

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

RCL Readings – 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

ACNA Readings – 1 Kings 19:15-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Introduction. In the UK our news is full of the problems holidaymakers are facing with many cancelled flights, often last minute, dispute on the railways with three days of strikes planned and arguments over whether asylum seekers should be deported to Rwanda or not. It is a world of uncertainty, confusion and often anger. For the believer, we know that all hope is found in the certainty of faith and a strong relationship with Jesus, yet it is so easy to be knocked by what is happening around us.

Common Theme. The readings focus on the sovereignty of God and what a relationship with the Lord can achieve. There is a great deal in these passages about the need to sacrifice whatever is necessary to follow the Lord and that sometimes the cost seems high, but that there are always positive consequences from being in tune with God.

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14. This reading marks the end of Elijah's time on earth. Elijah had been a very faithful prophet who had shown people that God was there to be trusted and obeyed. He had also had a re-awakening after sinking following the battle against the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah needed to be reminded of the God he was serving. We read that it is now time for Elijah to go to heaven. He is markedly different from everyone else in the Hebrew Scriptures in that he does not die on earth but is taken into heaven. For believers in Jesus, there is the comparison with his ascension which is quite similar and that fits well with Elijah foreshadowing the Messiah. At the same time, Elijah is preparing his successor in much the same way as Jesus prepared his disciples for the time after his ascension.

In verse 7, we read that 50 men from the company of the prophets are facing the Jordan where Elijah and Elisha are standing. They are to witness the miracle of the waters being parted and Elijah and Elisha walking across where the water had been. Clearly, there is a parallel with Moses for whom God had parted the sea as the Israelites escaped from Egypt. Moses the lawgiver parts water, and Elijah the prophet parts water. Both men foreshadow the Messiah and are associated with the Messiah, so it makes sense. We must also remember that Joshua had been used to part the Jordan as well for entry into the Promised Land. Each time water is parted, it is a reminder of a powerful God and how he equips his servants and gives them power to do his work. It also shows continuity by God in his promises.

Why would Elijah take off his cloak in verse 8 to perform this act? The answer lies in the fact that Elijah was like a father to Elisha, and in verse 12, Elisha calls him "My father, my father". Elisha is keen to follow in Elijah's footsteps. In Judaism, when someone dies, a garment is torn (Gen 37:34, 2 Sam 13:30-32). The process is known as *keriah*. It is possible that Elijah is preparing to hand his cloak to his protégé as it is time for him to go from this world. Elisha is going to witness God's power through the use of that cloak, which would give him confidence in God in the following years after Elisha becomes the owner of the same cloak. Filled with confidence, having seen the miracle done by Elijah, Elisha asks for a double portion of his spirit. He wants to be able to repeat the work

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done by Elijah for his own ministry. He wants to carry on the work of Elijah in much the same way as believers should carry on the work of the Messiah who himself said, “You will do even greater things” (John 14:12). In verse 11, Elisha sees Elijah taken up to heaven, which was the sign he needed to know he would receive the double portion of Elijah’s spirit as said in verse 10. Elisha takes his cloak and tears it as he mourns the passing of his mentor. As Elisha picks up the cloak, he questions the presence of God (v. 14). Is he expressing doubt or fear, or simply asking if God would be with him as he had been with Elijah? It could be read a number of ways, but on balance, I think Elisha was seeing if God would be with him. God certainly is for now it is Elisha’s turn to see the power of God as he too sees the waters split in two as he strikes them with Elijah’s cloak. It must have been a very reassuring moment.

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20. The opening verses of the psalm are words that could be uttered by any believer: the need to cry out to God when in distress. It is a strong point in the Judeo-Christian faith that believers can appeal to the Lord when in need and be sure of an answer. God accepts the honesty of the cry, the honesty of the state of mind of the one who cries out. Verse 2 shows the realism that the answer from God may not be immediate, and here in verse 2 the psalmist speaks of how he cries out in the night and could not be comforted. Like Elisha who remembered Elijah parting the waters of the River Jordan, the psalmist says in verse 11 that he remembers the deeds and miracles of the Lord. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is a repeated call to remember God’s deeds in the past. By looking back, we are reminded of the power of God, which should give us the faith to expect God to work again. The annual celebration of the Passover is perhaps one of the best examples of this approach. In verses 13-15 there is a change of tone from the crying out of verses 1-2 to the understanding of who God is and what he can achieve. The psalmist is taking us from the crying out to God, through the memory to what can be achieved by looking back – a new certainty in God. By verses 16-19, there is a further change from the God of miracles to how nature responds to God. We see this with Jesus calming the storm, for example, in the New Testament, but here the thoughts are retrospective, reminding the psalmist of things he has seen in the past or heard of from others. From the desperate cries of verse 1, we move through an act of remembrance, leading to a new trust in God and a time of joyous reflection on the greatness of God, which even the elements obey.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25. Our New Testament epistle builds on the theme of the Old Testament readings that knowing God provides certainty and a different way of living. Paul deals with this in verse 1, speaking of the freedom we have in Christ and that as a result we should not be burdened by a yoke of slavery, knowing Jesus enables us to break free from what has bound us in the past. This comes with a condition, however, that we should not misuse that freedom to indulge the flesh but instead use it to serve others. Selfishness has no place in the Kingdom.

Verse 14 continues the theme of a consistent God as Paul explains that the Law had a purpose, a purpose which can be summed up in the need to love one’s neighbour as oneself, exactly as Jesus had taught. Not doing so can lead to destruction (v. 15). Scripture teaches that we will never achieve the purposes of God on our own, and here there is no exception. Paul explains that walking by the Spirit is the only way to go, for concentration on the Spirit prevents concentration on the desires of the flesh, as the two are opposed (v. 17).

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Verse 18 lets us know more about that freedom won for us by the Lord Jesus. We are released from the Law. This does not mean that the Law was at fault but that we will not suffer the consequences of the Law as God is now with us. As if to reinforce the point, there is a list of behaviour that would prevent us from being in the presence of the Lord. It is quite a comprehensive list, but it is one that will be familiar to anyone with a working knowledge of Scripture. Once again, there is absolute proof of consistency with God. This list could quite easily have been lifted from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Verses 22-25 provide what might be thought of as the opposite behaviour, behaviour that is approved of by the Lord, behaviour that is expected from a believer. Paul describes it as fruit, which is fitting because these things will grow inside us as we get to know the Lord more and more, just as fruit continues to grow on trees as the tree matures. If we keep in step with the Spirit (v. 25) and focus on him and what he desires of us, we can ensure that we stay with the right behaviour list, so to speak.

Luke 9:51-62. The sovereignty of God is such that Jesus knew exactly when the time for the end of his mission of earth would come. Here Luke helps us see into this by recording that Jesus resolutely went up to Jerusalem (v. 51) There is no attempt to divert from the task that lay ahead, and it reminds us of Elijah in the Kings reading as he prepared for the end of his mission. Ministry for God is prepared and it is ongoing as one passes the mantle to the next. It is interesting in verse 52 that Jesus sent messengers to a Samaritan village because the Samaritans were natural enemies of the Jews, although we know from John 4 that Jesus had found a welcome in Samaria at times. This time, however, he is not to be welcomed because he is heading to Jerusalem (v. 53), which presumably heightened the awareness of the differences between the two peoples. James and John are indignant about this and in verse 54 we read, almost with amusement, that they want to call down fire and destroy them. Whilst I am sure they thought their intentions were honourable, Jesus will not allow it and instead heads to another village (v. 56). Perhaps in the Hebrew Scriptures, it may have been the case that they should have been destroyed as with the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 19, but Jesus is working to a different principle this time and as we look back we can see that following his death there is hope for all to know him. It may well be too that Jesus is thinking back to the episode with the Samaritan woman, although that would be guesswork in the context of this passage.

From verse 57 onwards, Luke takes a different track and addresses the cost of following Jesus. We see in verse 57 that a man approaches Jesus and says he will follow him, but Jesus seems to put him off by replying that he has no home, a reminder that sacrifice is very much part of the Christian method. In verse 59, it is Jesus who calls rather than a man approaching Jesus. The individual's response this time is that they want time to bury their father. At face value, this does not seem unreasonable as Scripture reminds us of the need to honour parents. However, here Jesus is pointing out that we cannot be distracted by those without hope for the Gospel must be first, whatever the cost. A similar encounter follows in the next verses as another potential recruit wants a chance to bid farewell to his family. Again it does not seem to be an unreasonable request, but once more Jesus replies (v. 62) that we must remain focused on God at all times, not look back at whatever we have left behind. It is similar teaching to Hebrews 12:2: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus." Ultimately it is a call of sacrifice, and following the Lord will cost.

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ACNA Readings

1 Kings 19:15-21. The reading here focuses on the end of the ministry of Elijah. It reads almost as a tidying-up exercise for Elijah as he is called to anoint two kings who will continue to work out the purposes of God. We should never forget that no matter how powerful a leader is, God is the one in overall control. What comes as particularly interesting is that Elijah is told to anoint Elisha as his successor. There are always successors to any ministry that is God-given. Some traditional churches connected to catholic tradition think of apostolic succession whereby one generation hands the task of the Gospel to the next, and Elijah anointing Elisha is a similar approach. Elisha will put to death the enemies of God who have not already been dealt with by Hazeel and Jehu. As this passage comes on the back of the contest at Mount Carmel, it is interesting to read that the Lord had reserved 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal (v. 18). The fact that God has reserved a community reminds us how desperate the situation in Israel had become in that many had been put to death. However, even in the midst of great disobedience and revolt against God, there is always a remnant that remains faithful to the Lord. It should be an encouragement to both Elijah and Elisha that there are those left who will be that remnant for the Lord. On finding Elisha, Elijah throws his cloak around him (v. 19). This is the passing on of the mantle to the next generation and a sign that Elijah knew his time on earth was finished. Like a father passing on to his son, Elijah passes on to Elisha. Elisha had been ploughing when Elijah arrived and he requests time to say goodbye to his father and mother first. In v. 21 this is followed by Elisha sacrificing his oxen and burning his ploughing equipment. It is a supreme act of sacrifice. Elisha is declaring in this act that he is leaving his past behind and moving on to pastures new. There is surely an echo here of the disciples in the New Testament who leave everything to follow Jesus. These incidents remind us that the call of God is supreme and that we should leave the past behind.

Psalms 16. One of the wonderful points about the Judeo-Christian faith is that a believer can always appeal to God whatever the need or situation and feel secure that an answer will be forthcoming and that God will provide his protection. In verse 1 that is exactly what is happening as David cries out for God's protection and knowing the safest place to be is with the Lord. The reason he feels he can do this becomes apparent in verses 2-3 with a clear declaration of who God is and where people should be in relation to God. David is not questioning the presence of God or the care of God but declaring the same as a certainty, with the comparison in verse 4 of those who follow false gods and suffer for those beliefs. His sense of certainty in the Lord and his recollection of the blessing received from knowing God are dealt with in verses 5-8. Verse 5 particularly reminds David that he must invest solely in God and that as a result, he has seen an inheritance in verse 6. By reflecting on God and his goodness, the believer should feel more secure, which will always lead to praise, as we see in verses 7-8. Praise is circular in nature. God does something for the believer (v. 2), and the believer praises God (v. 7) which leads to a certain style of behaviour as seen in the second half of verse 7, enabling the believer to then focus back on God, as seen in verse 8. As one focuses on God, the circle starts again with a response from God (v. 8) leading to praise and so on. Verses 8-11 become a natural follow-on of trust and praise in God even to the point of death (v. 10). David often reflects on the certainty of life beyond the grave – here the last line of verse 11. It is a remarkable

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teaching considering he is years ahead of the teaching of the Lord Jesus on this subject, but it helps to prove that the Lord is continuous and continually reliable. He does not change his mind. Any idea that the New Testament presents a completely different God with a new approach is false teaching. The Hebrew Scriptures build up to the revelation of the Messiah. The New Testament is the outworking of life in the knowledge of the Messiah. God has not changed, just revealed a great deal more of himself.

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.