

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Thirteen Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

**ACNA Readings** – Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 11:25-36; Matthew 16:13-20

**Introduction.** The Gospel this Sunday hits the high point in the ministry of Jesus. Peter's proclamation that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and the Son of the Living God is a confession that has gone all around the world and brought countless millions to faith. From this most northern point of the Holy Land, Jesus will set his face towards Jerusalem to confront the Sadducees and the cross and redeem the world.

**Common Theme.** The theme of deliverance appears through many of the readings this week. Often, redemption and deliverance begin in dark places when it seems like the enemy is winning. In Exodus, Moses is born during a period of suffering and uncertainty. He will participate in the deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh. Jesus will challenge us to confess who he is in a very pagan environment and declare that his kingdom will not be stopped – not even by Hell.

**Exodus 1:8-2:10.** The story of the Exodus begins by informing us of a change in the political hierarchy of Egypt. There was a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, in Egypt (Exod 1:8).<sup>1</sup>

Verse ten indicates that the new local Egyptian dynasty feared a war with an outside empire – potentially the Hittite empire at this stage. Semites had fallen from favour and growing suspicion they might side with Egyptian enemies led to harsh treatment and enslavement of the Hebrew peoples. This provides the backdrop to the miraculous birth story of Moses. Many of the Biblical heroes of the Old Testament have miraculous birth narratives.<sup>2</sup>

Moses is born during a time of infanticide and miraculously survives a Nile river journey to end up in the hands of the daughter of the Pharaoh. According to ancient tradition and rabbinic sources, Pharaoh received a premonition of a coming redeemer. A tradition in *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer* chapter 48 says the magicians warned Pharaoh that in the future a child will be born who will take Israel out of Egypt. Pondering this, Pharaoh ordered all male children to be thrown into the river. It is the daughter who rescues Moses and names him Moses – which is not a Hebrew word but rather a more common name in Egyptian hierarchy than we might think. For example, similar Egyptian names of Pharaohs include Ahmose and Thutmose. In Hebrew etymology, the name Moses sounds similar to *Meh-sheh*, which means *from there*.

Growing up in the court of the Pharaoh, it is possible that Moses had access to Egyptian education and literature, being instructed in scribal art and warfare like many in the royal family. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Archeological dating is not an exact science and many Biblical scholars and archaeologists argue about the dating of the Exodus from Egypt. They don't argue that the Exodus didn't happen just its timing in history. Some place the account of Joseph in Genesis to occur during the Hyksos dynasty. The Hyksos were not Egyptians, rather they were Semitic foreigners who conquered and ruled Egypt for a time. They were familiar with Semitic and Canaanite languages and perhaps looked favourably toward the Hebrew peoples, who also had Semitic origins.

<sup>2</sup> Other examples are the judge Samson and the prophet Samuel.

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literal text of Exodus provides no evidence that Moses had any power or influence in the court of Pharaoh. Instead, Exodus asks “Who made you ruler and judge over us?” (Exod 2:14). Which is not something you would say to challenge a known prince of Egypt! The daughter of the Pharaoh may have protected Moses by keeping him out of the limelight of palace intrigues and away from the court.

The Gospels present Jesus as the new Moses. The author of Matthew reflects the Exodus narrative tradition in which a tyrant attempts to destroy the *future child* by ordering infanticide and the murder of children in Bethlehem. Moses and Jesus are both miraculously delivered from the hands of evil kings and go on to bring redemption to Israel and the peoples of the world.

**Psalm 124.** This psalm is included in the collection known as the Songs of Ascent. It is a praise and thanksgiving psalm for deliverance from some unknown but deadly threat. As a Psalm of Ascent, this prayer would have been on the lips of the pilgrims during Passover – for which the theme of deliverance is very applicable.

Acknowledging the mercy, grace, and deliverance that comes from God is a good thing. Now that the people are saved, what should be the appropriate response? Praise and thanksgiving are the appropriate responses as reflected in verses six and seven which say, “Praise be to the Lord ... (for) we have escaped like a bird” (Ps 124:6-7).

The final sentence emphasizes a simple basic principle that the worshipper – as they pilgrim towards Jerusalem and the Temple – should keep in mind. Our help – and deliverance – is in the name of the Lord, who is a creator that made all of heaven and earth.

**Romans 12:1-8.** After describing to the community in Rome God's continual relationship with the Jewish people and the blessings the Gentiles now have in the Messiah (Rom 9-11), Paul returns to his earlier theme that Gentiles should no longer live like pagans. Instead, they should live holy lives as if their very physical bodies were holy sacrificial offerings to God.

This concept of living sacrifices was not entirely new to the Jewish world of the late Second Temple period. The Dead Sea Sect at Qumran held that the Temple and its sacrificial system had become corrupt and so traditional sacrifices could and should not be performed in the profaned sanctuary in Jerusalem. *IQS* – known as the Community Rule of the Qumran sect – describes how their holy lifestyle was a substitute for the sacrifices that could no longer be performed in the Temple.

In another tradition, when someone brought an animal for sacrifice in the Temple it was inspected by the Levites to determine if there was any blemish on the creature (Lev 1:10). The Torah was clear and specific that blemished animals could not be offered to God. However, once the animal was brought into the Temple precincts for inspection and deemed unworthy it could not be returned to the worshipper who had brought it. Why not? Because the animal had already been offered to the Lord.

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When does that occur? When the animal was first selected as an offering from the herd. It had already from that moment of selection belonged to God. However, due to its blemishment, it could not actually be killed but also could not be returned. It was to be kept as a *living sacrifice* until its natural death.

Paul says that our new lifestyles as living sacrifices before the Lord constitute true and proper worship, sometimes translated as *reasonable service*. The Greek word used is λογικός – *logikos* – and contains the root of logos or Word. Some commentaries describe this reasonable service as a lifestyle according to the Word of God. Which I think is a fair understanding of what Paul is advocating to the new believers in Jesus.

**Matthew 16:13-20.** The declaration by Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, also known as the Confession of Peter, occurs in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Luke's account (Luke 9:18-20) does not record the location, while Mark and Matthew tell us this occurred in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Geography is Theology, that is that place and location matter to the narrative and add nuance and insight to the message of the story. Jesus could have asked this question of who he is to his disciples at any time, but Jesus deliberately chose Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is in the Golan Heights of northern Israel, in the ancient territory of the tribe of Dan.

The modern name for the location is *Banias* which is derived from the Greek name *Paneas* due to its association with the Greek god Pan who was worshipped in the area. During the early Islamic rule of the Levant, the name settled as Banias; since Arabic has no 'P' sound. In Greco-Roman mythology, Pan was the god of nature, often depicted as a Satyr – half man half goat.

The city of Caesarea Philippi was predominately a pagan, Gentile city with the Jewish city of Dan not too far away. The city was nestled around a large, rocky outcrop 100 feet high and 500 feet across. At the base of the rock was a limestone cave which sheltered a spring that is one of the tributaries of the Jordan River, which gets its name from the meaning of the Hebrew *Yered-Dan* or *down from Dan*.

Various temples and cults became associated with the area and were constructed at the bottom of the rock. Four of these major temples were: Pan, the nature god; the temple of Caesar Augustus representing humans becoming gods; Nymph the goddess of sex, pleasure, and immorality; and Nemesis the goddess of vengeance.

It is here in this location of paganism – representing nature, self-deification, immorality, and violence – that Jesus asks the question: Who do people say the Son of Man is? Various answers are given until Simon Peter makes his proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah. Actually, Peter makes two distinct claims: one is of the messiahship of Jesus the promised anointed one spoken by the prophets, and the other claim is that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. This claim is given more credence considering the location in which Roman emperors consistently declared themselves not only to be kings but also to be sons of gods.

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Jesus then addresses a name change for Simon – Shimon in Hebrew – to Peter. In Aramaic, this would have been *Kefas*, which like the Greek *Petros* also means *rock*. Jesus says that upon this rock he will build his church. This is the first time the word church – ἐκκλησία, *ekklesia* – is used in the New Testament. The complimentary Hebrew word for *ekklesia* is *kehilah*. *Kehilah* carries the meaning of an assembly of people or a community.

Many commentaries then reflect that the *rock* is a reference to Peter himself and/or his declaration of Jesus as Messiah. Peter did indeed become the initial leader of the Jesus movement in the opening chapter of Acts. However, I think that the location gives special nuance to the statement of Jesus here. I suggest that Jesus makes reference to the rock that is actually before him. At the base of the rock of Caesarea Philippi are the temples of the world system – nature, sex, self-gratification and violence – and the *ekklesia* or *community* of Jesus will dominate all of these systems symbolized as constructed on top of the rock. The community of Jesus will dominate all others.

The limestone cave at the base of the rock was known as the *Gates of Hades*. Virgins were sacrificed in the cave which has a long drop to the spring waters below to appease the demons of Hell. Jesus forcefully proclaims that his community can't be stopped even by the gates of Hades. And upon historical reflection, we see that even Satan has been unable to stop the Gospel from going around the world.

To the new community, Jesus says they are to be given the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Some traditions claim these keys were given only to Peter, which is why the papal flag of the Vatican is a white field with two golden keys. In its Hebraic context, there are indeed two keys to the kingdom of heaven. One is the key to the inner court and one key to the outer court. The inner court is our heart or faith and the outer court is our deeds and actions. We need both keys to both courts. If we say we believe and love God but do nothing to love our neighbour or put our faith into practice then this honestly does us no good. The converse is also true; if we behave well and love our neighbour, but have no faith in God then this also does us no good. James puts it rather concisely when he says, “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:17).

Jesus also instructs the community in binding and loosing. Which is often only exegeted to mean the spiritual binding of demons, satan, and evil powers. In its Hebraic context, this term of binding and loosing is actually a halachic expression for permitting and not permitting. Jesus is allowing the community to create its own *halacha* – or how the faith is practised and performed.

For example, if there is a community that requires women to wear head coverings then that is the *halacha* applicable to that community. And heaven accepts this precedent for this particular community. To disobey the community by not wearing head coverings then is sinful disobedience in this context. If you disagree with head coverings, then don't join that community; simply join another that does not have such requirements.

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This does not mean or infer that communities can change or manipulate the Scriptures to promote sinful activity as not sinful. There are non-negotiables and unchangeable truths, such as; there is only one God, Jesus is the Messiah, the Holy Spirit is real, and angels and demons exist to name but a few. It's not that binding and losing is permission to change faith rather it is the application of faith within a given community.

**ACNA Readings**

**Isaiah 51:1-6.** In the Hebrew Bible – Old Testament – it is usually God who is referred to as צֵרַר *tzur* literally *a rock*. Interestingly, the Septuagint declines to translate צֵרַר *tzur* as rock and instead always uses the word *king* – saying that *God is a king* whereas the Hebrew reads *God is a rock*. Perhaps the Septuagint translators did this to avoid idolatry and not make God out to be a literal rock; there may also be more to this word than we understand today. In contrast to the Greek translators, the Hebrew Bible consistently refers to God as a rock. Paul makes one noticeable deviation from this tradition when in 1 Corinthians he says that the rock that followed the children of Israel in the desert was the Messiah (1 Cor 10:10)! This is an exception proving the rule that typically God is the rock!

Here in this passage from Isaiah, there is another break with the norm: the rock is linked with Abraham. Verse one says to “look to the rock from which you were cut” and is paired with verse two which says “look to Abraham your father” (Isa 51:1-2). By drawing us back to Abraham, the prophet Isaiah is asking us to recall and acknowledge our foundations. Sacred history reminds us how God has dealt with his people in the past and his promises of blessing for the future.

Despite the difficulties that confront the people of Israel in the days of Isaiah or the concerns that are before us in our modern era, the prophet says with hopeful conviction that the Lord will surely comfort Zion. Deliverance from the current strife will come. God has never abandoned his people in the past. Trials and times of testing come, but they do not last. What does last forever is found in verse six: “My salvation will last forever and my righteousness will never fail!” (Isa 51:6).

**Psalms 138.** Psalm 138 is a declaration of praise in which David begins by saying he will worship with his whole heart. He is not going to restrain himself but give himself over to total praise *before the gods*. *Before the gods* is an interesting phrase. I can't imagine that David for one second thought he would be worshipping the Lord in front of idols or anything else falsely called a *god*.

The word is *elohim* in Hebrew and does come with divine connotations. It is after all one of the names of God. One possibility is that the word *elohim* could be referring to the angelic beings which are sometimes called sons of God – *Elohim*.

David says he will bow down toward your holy temple. David may be referring here to the temple in heaven as there was no actual temple constructed in Jerusalem during the reign of David. As we have mentioned many times before, salvation and redemption are universal in scope in that they are

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available to the Gentiles. David continues in this universal theme in verse four where he invites all the kings of the earth to praise the Lord.

Not only will David worship with his whole heart but so will the Gentiles. The reason for the complete adoration and praise is found in verse seven. There we see that David refers to some sort of deliverance. Though he walked through the midst of trouble it was God who preserved his life. God is a redeemer, a shield, and a defender. This has been his character from the beginning and so he is worthy of praise by all peoples of the earth who see and experience his mercy.

**Romans 11:25-36.** Paul asks us to ponder something mysterious, and that mystery is the mystery of Israel. Messiah is a Jewish concept. The Hebrew Bible contains the prophetic promise of the coming redeemer and so one would assume that the people who should have embraced the Messiah would have been the Jewish people. This was not the case.

While the initial followers of Jesus were all Jewish, of course, the nation of Israel as a whole did not embrace his Messiahship. Instead, it was the Gentiles that found it easier to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul wrestles with this mysterious tension and proclaims to the Romans that this situation will remain until the full number of Gentiles has come in (Rom 11:25). This implies that there is an actual number – known by God – of how many Gentiles will ultimately come to faith.

Where would Paul get this idea from? There is a Jewish tradition in *Midrash Tanchuma* which states that all the souls that will ever be were created during the six days of Creation. This is derived from exegeting Genesis 2:3 where it reads that God rested from all his work which he had made. God is no more in the creating business as all his work was done in the six initial days. This then begs the question; where are the souls? The *Talmud* records a tradition that there is a well of souls in heaven guarded by the angel Lilah (Niddah 16b), and as souls are required, the angel takes each soul and deposits them into the woman. Islam knew of this tradition and placed the well of souls underneath the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

The point of all these mysterious traditions is the concept of a finite number of humans that will ever draw breath prior to the end of the world. And Israel will not be excluded from the redemptive process. Paul even boldly claims that all of Israel will be saved once that final number has been reached. *All* is a very strong word and perhaps misunderstood in biblical meaning.

*All* in the Bible actually doesn't mean 100% as it does in modern English. For example, 1 Chronicles 13:6 says that David and all Israel went to Baalah of Judah – Kiriyat Yarim – to bring up from there the ark of God the Lord. Literally, this is not possible for several reasons. One: there simply is not enough room for everyone in Israel to congregate at the village of Kiriyat Yarim. Two: it's actually inconceivable that everyone departed from the Galilee and the Golan abandoning whole villages and leaving animals, crops, and empty houses easily accessible for plunder and theft. In the Biblical sense *all* means a majority representation.

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Paul also wants to remind us that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. Thus, the calling of Israel to be a light to the Gentiles has in no way been withdrawn. The mystery is that the disobedience of the Jewish people regarding the Messiah has actually been a blessing to the Gentile people. Paul's conclusion – in verses 33-36 – to his entire argument of Romans 9-11 is simply to break into a doxology. The mystery of Israel is almost unfathomable. No one can know the mind of God and so let's just give him the glory!

**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.