

## Sermon Notes for Jerusalem Sunday

May 17th 2015

### RCL Sunday Readings (NRSV)

Acts 1:15-17 and 21-26

#### Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, <sup>16</sup> “Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus — <sup>17</sup> for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.

<sup>21</sup> “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us — one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” <sup>23</sup> So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. <sup>24</sup> Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen <sup>25</sup> to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” <sup>26</sup> And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

#### Psalm 1

#### The Two Ways

<sup>1</sup> Happy are those  
    who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
    or sit in the seat of scoffers;  
<sup>2</sup> but their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
    and on his law they meditate day and night.  
<sup>3</sup> They are like trees

planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

<sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

<sup>6</sup> for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked  
will perish.

### 1 John 5: 9-13

#### **Testimony Concerning the Son of God**

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. <sup>10</sup> Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. <sup>11</sup> And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup> Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. <sup>13</sup> I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

### John 17: 6-19

#### **Jesus Prays for His Disciples**

Jesus prayed and said: <sup>6</sup> “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. <sup>7</sup> Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; <sup>8</sup> for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. <sup>9</sup> I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. <sup>10</sup> All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. <sup>11</sup> And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy

Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. <sup>12</sup> While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. <sup>13</sup> But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. <sup>14</sup> I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>15</sup> I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup> They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.”

### **Common and Specific Themes**

The lectionary texts today draw our attention to the work of the Church, beginning in Jerusalem, and to the love and care God has for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

The Acts reading describes the first organizational steps of the apostles to prepare the Church for its expansion into the Gentile world. Following the death of Judas, Matthias is elected to replace him, suggesting a role of special authority for the Twelve whose number is again made complete. The main criterion for selection is to be an effective witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Peter explains that these events – betrayal, death, and resurrection - are in fulfillment of the Scriptures, indicating that God’s intention for the Church is being carried out even through the turmoil of the present days. The casting of lots which leads to the appointment of Matthias – a common way of seeking divine guidance in the ancient world – stands in deliberate contrast to the action of the soldiers in dividing up Jesus’ clothes (John 19:24, Matthew 27:35 etc.). Thus God is already restoring what the world has tried to destroy. The trust of the apostles in God’s faithfulness leads directly on to the Day of Pentecost.

The Psalm, an ancient song of the Hebrew people contrasting the way of godliness with the way of wickedness, follows in close connection to this story of betrayal and violence at the hands of Judas. We have a choice in the way we live our lives, whatever our circumstances. The Psalmist’s counter-posing of the two

ways parallels the theme of light and darkness prevalent in the Johannine writings that follow. The theme of judgment is introduced, and we are reminded of our accountability to God. In response to their delight in, and obedience to, the law of the Lord, God watches over the righteous and blesses their days with fruitfulness and prosperity.

The First Letter of John is widely held to have been written in repudiation of the Gnostic belief that the divine had merely appeared to be incarnate in Jesus without actually taking on his humanity. Proponents of this view placed greater weight on Christ than on Jesus, and John writes to contest this separation. It is important to him that Christians believe in the name of the Son of God, and in the actual life and deeds of the “Word made Flesh.” This has been revealed by God, he writes, and those who do not accept Jesus Christ make God into a liar. Whoever confesses his name is already moving along the way of eternal life. The context of this letter – variously dated by scholars – appears to be a time of tension in the first century CE when the emerging Church, consisting of house Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah, were opposed by synagogue Jews who disputed the claim. Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown describes this as “the first schism.”

The Gospel reading is taken from the Farewell Discourses (John chapters 14-17) in which Jesus takes leave of his disciples in a series of lengthy exhortations prior to his Ascension. In Chapter 17 we listen in on Jesus praying to the Father. It is a prayer of extraordinary beauty and power, a sacred conversation within the Holy Trinity that invites us into holy ground. Jesus affirms the completion of his earthly ministry and prays for those who were given to him by the Creator and have “kept your word.” He prays for protection for the nascent Church, now about to face many perils and tragedies. He describes himself as being “glorified in them” and he prays for their complete joy. These gifts of glory and joy are spiritual not material. They are not to be equated with success or wealth, but with sanctification in truth. The reading ends with the imperative to mission, the sending out of Jesus’ friends into the world God loves so that all may receive the same joy and truth. This is a long and deeply personal prayer, giving us a glimpse into the intimate relation between our Lord and the Father, a deep and divine intimacy Jesus longs to have with each of us.

## **Some Comments and Observations**

On Jerusalem Sunday, a day when Anglicans in Canada place special emphasis on the life and mission of the Diocese of Jerusalem, these texts take us to the deep sources of our faith. The final prayer of Jesus, spoken in the city, lifts our eyes to the far horizons of God's hope for the world. This prayer for unity and joy – which was followed by the gifts of the Spirit descending like fire upon the believers – is a call to action to Christians everywhere. Jerusalem is the Mother Church of the Christian tradition. Its faithfulness in mission and prayer today has remained unbroken throughout the centuries, sometimes in grand basilicas, but often in simple house churches and private shrines.

It is a city of much suffering and conflict still, an epicentre of global geopolitics that directly affects the well-being of all nations. The possible emergence of a nuclear Iran, the failure of the Arab Spring, the rise of a brutal caliphate, the severing of countries, towns, and cities through civil war, the millions of displaced refugees, and the continuing tragedy of Palestinian people among whom Christians have kept alive a witness to the Gospel in the land of our Lord's birth through twenty centuries - all of this impacts the people of Jerusalem today and through them the world.

We are reminded in the texts not to follow the paths of the wicked, or the scoffers, who heap violence upon violence. Rather, we are asked to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom is light and life. At a time when the Christian community in the Holy Land is shrinking rapidly, by hundreds and thousands, through conflict and repression, the future of our witness to the resurrection is being endangered in the land where it originally happened. Warnings of judgment resound to us across the years from these ancient writings.

Mission requires effective organization, which in turn requires generosity of prayer and financial support. Last year, Anglicans in Canada gave over \$28000 in direct donations to the mission work of the Diocese of Jerusalem. It was a small beginning. We hope it will grow in enthusiasm and concern this year throughout every Canadian parish and congregation. Archbishop Suheil Dawani, the Bishop of Jerusalem, and his wife Shafeeqa, have asked for our commitment as partners in the Gospel to keep alive the diocesan hospitals, clinics and medical centres

serving people of all faiths in the Middle East, and to join them in prayers for peace.

Even in the turmoil of these present days God is fulfilling the promises of Scripture. We are called into partnership with people who are witnesses to that truth in the midst of enormous despair.

Jerusalem Sunday is a way of answering our Lord's prayer for protection for his Church, and joy for all who believe in his name.

### **Additional Scriptural References**

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16: 21)

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37)

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 46 and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah[n] is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24: 45-47)

I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; 26 for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 27 They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15: 25-27)

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. 2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. 3 And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. (1 Corinthians 16: 1-3)

Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia[g] and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. (Galatians 4: 24-26)

### **Quotations of Interest**

Once Yahweh had been enthroned on Zion, tzedek (justice, righteousness) became his attribute too: he would see that justice was done in his kingdom, that the poor and vulnerable were protected, and that the strong did not oppress the weak. Only then would Zion become a city of shalom, a word that is usually translated as “peace,” but has as its root meaning “wholeness,” “completeness” – that sense of wholeness and completeness which people sought in their holy places. Hence shalom includes all manner of well-being: fertility, harmony, and success in war. The experience of shalom negated the anomie and alienation that is the cause of so much human distress on earth. It was, as we have seen, also a sense of the peace which is God. But Jerusalem could not be a holy city of shalom if there was no tzedek or “righteousness” in the land. All too often, the people of Israel would forget this. They would concentrate on the holiness and integrity of Jerusalem; they would fight for its purity. But, as the prophets reminded them, if they neglected the pursuit of justice, this would inevitably entail the loss of shalom.

(“Jerusalem, One City Three Faiths” by Karen Armstrong, 2005, p. 106.)

Many years ago I had the privilege of meeting one of the great religious leaders of the Jewish world. He was the head of a large group of Jewish mystics. I was inspired by his teachings and impressed by the spirituality of his followers. But I had a question about the way of life he advocated. It seemed exclusive. In its intense and segregated piety it shut out the rest of the world. Was there not – I asked him – beauty and value outside the narrow walls in which he lived? He answered me with a parable.

Imagine, he said, two people who spend their lives transporting stones. One carries bags of diamonds. The other hauls sacks of rocks. Each is now asked to take a consignment of rubies. Which of the two understands what he is now to carry? The man who is used to diamonds knows that stones can be precious, even

those that are not diamonds. But the man who has carried only rocks thinks of stones as a mere burden. They have weight but not worth. Rubies are beyond his comprehension.

So it is, he said, with faith. If we cherish our own, then we will understand the value of others. We may regard ours as a diamond and another faith as a ruby, but we know that both are precious stones. But if faith is a mere burden, not only will we not value ours. Neither will we value the faith of someone else. We will see both as equally useless. True tolerance, he implied, comes not from the absence of faith but from its living presence. Understanding the particularity of what matters to us is the best way of coming to appreciate what matters to others.

(“The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations” by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, 2002, p. 208)

The Qur’an does not use the word jihad to refer to warfare or fighting: such acts are referred to as qital. While the Qur’an’s call to jihad is unconditional and unrestricted, such is not the case for qital. Jihad is a good in and of itself, while qital is not. Jihad is good because it is like the Protestant work ethic: hard work toward a good cause. Qital – war – however, is a different matter altogether. Every reference in the Qur’an to qital is restricted and limited by particular conditions; but exhortations to jihad, like the references to justice or truth, are absolute and unconditional. On every single occasion that the Qur’an exhorts Muslims to fight, it hastens to qualify the exhortation by a command to believers not to transgress, but rather to forgive, or to seek peace. Although this fact is recognizable by simply reading the text of the Qur’an, this textual reality has strangely eluded a large number of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of the Qur’an. Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that the Qur’an never endorses the military option without conditioning that choice in some significant way.

(“The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists” by Khaled Abou El Fadl, 2005, p. 223)

The first settlements, established in the mid 1970s, were justified by the Israeli government on specific security concerns, such as control of high ground. Then conservative governments headed by Menachim Begin and Yitzhak Shamir came to office intent on the idea of a “greater Israel,” re-establishing the country’s claim to the entire West Bank (all of biblical Judaea and Samaria) and essentially



ignoring the aspirations of millions of Palestinians. Under their leadership, Israelis were given financial incentives to establish communities in places historically lived in by Arabs. Begin referred to the conquered territories as “liberated Israeli land.” Shamir called the construction of settlements “holy work.” As one rabbi explained “the Redemption of the whole world depends on the Redemption of Israel. From this derives our moral, spiritual and cultural influence over the entire world. The blessing will come to all humanity from the people of Israel living in the whole of its land.”

The rabbi may believe that the settlements have enhanced Israel’s influence, but the evidence is sparse. As many Israelis have pointed out, the aggressive program of construction on disputed territory tarnished their country’s moral standing, deepened Arab anger, and contributed to Palestinian misery. The settlements also imposed an unsustainable burden on Israel’s security forces, who were required to protect the settlers from their hostile, impoverished Palestinian neighbors.

I find myself in sad agreement with Leon Wieseltier, the literary editor of the New Republic: “The idea of Greater Israel . . . was always a foul idea, morally and strategically. It promoted the immediate ecstasy of the few above the eventual safety of the many; and introduced the toxins of messianism and mysticism into the politics of a great modern democracy.”

(“The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs” by Madeleine Albright, 2006, p. 132-133)

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