

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
17th Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

RCL Readings – Lamentations 1:1-6; Lamentations 3:19-26; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

ACNA Readings – Habakkuk 1:1-13, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-17; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Introduction. The Jewish Festival of Yom Kippur begins on the evening of October 4th. It is the holiest day of the year in Judaism with the main themes being atonement and repentance. Many people will spend the day fasting, in confession and intensive prayer. Inevitably this is going to involve a time of reflection on what has gone wrong.

Common Theme. Undoubtedly the common theme in these passages is the need to be focused on God at all times and to realise that whatever one person does they can, and usually do, have an effect on other people and the work of the Lord generally. A lack of focus on the Lord, or true gospel, may well lead people towards feeling distanced from the Lord, whereas, when focused on the Lord, even in dire circumstances, a person can find strength and contentment.

Lamentations 1:1-6. Jeremiah the Prophet wrote Lamentations. There is a tradition that he sat under Jerusalem's north wall at the time, which has led some to call that "The Wailing Wall of the Old Testament". We do not know of course, but it gives an idea of where this book of the Bible is heading. It is a book of deep sorrow because in it is seen the wrath of God lying heavily on the holy city of Jerusalem. In the opening of the book, Jerusalem is described as deserted, where once it was full of people. Jerusalem had been chosen as the holy city in the time of David so the fact it is empty is a serious matter. It is not just empty, though; verse 1 also speaks of Jerusalem being like a widow or a queen that is now a slave. All three images are indicative of huge decline, an indication that God is no longer sustaining it.

The desolation continues in verse 2, where there is no hope. Verse 3 makes it clear why Jerusalem is in the state it is, namely that Judah has gone into exile and, in verse 4, that no one is flocking into Jerusalem for the appointed festivals. This is key. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people were required to go to Jerusalem for the three great feasts – Passover, Pentecost, Sukkot (Booths) – and many may have gone for the minor ones too. Jerusalem should never be deserted. These occurrences may suggest to some that there is no future hope for Jerusalem, which had been the centre of everything and the home of the temple, God's dwelling. Without Jerusalem, the Jewish people would undoubtedly feel that God's presence was not with them.

Judgement and repentance are key themes in Judaism – only God can restore hope. Verse 5 particularly highlights God as the author of Jerusalem's grief and links it to sin. Sin leads to grief, which is a strong theme throughout the Old Testament. Think for example of the plagues being sent on Egypt as judgement for Pharaoh not listening to God through Moses.

In verse 6 Jerusalem has lost its splendour, clear evidence of God's judgement. It is not only deserted but potentially lies in ruins compared to its former glory. Stopping the reading at this point really does hammer home the lack of hope and that God's hand lies heavily on Jerusalem because of its people. The passage is a good link to Yom Kippur and the need to spend quality time with the Lord in reflection, confession and repentance. This should help Christians think through their attitude to the Lord Jesus' sacrifice. The One who from great glory spoke the universe into existence was

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abandoned, rejected, betrayed, and crucified because of the sins of all people. Jesus' atoning sacrifice should prod us to be thinking of confession and repentance on a regular basis (without being legalistic about it).

Lamentations 3:19-26. It is never enough to look at sin on a community level and think the answer lies there. Personal responsibility is an essential component of faith. There is a danger that some see the Old Testament as speaking to the collective “the children of Israel” and the New Testament as the only place for a personal relationship with the Lord, but this is not the case. The Old Testament takes seriously the duty of an individual towards God. There is a knock-on effect to how an individual behaves or treats God that can affect a whole community. Here Jeremiah moves from the corporate approach of chapter 1, so to speak, to the personal response that is an essential part of faith. It is as though he is speaking as the representative of Judah, taking Judah's suffering as his own. In verse 20 he explains that his soul is downcast. From that we should see that there is always a direct link between our physical, mental and spiritual states. Where one is weak, the others will undoubtedly follow. However, unlike in chapter 1, we have a note of hope in 3:21 which comes as a result of the testimony of the Lord's great love and compassion, something that is repeated daily (v. 23). Hope comes out of waiting for God (v. 24), which should be the result of spending time with the Lord in reflection, confession and repentance. Once again Yom Kippur is the major Jewish Festival for this particular issue and Christians would do well to think how seriously Judaism regards these issues, lest we dare take too lightly the death of Christ. Christians also should not hold fast to verse 23 and the idea that God renews his love daily. Verse 25 requires that the believer should seek after God to find this hope and that, too, comes through waiting (v. 26). There is much to learn from Yom Kippur and these two passages in Lamentations. (The writer of Hebrews discusses Jesus' sacrifice as fulfilling Yom Kippur in Hebrews 9-10).

2 Timothy 1:1-14. At first glance, this passage may not seem to be connected to Lamentations but when we consider that personal issues affect and are affected by others then the link is strong. The apostle Paul is thinking of Timothy on a daily basis, remembering his tears and wanting to see Timothy (v. 4) so that he may be filled with joy. Here, meeting one individual affects another. As believers we are a community that spans time and space, a truth further emphasised by Paul's appeal to Timothy to remember what previous generations have taught him. It is not hard to spot Paul's Jewish heritage in this comment alone. Judaism forever looks back at what God has done and gives constant instruction that the next generation should be taught by the previous one. Passover is one of the best examples of this.

The idea of affecting one another comes up again in verse 8 as Paul appeals to Timothy not to be ashamed of his suffering for the Gospel because God is the one who has saved us. In the same way, as Jeremiah in Lamentations, Paul's direction is to put one's hope in God with a reminder that this hope was given before the start of the world and became visible in the revealing of Jesus on earth. Reflection on God and time spent in confession and repentance will help Timothy remember the one who gave him hope in the first place and stop him from being affected by the plight in which Paul finds himself. As if to confirm his thoughts, Paul states again that he is in a difficult situation but that he is not allowing himself to be brought down because he knows his suffering comes through his

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faith and by hoping in God long term. He is so confident of his own position that he sets himself up as one to be followed (v. 13) and relies on the Holy Spirit (v. 14) to act as a guard over his faith. The lesson Paul is making here is that spending time thinking about the person and character of God will enable a believer to remain secure even in the most trying of circumstances and leads to a different position to that of the stark state of Jerusalem seen in Lamentations 1.

Luke 17:5-10. The disciples are wanting an increase of faith in verse 5. This could easily be taken as a good request to make of the Lord because great faith is needed to carry out the mission Jesus has given us. Jesus is swift to point out that even the smallest amount of faith can achieve the greatest result. He is not rebuking them for their request but rather stating that it is not the quantity of faith but the kind of faith that one is exercising. Jesus' illustration of the mustard seed – being very small but producing a strong plant – is in line with the teaching common amongst Jewish teachers of the day and illustrates his point clearly.

The next few verses speak of the fact that a servant would not be thanked for doing what they are supposed to be doing, The servant ought not to expect thanks for doing his daily work, even if it is hard work, like ploughing or tending sheep, both of which would be hard work. In the same way, those serving the Lord should do it out of a desire to fulfil the will of the Lord that we should serve, rather than to attract brownie points or make God feel more favourable towards us. So, as Charles Spurgeon said, we act as believers to do what the Lord expects as a result of our faith, not to earn faith, which is quite helpful in understanding this passage. The believer has been given faith, and faith leads to a desire to serve the Lord as a response to this love. Although not explicit in the passage, not being willing to serve God would suggest ingratitude.

ACNA Readings

Habakkuk 1:1-13, 2:1-4. Habakkuk is a book that is full of complaint against God, and chapter 1 sets the scene well. Habakkuk's complaint is that God appears not to be listening to the cry for help and not saving people who are in need. Instead, Habakkuk is left looking at injustice, wrongdoing, destruction and violence all around. The wicked are so strong that it would almost appear as if God has withdrawn totally. The Lord's reply (v. 5ff) puts Habakkuk's complaint in perspective. He is instead to watch the nations and expect the Lord to do something that would, if explained, sound unbelievable. The Lord is going to use a foreign nation, the Babylonians, to carry out his desire and purpose. The message is clear. Instead of complaint and self-appraisal, focus on the Lord and the bigger picture. All may seem lost, but God is always in control and will bring about his plans regardless. So often the plans of God exceed our imagination. Habakkuk's response is actually a second complaint. Although in verse 12 he begins a statement about the holiness of God and the power of God over the nations, by verse 13 he is complaining that the Lord tolerates the treacherous and allows the wicked to succeed. The complaint suggests the danger of looking at things through earthly eyes rather than trusting the Lord to do what would seem difficult or impossible. However, a note of hope comes in Habakkuk 2:1 as Habakkuk states he will wait to see what answer the Lord gives. The Lord's answer is amazingly simple: there is an appointed time that will come exactly

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when it should. Waiting can easily be a bad state to be in if expecting something to happen unless the believer is focused on the Lord and confident that his timing is perfect, in which case, waiting is an act of faith that should uplift rather than cast down the soul.

Psalm 37:1-17. David recognises in verse 1 that there are those who worry about the prosperity of the evil, but because he is focusing his attention on the Lord, he is able to say in verse 2 that they will just wither away. Hence from verse 3 onwards, we find an instruction to keep focused on the Lord. When that happens, the believer's desires of their heart are fulfilled. So confident is he that in verse 5 he gives a direct instruction to "commit your way to the Lord" and to "be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him". David understands that one focused on the Lord is stronger whereas one who is not will only worry about what is going on around them. As with the writings of Jeremiah in Lamentations, David knows that our attitude can affect our relationship with God (v. 9), yet in reality, God is working to a perfect timetable (v. 10). The plans of the wicked will come to nothing (vv. 11-15) but verses 16 & 17 highlight once again the power of God. The message is simply the need to concentrate on and trust in 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 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.