

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

ACNA Readings – Wisdom 12:13, 16-19; Psalm 86; Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43

Introduction. The Jewish Festival of *Tisha B'av* – Ninth of Av – is on the 9th day of the Jewish Month of Av, which this year falls on the 26th of July in the Western Calendar. It is one of the most solemn occasions of the Jewish year because it remembers past tragedies, most notably the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC and the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in 70 AD. Over the years, other disasters – such as the Holocaust – have come to be remembered on this day too. According to Jewish custom, no cosmetics or leather are worn and people are expected to refrain from smiling and laughing. The usual synagogue reading is the Book of Lamentations, written by Jeremiah after the destruction of the first temple. It is a reminder of how much the Jewish people have suffered over the years.

Common Theme. What runs through all of these readings is the relationship between God and the believer. There are many references to how much God cares for those whom he loves and the extent to which he will go to protect them. This is mirrored by the confidence the believer should have in approaching God – to be honest with God and to know that God is there for them.

Genesis 28:10-19a. As Jacob journeys from Beersheba to Harran, he naturally becomes tired and stops for the night. We do not know where exactly, but we are given the detail that he used a stone for a pillow, so presumably between towns and villages. Verse 12's details inform us that he has a dream – a ladder from the earth to heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending. No other information or description is given because the key point is in verse 13 that the Lord is standing above the ladder.

Some translations suggest the Lord was standing beside Jacob, but this is not supported by the original Hebrew text where it seems clear that the Lord is above the ladder. Furthermore, the Hebrew word for angel means messenger, so it must logically follow that the angels were carrying messages between the Lord and Jacob, otherwise why were they as messengers ascending and descending? There is no doubt who is speaking as the passage begins, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac."

Jumping ahead to verse 21, we must wonder if Jacob had much experience of the Lord before this time as his desire for God to be his God seems conditional. He would have known about the Lord from Abraham and Isaac, so the Lord often familiarly introduces himself, reassuring, reminding us that he is a personal God, known to individuals and showing us he is a God of continuing history. A message follows – one that is repeated in many places in Scripture – that God will give the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, making it clear that Jacob is now included in those whom God knows.

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However, the promise extends beyond Jacob and his immediate family as the Lord informs him that his descendants will be like the dust on the earth. It is a promise that remains true to this day. The Church needs to hear today that they will be a blessing to all the people on the earth (v.14). The Jewish people have offered the world so much, illustrating this promise has certainly come true and Paul's list of spiritual benefits in Romans 1 is to be considered here, too.

The final piece of news for Jacob is that the Lord will one day bring the Jewish people back to the land – Israel, as we know it today. There is a gathering and a further promise that they will not be left alone, they will not be without their God (v.15). It is so amazing to live in an age where we see that happening as Jews make Aliyah to Israel.

When Jacob awakes he does not doubt at all that the Lord is present, yet says he was not aware of it (v.16). This comment is clearer when we read that he was afraid. He believes the Lord has spoken to him, but his thoughts perhaps suggest he was not ready, not expectant, or maybe not tuned in to the Lord as a believer (vv.21-22). It is difficult to know his mind for certain.

Nevertheless, he states, “How awesome is this place.” He sees that place as the gate of heaven a place where he has accessed, even unintentionally and unexpectedly, the presence of the Lord. He uses his stone pillow to mark the place, and having placed oil on it, renames the location as *Bethel* – House of God (v.22) – a permanent reminder. His journey takes on a new meaning as he becomes expectant that God will provide for his needs and he is therefore hopeful he will return to his father's household. These two things appear to be the conditions he sets for God being his God – raising the question of whether he had known God beforehand. There is no doubt now. He is so moved by the Lord that he promises to tithe.

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24. This Psalm of David is one that gives reassurance and warning. It brings us face to face with the enormity, power, and knowledge of God. There is a reassurance that God knows every intimate detail about us, and a warning that we can hide nothing from him (v.1). God is a loving Father into whose arms we can run, and he is also an awesome God who deserves our obedience and our worship. Verse one catches both sides of this.

How much the Lord knows us is clear in verse two – he knows us right down to the details of when we sit or stand up, perceiving our thoughts from afar. What is being described here is an intimate relationship with the Lord; which as Christians, we know is made possible through the Holy Spirit, yet it has its roots deep in Judaism. David speaks of God being so aware of us that “Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.” This is a warning to those who think it does not matter what they say. The Lord hears and knows everything. Verse five tells us this is true wherever we are. There is

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no escape from God, which is not negative, but encouraging as verse six teaches that David is overwhelmed by the knowledge of just how much the Lord knows us and is with us.

David knows God is truly everywhere (v.7) - there is not a single place on earth where we can avoid the Lord even ascending into the heavens or descending into the earth. Furthermore, verse nine tells us that God is alert all the time, and his kingdom extends even to the far end of the sea, meaning beyond Israel as well as within its borders. *Apart from traders, many people would not have travelled extensively in those days, and God was known as the God of Israel, so this may have struck some readers as astonishing.* God's presence everywhere is reassuring because God's hand will bring guidance his right hand will keep people secure. The result is that hiding in darkness – out of sight – does not work with the Lord because he makes the dark turn into light either literally or figuratively (v.11). It matters not. The result is the same.

By verse 13, David moves from God's sovereignty to his intimate knowledge. Creation brings a deeper understanding of this; which is one of the reasons creation has always been a strong theme within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Creation is important because the God who creates is the God who cares, and when the beauty of the world is seen, it is a reminder of how God see us. David knows he was “fearfully and wonderfully made” (v. 13 NIV) – an insight into the creative work of God, of which we are a part.

Verses 15 and 16 are particularly important. Today ultrasounds give parents a first view of their baby, but God was already seeing inside the womb thousands of years ago. More than that, he is aware of the exact route our lives will take as they are written in his book. No one can accurately predict the future of each and every person day by day, but God is already there. That thought leads David to praise God's control of all things and his knowledge of all that is happening and yet to come.

Never far from the thoughts of all the Psalmists is the desire that the wicked would be dealt with – here slain. To 21st-century ears, it sounds too harsh and people object, but it illustrates the passion for God and the desire to deal with those who oppose God. Verses 19-22 list what is offensive about the opponents of God and how it makes David feel. He is truly a man after God's heart. However, David is a realist and knows his own heart is not perfect – so in verses 23-24, he seeks the Lord's guidance, asking the Lord to examine him to see if there is anything in his life that needs to change. All who seek to worship God, serve God, and stand against his enemies need to ensure that they too are right with the Lord.

Romans 8:12-25. So far in this chapter, Paul has been dealing with the wonderful news that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. It is essential for the believer to live according to the Spirit and to be aware of the death that comes from sin. Hence, verse 12 begins “Therefore” showing that there is a direct link with what precedes. The believer is now set free to live to the Spirit not the desires of the flesh for one very good reason, an obligation to the flesh leads to death (v.13) but when the flesh is

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tugging at you, you need the Spirit to deal with it. We cannot manage to fight on our own, so God has given his Spirit to strengthen and support us.

Whilst verse 13 speaks of a battle against the flesh, verse 14 contains one of the most reassuring teachings of Scripture – that the believer is a child of God. The Hebrew Scriptures speak often of a close and intimate relationship between the Lord and believers, but since Jesus has died for us, this relationship is secure and deeply personal. In line with John 1, Paul teaches in verse 15 that the Spirit has brought us into adoption to sonship.

Today we talk more of children than sons of God, but it is worth pointing out that here sonship is significant. In the context in which Paul is writing, sons received any inheritance, not daughters. Paul is highlighting how deep and intense the relationship between the Lord and the believer is. Far from any idea of slavery and being owned by God, we are his children who will receive his inheritance. As if to reinforce the point, Paul reminds believers that they can call God, *Abba* – a word of intimacy between a child and a father. It helps our understanding to know that in Hebrew this word is used by little children and by adult children so intimacy for the believer starts at a young age and carries on throughout life.

We do not need to earn our relationship with the Lord. Lest there be any doubt, the Spirit testifies to our status with our spirit, which should leave us in no doubt at all, and verse 17 then reinforces the fact that we will inherit from the Lord alongside Jesus himself. Paul is not holding back in driving home the depth of our relationship with God and the security of that relationship. However, there is a condition, as so often in Scripture. We must share in Christ's sufferings to share in his glory. We are not gaining a trouble-free life; we are to be aligned with Jesus.

Remembering that verse numbers and chapter headings were not put in by Paul, verse 18 must be read with verse 17. Yes, there are sufferings, but in context, they are nothing compared to the glory to be revealed. They will fade into insignificance. For now, however, even creation is expectant and waiting (v.19). Genesis three tells us creation suffers because of humanity's sin, as Paul reminds us in verse 20. It was done by God – the curses were his – but it will not last forever. Verse 21 teaches that liberation is coming to creation, and death and decay will be removed as the children of God come into their promised freedom and glory.

In verse 22, Paul graphically compares the suffering of creation to the pains of childbirth. It is a suffering pain alongside the children of God, who – despite having received the first fruits of the Spirit – groan inward as they wait eagerly for the final adoption and redemption. The groaning marks a wonderful contrast to the eagerly awaiting. Anything happening now is nothing compared to what is yet to come (v.23), but it is not something that can be seen now. Paul is clear that believers are saved in hope; hope that is unseen, but must be believed in. There is no fault with salvation here; for as Paul says,

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you cannot hope for what you already have (v.24) so there is a need for patience, which takes us full circle back to verse 18 explaining that we are in a battle for now and must depend on God.

Matthew 13:24-30, 34-43. The parables of Jesus are often familiar but need to be understood within their Jewish context. Here Jesus is using a farming analogy; a man is sowing wheat seeds in a field, which would have been very common in biblical times and would have resonated with all who heard him. However, during the night weeds were sown so that when the wheat sprouted weeds sprouted also (v.26).

The owner's servants query the mixed harvest of wheat and weeds. One can imagine a wry smile as Jesus poses the servants' question asking where the weeds came from. It is surely a hint at how limited our understanding is, but he is clear in the answer, "an enemy." The reaction of the servants, who want to pick it up, is natural, but Jesus is clear that the wheat is so precious the weeds must be left in case the wheat is damaged. Once harvest comes the weeds will be collected, tied in bundles and burned so that the wheat can be collected. There is a definite reason for waiting, protection of the wheat.

It remains a point of fascination that Jesus only spoke in parables (v.34) and that this was a fulfilment of prophecy from Psalm 78:2. One cannot help but wonder how many more people might believe if Jesus had not used parables, but there is a purpose we may not understand. Perhaps the answer lies in verse 36. Jesus explains to the disciples – his chosen ones – that it is those within the Kingdom who understand Jesus' parables. They seem to be there as an explanation of Kingdom values to believers alone.

Verse 37 tells us that the farmer is the Son of Man – Jesus himself – and that the field in which he sows is the world – the world, not just Israel. This is significant because Jewish understanding at the time was that God was the God of the Israelites alone. The wheat is the believers, the weeds the non-believers who are described as people of the evil one (v.38). It is one of many parables that draws a deep distinction between believers and non-believers. He further explains that the enemy is the devil and the servants are the angels. In this parable the harvest is the end of the age when angels will be sent around the world to separate believers and non-believers, identifying what and who is godly against what and who is evil. There is no second chance here. Believers are to shine like the sun, a very vivid image, in the kingdom of the Father, but those who are not believers are thrown into a blazing furnace.

It is a graphic image, but it is a reality Jesus teaches here and elsewhere. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there was always an understanding of those who are with God and those who are not – as evidenced in Psalm 139 above. Today believers and non-believers can be either Jews or Gentiles.

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ACNA Readings

Wisdom 12:13, 16-19. Verse 13 leaves no doubt that God is the only God and there are no others but the one God who is caring and who is interested in all people. This is an introduction to the rest of the verse that challenges any idea that God could have acted unjustly. His uniqueness and his care identify him as a just God.

In verse 16, the writer speaks of God's righteousness coming out of his might. It continues the theme of what may be called fair play to all, to the extent that despite being over all God is said to be lenient at the end of the verse. So often, God is seen as a God to be feared, yet a God to be trusted for his love and care. His strength is often revealed whenever there is disbelief in his power. But for those who are his, insolence leads to a rebuke as God seeks to keep his own on track.

Lest there should be a charge against God for abusing his power and authority, the writer explains that God judges with clemency (v.18) and governs with leniency. This is not to be seen as a weakness for we are reminded that the power of God is always there. As a result, the followers of God are expected to act appropriately exhibiting kindness (v.19), but when they go astray there is the option of repentance of sins, for God's power is evident in both judgement and forgiveness.

Psalm 86. In this Psalm of David, he goes straight to the intimate relationship between God and himself. He knows God will answer him when he cries out and he knows that this will happen because God knows he is poor and needy. He does not need to make any special effort for God to listen to him; God accepts David as he is. Verse two continues the same theme as David asks God to guard his life, pleading his faithfulness to God and declaring his trust in God. David knows he is in partnership with God. David plays his part, but so does God (v.3) who is expected to show mercy to one who is in a 24/7 relationship. David is explicit that his relationship with the Lord is an ongoing thing, not something he opts in and out of. The Hebraic view is clear – everything revolves around a relationship with God whether it is work, play, or time specifically dedicated to God. As a result of his pleading, David knows God will bring joy (v.4).

David highlights more of God's character from verse five onwards, highlighting God is not only forgiving and good, but abounds in love. Words like abound help us to know God is not begrudgingly reaching out to us. In verse six, he again – as with verse one – appeals to God to hear him as he seeks mercy. He knows his true state before God. He does not presume on God, he knows his position before God, and in verse seven, his honesty comes to the fore again as he acknowledges that even in distress the Lord will answer those who call upon him.

Verse eight seems to suggest there are other gods, but from the Hebrew Scriptures, we know that David does not believe this to be true. His expression has more to do with showing how false other gods are

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because they do not match up to the Lord and cannot do what the Lord does. One day – as verse nine states – all the nations will come before the Lord, but they will come worshipping the Lord and bringing glory to his name. This reinforces the idea that other gods are not real, for the nations will see that only God is worthy of praise, only God can do marvellous deeds and show himself to be true.

David is already there with God, but he knows he is not perfect and needs teaching so that he can rely more on God and trust God wholeheartedly. Not only does he wish to rely totally on God, but the Hebraic worldview comes to the fore again in verse 12, which shows that he needs his whole heart to glorify God – not just a part of it. Everything about David is directed at God. He does not compartmentalise his life. In verse 13, he explains why: God's love is so great; he has been a recipient of it and has been rescued from death and despair.

Verse 14 brings to light the age-old cry of Scripture that there are enemies of God – here described as arrogant and ruthless and set on destroying David without paying any attention to the Lord. God's enemies ignore him and follow their own heart and their desires. David knows, however, that God is compassionate and gracious, a God who does not anger easily but has an endless supply of love and faithfulness. That latter thought lets David be confident in asking God to turn his attention to him (v.16) so he may receive mercy and strength – qualities that truly come from God.

Again, he pleads that he may be saved due to playing his part – his service – which he compares with his mother's service. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of passing down the fear of the Lord from one generation to the next, and that has happened here. By the end of the Psalm (v.17), David seeks a sign of God's goodness – not for himself – but as a witness to his enemies so that they may see the Lord and be put to shame, and his request for help and mercy is at this point seen to be received. David has such confidence in the Lord that he can proclaim fulfilment of his request in the same breath that the request is made.

About the author. The Rev 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 Shoresh 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.