who spitefully use and persecute us (Matt 5:44). Everyone is included, as everyone is not everyone if someone is left off the prayer list. Paul makes special mention of praying for kings and those in authority (2:2). This is all fine and well if those in authority are even half decent. But if rulers are profoundly corrupt, grossly incompetent or violently despotic, praying then poses a particular challenge and requires faithful obedience. In this latter example, the very act of praying for those in authority within the context of a worship service can be highly controversial and even divisive.

Several commentators suggest that peace is the goal of these prayers. The argument is put that when there is peace, the church can work freely to advance the gospel and make Jesus known. There are two things that undermine this line of thinking. First, Paul says we are to pray for those in authority "that we may live peaceful and quiet lives *in all godliness and holiness*" (2:2). Living peaceful and quiet lives in the face of an evil and unjust system or society is to become complicit with that evil. In this instance, a follower of Jesus is not displaying either godliness or holiness. Peace is not an end itself without the other dimensions. What is good and pleasing to God is a people who, no matter what the prevalent political circumstances, live godly and holy lives (2:3) and witness to the saving work of Messiah Jesus (2:4-7). Second, the Church and the gospel that it proclaims, contrary to Western sensibilities, often seems to thrive and spread fastest in times of great social upheaval, strife and calamity.

Perhaps no less controversial are Paul's further instructions on worship. They all intersect in some way or form the same theme of preserving the peace. Men praying without anger or disputing (2:8). Women dressing modestly (2:8-10) and keeping quiet (2:11-15). Reams have been written on this topic and thousands of hours presented and debated on the role of women in the church. It won't be rehashed here.

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Luke 16:1-13. This parable is variously known as The Parable of the Shrewd Manager or Unjust Steward. It is perhaps one of the most difficult to interpret. There is a lack of consensus concerning the meaning and the message. Why would Jesus praise a wheeling, dealing, unethical steward? No doubt the parable was much better understood by the first listeners in Jesus' day considering their own times and place. The general backdrop to this parable is a travel narrative that Luke devotes nine chapters to – Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. The general narrative is heavy on parables and light on miracles. At several points, there are reminders that Jesus went around teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Jerusalem, and what will happen there, therefore intentionally overshadows the travel narrative and the parables contained therein, including this one.

In this parable, a master accuses his steward or manager of mismanaging his estate (16:1-2). We hear nothing of the manager's protests or denial, only that he realises that his options are severely limited as he won't beg and can't do manual labour (16:3). (His silence may be a tacit admission of his guilt.) He pursues immediate actions with a range of people who will become indebted to him through his self-serving acts of goodwill and will owe him favours in return (16:4). He restructures the debt of the master's debtors (notice he still refers to *his* master as if he still represents the master), reducing it considerably in the debtors' favour (16:5-7). There is debate about whether the debt reduction was a moral or immoral action, for example, that the manager was not being dishonest as he was only reducing the hidden interest that was added to the contracts. He also could have been cancelling his own commission. Notwithstanding if the manager was honest, he was undeniably shrewd. His actions not only benefitted himself but also his master, who would have received great honour and praise from the debtors in the public space for the acts of his manager. (Charity was and is highly valued within Judaism both ancient and modern.) This, of course, is the genius of the manager. To subsequently publicly confirm the dismissal of the manager (by disputing the reduced terms) would show that the master was not the originator of these acts of debt relief worthy of public praise. To retain the respect of his community, the master must keep the status quo of the manager and the new terms intact. Scripture is silent about what happens to the manager but no doubt the master watched him with ever greater vigilance.

The parable draws to a conclusion with Jesus speaking of the people of the light and a soliloquy about being trustworthy and serving two masters – God and Mammon (16:8-13). This last part is like a *nimshal* in rabbinic literature, something that gives practical application. David Flusser has convincingly argued that this *nimshal* is rooted in the communal life and economic structure of the Dead Sea sect, the Essenes.³ Brad Young says that “the questionable financial practices of the dishonest steward in Jesus' parable recall the policies of the Dead Sea community. They collect money of all their members and reject all business ties with outsiders. As religious isolationists, they kept their money within their sect.” The key link is with the term “sons of light” in verse 8. This is the only time “sons of light” is referenced in the Synoptic Gospels. It is not used in the same manner

³ Brad Young draws on Flusser extensively in his book “*The Parables - Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*” (Hendrickson Publishers, 1998) to understand the parable of the Unjust Steward, 232-248.

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as referring to early Christians in Johannine and Pauline writings. The Essenes referenced their members as the children of light and everyone else as the children of darkness. Money belonging to those outside the Essenes was called the wealth of unrighteousness, which Young says is the dynamic equivalent to the unrighteous mammon of Luke 16:9. Perhaps what is missed by a modern audience, because of our ignorance of the cultural cues, is that Jesus is parodying and clearly ridiculing the Essene attitude towards money. He highly commends giving money away to benefit those who need it. Young says “regarding the proper use of money, Jesus and many rabbis seem to have much in common. At least powerful streams of thought in Judaism from the Second Temple period stressed giving money to the downtrodden. Money should be used to alleviate human need.”⁴

ACNA Readings

Amos 8:4-12. The prophet Amos had once been a shepherd (1:1) but God had another purpose for him during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793-753 BCE). The kingdom of Israel was experiencing a period of prosperity and influence. King Jeroboam II had expanded his territory further north into Aram (2 Kngs 14:23-29), which gave him control of some significant trade routes. But this affluence came at a terrible price.

Prosperity was limited to the wealthy and fed on the oppression of the poor. Amos was therefore sent by God to denounce the social and religious corruption and warn of God's judgement with his rallying cry: “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-ending stream” (5:24). What made his task even harder was that his home was in Tekoa (1:1), south of Jerusalem, on the edge of the Judean desert in the southern kingdom of Judah, but God used him as a prophet in the rival northern kingdom of Israel. Amos, therefore, was a shepherd from a rival kingdom who had gone up north to speak unpleasant truths to the king and kingdom of Israel at the height of their power. You can imagine how that was received!

Amos has a series of visions from God. First, a vision of locusts that will destroy precious crops (7:1-3). Second, a vision of fire that utterly devours the land (7:4-6). In both instances, Amos intercedes, pleading on behalf of Israel, saying “Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!” (7:2, 5). God relents and says the visions will not come to pass. However, God goes on to show Amos a vision of a plumbline (7:8), which is something a builder uses to judge if a wall is perfectly vertical or not. It is a tool of judgement. Amos is given a final vision in today's reading. He is shown a basket of ripe fruit (8:1-2). Ripe fruit in a hot climate soon begins to rot and spoil, a warning that a ripe (prosperous) kingdom built on the abuse of the poor (8:4) would also go the same way (8:3). Amos describes in detail what the rot looked like in terms of a variety of corrupt practices (8:5-6). In addition, he warns of further cataclysmic events (8:8-12). God threatens that a famine would come, not an actual famine, but a spiritual one – “a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (8:11). The problem seems to be a universal one down throughout the ages, that when we begin to

⁴ Young, “*The Parables*”, 244.

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ignore God's word, what is right and true, we eventually become deaf to God's word and ambivalent to whether something is right or wrong.

Psalm 138. This psalm is a wonderful one of praise from first to last. Gratitude bubbles up in every verse as the psalmist finds multiple ways to say the same thing. There is personal praise (138:1-3) but also a desire that those in highest authority – the kings of the earth – also praise God (138:4-5). Praise of God is manifest in hearts and in song (138:1) as well as in posture, bowing down (138:2). Praise emboldens and encourages (138:3). There is eternal hope expressed in praise, extolling justice for the lowly (138:6) and protection from enemies (138:7). Ultimately, praise arises from knowing we are the work of God's hands, and in this God's love endures forever (138:8).

About the author. The Rev. Canon Peter Houston is the national director of CMJ South Africa. He is an Anglican priest and canon theologian in the Diocese of Natal. He holds an M.Phil. in Environmental Management and an M.Th. in Church History and Polity. He is a research associate with Stellenbosch University and has a particular interest in church history and historical theology. He lives in Kloof, South Africa, with his wife and two children.