

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

RCL Readings – 1 Samuel 2:18-20,26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 61:10-62:5; Psalm 147; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

Introduction. ‘Mass’ is from a Latin word (*missa*) meaning ‘to send forth’, thus Christmas literally means the sending forth of the Messiah. The incarnation of the Messiah is an incredible and amazing event – so much so that we need 12 days to contemplate the mystery and wonder of it. Christmas is not a day; Christmas is a season. The world around us seems to move at a hectic pace, and the beauty, simplicity, and joy of Christmas get so easily lost. The ‘Ho Ho Ho’ too quickly becomes ‘Go Go Go’ as we race to prepare the food, the presents, the last minute shopping. It is a discipline at this busy time to stop and ponder the true gift that this season can bring to the world.

Common Theme. It is worth saying again that the first thing that God created holy in the Bible is time. Time is important to God. It is the Lord who introduces a sacred calendar to the Jewish people, and it is from there that the Christian calendar is based. Most sacred time is historical, that is, something significant happened that was worth recording on the calendar. Whether we celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas or not is not the issue for we cannot say for certain we know the true day of the Messiah's birth. However, that does not diminish the actual important historical truth of Jesus' birth. God once again fulfils his promise to send the Redeemer. This is the message of Christmas and what makes this season sacred time. Christmas is not the celebration of the ‘birthday’ of the Messiah marking him a year older. Rather we celebrate the appearance of the Messiah and the hope this gives the world.

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26. The boy Samuel is contrasted against the evil sons of Eli the priest. One of the worst forms of corruption is religious corruption as it involves the bringing of the name of God into disrepute. Even as a small boy, Samuel distinguishes himself serving in the tabernacle wearing the linen ephod of a priest. Exactly what his tasks and duties were is not explained, however, we do know that Samuel did not ‘know’ everything. This is implied in the statement that says, ‘Samuel grew in stature and favour with both the Lord and men’. Samuel did not have to know everything to serve the Lord with a pure heart, even at a young age. Samuel did not stay ignorant of knowledge either. He grew in the knowledge and service of the Lord. This provides us with a good example; we don't have to know everything to serve the Lord and we always have the opportunity to learn more and better our service.

Psalm 148. This psalm of praise calls on all creation to join heaven and earth in the worship of the Lord. Revelation 5:11-13 describes a future where every living thing on earth and in heaven will indeed praise the Lord. John saw in his vision that what this psalm commands will come to fruition. There are many passages in the Hebrew Bible that describe the creation contributing to the praise of God, such as Isaiah 55:12, where mountains, hills and trees burst into song. Some commentators might suggest this is simply metaphorical and say that the earth is purely inanimate. While I would stress that creation is not a god, anyone who has watered a tree knows that the tree is alive in some way. Paul hints at a mystery when he personifies creation as groaning like a woman in childbirth for the coming redemption (Rom 8:22). The

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Christmas – Year C

Gospel of John tells us that God so loved the world, and I think he means not just the humans that are on top of it. The hope of Christmas extends to every aspect of creation, salvation for Jews and Gentiles, and a renewing of heaven and earth.

Colossians 3:12-17. The message of Christmas is something that not only needs to resonate within our hearts but also to spill over into our behaviour. Paul admonishes the Colossians to practice the peace of Christ. The angels at Bethlehem had proclaimed 'peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests' (Luke 1:14). What does 'letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts' look like? Paul says it is compassion, kindness, humility, and gentleness. Paul reminds us that forgiveness is something that we not only receive from the Lord but is also something we share with each other. These qualities are all behavioural. Faith is something we put into practice, love is also an action, and the hope of Christmas is not something we only sing about but allow the message to change our behaviour.

Luke 2:41-52. The Gospels do not provide great details on the early childhood of Jesus. Yet, what we have is enough to know that the context of Christmas is indeed a Jewish story. On one hand, the story of Christmas is of a poor family, with human vulnerabilities and surrounded by a troubled world. It could be the story in any cultural setting. However, it is also about a Jewish child born to Jewish parents in a Jewish town as the promised Jewish Messiah. Jesus is born into a Torah-observant family, evidenced by the Gospel passage telling us that Jesus' family made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year at Passover. While thrice-yearly pilgrimage is commanded in the Torah (Deut 16:16), only devout Jews living in Israel actually did this on an annual basis. Most Jews in the diaspora could not possibly travel to Israel every year and thus probably only went once in a lifetime to Jerusalem for the High Holidays.

In the first century, a Jewish boy was considered of adult age at 12 years. It is possible that Luke is recording an early rite of passage that Jesus undertakes at the temple once he has reached this age.¹ Much of the narrative of the Gospel of Luke is centred around the temple, with over a third of Luke's stories taking place in the temple. Following the ceremony, Jesus remains behind as his parents return to the Galilee. They reconnect again in the Temple with Jesus sitting and discussing with the teachers of the Torah. To put what Jesus is doing in its Jewish context, there is an early Mishnah (Jewish teaching) that urges the faithful to 'sit amid the dust of the sage's feet and drink their words with thirst' (*Pirkei Avot* 1:4). Again here the Gospel of Luke reveals its Jewish character in that the text says Jesus was listening and asking questions with everyone amazed at his answers! How did questions become answers, one might ask? In Jewish tradition, the way you demonstrate knowledge and teach is through asking the right questions. Often in the ministry of Jesus, we read that when he was asked a question his answer was to return to the inquirer a question of his own. There is another Jewish saying that says, you

¹ Modern Judaism has developed a bar mitzvah ceremony for male children aged 13 years to mark the transition into adulthood. I do not think we can say that Jesus is participating here in a modern bar mitzvah service.

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

are closer to God when you are asking questions than when you think you have answers.² Jesus knew where he was and perhaps knew his mission and role as the Messiah. When asked by his parents why he was in the temple, Jesus responded with a question: 'Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?' Despite this reference to 'his Father's house', there is no indication that Jesus had full divine knowledge of the universe at birth. Jesus submits to his parents' will to return to the Galilee with them. Thus we see Jesus obeying the commandment to honour your parents. Luke then uses the same language as Samuel to describe how Jesus 'grew in wisdom'. Christmas is not solely about the gift of God through Jesus to save humanity but also about how he shared our humanity. In his humanity, Jesus had to experience and learn things too. Through the experiences of Jesus, God can identify and empathize with us in every way.

ACNA Readings

Isaiah 61:10-62:5. In this prophetic passage, the salvation of the Lord is represented through the picture of garments and clothing. The clothing is given, not earned, and the garments are not seen as rewards. The work of righteousness that Isaiah describes is all performed by God. Isaiah was prophesying when Jerusalem was spiritually corrupt which would result in conquest and devastation from the Babylonians. Captivity and exile were not to be the end of the story for the Jewish people. The prophetic message here is one of hope and redemption. The future desolation of Zion and Jerusalem will pass and be replaced by the righteousness of God. Not only will the inhabitants of Jerusalem see this, but Gentiles will also be included in the salvation that comes from the Lord.

Psalms 147. Psalm 147 is a call to worship and is one of several psalms that begin and end with the word *hallelujah*. The final five psalms in the book of Psalms all share this characteristic. The author of the psalm remains unknown. What is known is the passion of the author that we worship the Lord. The word *hallelujah* is an imperative to praise God, essentially it is a command. Worship is something we can continue to do in our homes, online and in the in-person gatherings that are permissible for us during this pandemic. Restrictions on gatherings and fear of the pandemic should not hinder our desire or ability to worship the Lord this Christmas. The word *hallelujah*, 'praise the Lord', is both an imperative declaration to praise as well as an encouragement for us to do so. The psalm reminds us that it is good to praise the Lord, particularly with singing. At this season, Christmas carols beautifully carry the treasured message of Messiah's birth and hope to the nations. I suspect that even much of the secular world enjoys Christmas carols.

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7. The relationship between the followers of Jesus and the Torah, poorly translated as Law, is often misunderstood. One prevailing view is that when the Messiah came the Law was now done away with. Yet Jesus said he had not come to abolish the Torah (Matt 5:17). The Torah

² Attributed to Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Christmas – Year C

was not the device by which anyone was made righteous. Rather it is the ethics and moral code by which Israel is to live. Paul describes to the Galatians the situation prior to the Messiah. Paul says that the Torah was the guardian, sometimes described as a shield, a tutor or schoolmaster and then not in a negative way. In a positive sense, the instructions of God, the Torah, helped remove people from sin, harm and moral danger. The defence against idolatry and immorality were the teachings and instructions from God.

Following the advent of the Messiah, the Torah continues to operate in the hearts of the believers. It is not abolished, neglected, unread or removed from the Bible. Instead, the Torah takes its place upon the heart, exactly where it was always meant to be, as Moses writes in Deuteronomy 6:6: 'And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart'. Jewish and Gentile believers are now under the guardianship of the Messiah and the Holy Spirit, which the Scriptures foretold would happen. We are not saved from the Law; we are saved from Sin and Death. Echoing the words of Moses, the prophet Jeremiah writes that God will make a New Covenant and write the Torah on our hearts (Jer 31:33). The passage in Galatians concludes by saying that when the time was right the Messiah came, not simply to die as a ransom for many but to elevate us to the status of God's family. Another beautiful message of the Christmas season is that we who were once far removed from the presence of God are now counted as members of God's family.

John 1:1-18. The Gospel of John does not start with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem but at a moment before time. 'ἐν ἀρχῇ' ('In the beginning') are the identical first words of the Septuagint version of Genesis 1:1 (as in John 1:1) and remind us that Christmas did not start with the birth of Jesus but before time itself. The Messiah was always a part of God's plan; there is no plan B. There are echoes of Isaiah 48:12-16 in the words of John when he writes, 'Through him all things were made'. Isaiah 48:16 speaks of the mysterious First and the Last, who is said to have existed before time and fashioned creation, then was sent by God with his Spirit. Jesus is described as the 'true light that gives light to everyone'. Light and darkness are important symbols in the creation week and were important metaphors in exegesis for Jews of the late Second Temple Period. Light and darkness were separated by God during creation. Theologically, the Dead Sea community separated the world between the sons of light and the sons of darkness.

The Greek text of John 1:9 is a present participle and reads as continuous; thus the true light is coming and is still coming into the world. While his physical body is not with us anymore, his light is still influencing the world and chasing away the darkness. Creation itself is an act of love. God did not have to make the world. He chose to. God is the one who initiates the relationship we have with him. Maintaining the relationship is something we get to partake in. God did not have to send his Son into the world; this is also something he chose to do as another act of love. Christmas is unfortunately not seen by much of the world as an act of love. That message is buried beneath an overindulgence of presents

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

First Sunday after Christmas – Year C

and food. This season is an opportunity for us to be light-bearers to the world. God has not abandoned the world. He continues to send his light, his love and his hope.

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.