

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany/World Mission Sunday - Year B

RCL Readings - Isaiah 40:21-23; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

ACNA Readings - Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 86:8-13; Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 28:16-20

The Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) has designated the second last Sunday of Epiphany as World Mission Sunday and therefore has a special set of readings on this theme. The notes on the ACNA readings follow those for the Revised Common Lectionary for Epiphany 5.

Revised Common Lectionary

Introduction - Although still in the season of Epiphany, we have moved into “ordinary” time (shown by the change in liturgical color from white to green). So, rather than choosing certain events that reveal who Jesus is, we shall read consistently through one Gospel. The other readings generally will be chosen in relation to the theme of the Gospel. This will continue through Lent, and resume again for the season after Pentecost.

Common Theme - The theme of the revelation of Jesus as God come in the flesh continues in the account of his power to heal sickness and silence demons. The readings focus on God as Creator thus implying that Jesus is God because he can act outside the natural laws of the creation to perform miracles.

Hebraic Perspective - By the time of the later prophets, in contrast to the belief of the pagan nations about their gods, faithful Jews recognized Yahweh as the Creator of heaven and earth and Sovereign over the whole world. The pagan nations believed in territorial and national gods.¹ But, by the time of Jesus, while not thinking of Yahweh as just God of the land of Israel, most Jews did see him as their God exclusively. Thus the majority of Jews were looking for a Messiah who would defeat their enemies and restore Israel to world domination. This general misunderstanding about his role is the reason for Jesus’ reticence to manifest his identity as the Messiah publicly. He had come to preach the good news of the establishment of God’s Kingdom of righteousness, not to overthrow the Romans.

First Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31 - There is a clear change between chapters 39 and 40 of Isaiah, but there is no need to posit a “second Isaiah”! In chapter 6, we read of Isaiah’s call to be a prophet and his commissioning to bring a message of judgement to Judah and to foretell the exile in Babylon. In chapter 40 we read of his recommissioning – possibly in his later life – to bring a message of comfort and the promise of restoration to those who would have experienced the full measure of that judgement. In Isaiah 40:6, Isaiah’s response of “What shall I cry?” to the command to “Cry out!” is his acceptance of his recommissioning.²

¹ See Naaman’s request for soil from the land of Israel upon which to worship Yahweh in 2 Kings 5:17.

² Compare this to his response of “Here am I. Send me!” to the LORD’s question, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” in his first commissioning in Isaiah 6:8.

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany/World Mission Sunday - Year B

The verses (21-31) in our reading give two reasons why the exiles should put their trust in that promise of restoration: Yahweh is the Creator of all things, so he has the power to accomplish their deliverance – nothing is too hard for him. But he is also the God who cares for those who put their trust in him – no one is too insignificant for him to care about and enable to soar like an eagle.

Second Reading: Psalm 147:1-11, 20c - This psalm from the end of the Psalter echoes the passage from Isaiah. In verses 2-4, the psalmist moves from God's power in the particular to the general to the universal (i.e. the situation of the exiles to the "brokenhearted" and then to God's creation of the stars). To name things in Hebrew thought is equivalent to controlling and even to creating them. (So Adam, by naming the animals, was sharing in God's creative work!)

Third Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 - This passage raises many theological and exegetical complexities – especially the significance of Jewish religious practice for a believer in Jesus (that would take more than these brief notes to cover!). It also begs the question of whether Paul is advocating pretense in the practice of evangelism. Some suggest that Paul no longer put any store on being Jewish at all. I disagree (see Romans 3:1-2). But he would not let his being Jewish prevent his hearers coming to salvation in Jesus. He was not pretending to be Jewish or Gentile as the situation warranted, but "keeping the main thing (salvation by grace through faith in Jesus' atonement) the main thing." That was the Gospel he felt compelled by the love of Jesus within him to proclaim to as many as possible, both Jews and Gentiles, and by all righteous means possible (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:2).

Fourth Reading: Mark 1:29-39 - In verses 23-27 of this chapter from Mark, Jesus has demonstrated his divine power over the unseen spirit world. The focus in verses 29-34 is on his power over disease, but even more on his compassion for humanity. Although Jesus did demonstrate his credentials by performing miracles,³ his motivation was his divine compassionate nature. It is telling that, as Mark records in verse 35, even the Son of God needed, in his humanity, to take time quiet and free of distraction to meet with his Father and to discern his Father's will as he began to expand his ministry.

³ The Sanhedrin was commissioned to examine the credentials of any would-be Messiah, and we read of such observance by the religious leaders of Jesus' public ministry until the authorities had rejected him – see Matthew 16:1-4.

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany/World Mission Sunday - Year B

Anglican Church of North America

Common Theme: The God of the Bible has always cared about all the nations of the world – “This is how much **God loved the world**; He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”⁴ This is the rationale for world mission.

First Reading: Genesis 12:1-3 - After the fall of humanity, the flood and the separation of the nations at Babel, God begins his world mission plan with an Aramean from Ur of the Chaldees, Abram and his barren wife, Sarai. He promises that out of this one man, “and him as good as dead,” he will produce “descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore” (Hebrews 11:12). The only condition for this promise to bless him so that “**all peoples on earth** will be blessed through you”⁵ was that Abram must leave his country, his people and his father, Terah’s household and go to the land God would show him. Verse 4 says that “Abram left as the LORD had told him.” So the only condition was fulfilled.

The name Abram means “exalted father,” whereas Abraham means “the father of **many nations**”! The key was that Abram had to leave behind any other god and devote himself entirely to Yahweh – the LORD. It is instructive that the name ‘Terah’ is related to the Hebrew for ‘moon’. This was an ongoing struggle. Jacob had to get his family to leave behind pagan idols when they returned to Bethel from Haran (Gen 35:2). Joshua instructed the Israelites to get rid of these idols before entering the Promised Land (Josh 24:14). So, God’s world mission plan began with the physical descendants of Abraham, that is the Jews, and his Gospel is still for the Jew first and then through them for the Gentile (Rom 1:16). It is not favoritism, but mission strategy.

Second Reading: Psalm 86:8-13 - This Psalm was specifically chosen as a response to Genesis 12, and especially for verses 9 and 10: “**All the nations** you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name. For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God” (emphasis added). God’s world mission plan continues.

Third Reading: Revelation 7:9-17 - I am not a connoisseur of art! I do not understand Picasso’s pictures! Revelation is a “picture book.” So it is not surprising that there are different interpretations of the images. This is true of this passage. But the main point that the risen Lord is showing his servant, John is clear: God’s world mission plan will succeed; the “great multitude that no one can count comes from “every tribe, people and language” (remember Babel). Included in the company praising the One True God is all creation represented by the four living creatures, and both the Older Covenant people and the New Covenant people are represented by the 24 elders. The poetic explanation of who this great multitude is by the angel instructor uses images drawn from the Hebrew scriptures (see Isaiah 4:5-6; Psalm 23:1; Isaiah 25:8). But the focus is on the Lamb, through

⁴ John 3:16, The Message, emphasis added.

⁵ or “will bless themselves by you,” verse 3, emphasis added.

Sermon Notes from CMJ
Fifth Sunday of Epiphany/World Mission Sunday - Year B

whose shed blood they are all arrayed in clean white robes. This is the core of the world mission plan of God.

Fourth Reading: Matthew 28:16-20 - The “Great Commission.” The desire of God’s heart in the calling of Abram and his descendants, the sending of Jesus as the Lamb, and the commissioning of his followers is that disciples will be made “of all nations.” For Matthew, Jesus is the second Moses – lawgiver, prophet and teacher. Thus becoming a disciple of Jesus is the equivalent of believing in him or being born again of his Spirit as The Gospel of John speaks about. A disciple of a rabbi was not just a follower but was devoted to their teacher and was striving to be exactly like him. Therefore a follower of Jesus who is not actively engaged in making disciples of all nations is not really his disciple.

About the Author: The Rev. Philip Bottomley is a “retired” Anglican priest. He is the executive director of CMJ USA. Philip has a BA in Biblical Studies from St. John’s College, Durham, England and a Diploma of Theology from Cranmer Hall Seminary, also in Durham. He served as the Midlands Area Director for CMJ UK from 1978-84 and was the first national director of CMJ USA from 1984-91. He is an assistant priest at Prince of Peace Anglican Church, Hopewell, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.