

Additional Jerusalem and Holy Land Sunday
Worship Resources: Readings, Context, and
Sermon Notes



The Revised Common Lectionary—Year C

Readings

Acts 16: 16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17: 20-26

Context & Sermon Notes

Common and Specific Themes (2016)

Prepared by Michael Ingham

The lections for this Jerusalem Sunday in the Anglican Church of Canada point to God's power in guiding the mission of the Church, and to the virtuous character of the early apostles who commended the Gospel by their noble actions toward an often hostile world.

Paul and Silas are in Philippi, a city in Greece, and on their way to prayer when they are confronted by a woman whom some early manuscripts describe as possessed "with the spirit of Python." The snake-god was the serpent worshipped at Delphi as a symbol of wisdom. The woman is likely a priestess of the cult, and is referred to also as a

'ventriloquist' with the capacity of speaking in a disguised voice. The intent of this description is to denote madness or hysteria, and she pursues the two evangelists in a harassing manner, although she is clearly speaking the truth about them. She rightly names them as "slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." When Paul commands the spirit inside her to leave, he both confirms her message and also heals her from this possession. But as she is also a slave whose owners have exploited her madness to make money, Paul and Silas soon find themselves in jail on false charges—not the first (or last) clash between religion and capitalism.

In the most inaccessible inner part of the prison, the two men are fastened by the feet, forcing them to kneel on the stone floor. But here they begin to pray and are overheard eagerly by the other prisoners. Tertullian would later write to the martyrs of the Church these words of encouragement: —"The leg feels not the stocks when the mind is in heaven. Though the body is held fast, all things lie open in the spirit." Enduring their torture, the two evangelists nevertheless manage to lift the spirits both of their captors and fellow prisoners.

The earthquake is not directly attributed to the action of God in the text, but as Archbishop William Temple remarked—"when I pray, coincidences happen. When I stop praying, they stop happening." The walls come tumbling down, but Paul and Silas remain in place and do not try to escape. Instead, they save the jailor from committing suicide and speak to him of salvation in Jesus Christ. The jailor becomes a Christian by dawn.

The two stories in this one reading illuminate the confidence in God that sustains the Church through public harassment and mistreatment. They reveal the depth of faith and strength of character of the early evangelists who do not seek their own safety or advantage, but only the glory of God and the liberation of those enslaved to fear and violence.

Psalm 97 confirms the sure faithfulness of God, reminding us that “The Lord loves those who hate evil; he guards the lives of his faithful; he rescues them from the hand of the wicked.” The Psalm affirms the governance of God over the whole earth as its loving Creator, meaning that we are not the products of mere chance, nor subject to the controlling forces of evil, nor abandoned to a meaningless existence alone in the cosmos. It is an ancient song of the Hebrew people who look in hope to the final triumph of righteousness and glory through the power and goodness of God.

The Book of Revelation extends and deepens this theme of divine governance by identifying the ruler of the earth as Jesus Christ himself. He is the ‘beginning and the end’—the ‘Alpha and the Omega’ (first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) - thereby containing in himself the whole of time and existence. Nothing, therefore, stands outside of Christ or has an independent source. These are the final tumultuous words of the New Testament, bringing to a close the Christian Scriptures. They are an invitation to the reader to come to Christ and to partake freely of his gift of joy and life. They are a promise of Christ’s faithfulness to all who persevere in a righteous and holy life despite all tragedies and temptations.

Of slight interest, perhaps, are the verses omitted by the Revised Common Lectionary from this section of the Bible (verses 15, 18 and 19 of Chapter 22). They speak of ‘dogs and fornicators and murderers and idolaters’ and contain a warning to any who would add their own words to the Scriptures or remove any they do not like. The authors of the contemporary lectionary may have felt these passages to be too strong for modern sensibilities. But the omissions seem actually to illustrate the point of the warnings. It is up to the preacher to interpret these texts to modern ears.

The Gospel reading is from the Farewell Discourses (St. John 14—17) in which Jesus takes his leave of the disciples and concludes his earthly ministry before the Ascension.

It is a long prayer in which we hear the actual words of Jesus spoken intimately to the Father—a rare opportunity in the New Testament.

Jesus prays for the unity of the Church. He asks that we may always belong to God, and that just as God in Christ has sanctified us with his truth, and made us holy by his word, so we who believe in him shall remain one as a sign to those who are not yet one. Just as the Son and the Father are indivisibly united, so we who bear their name are to reflect their unity and point to that divine truth which overcomes all human division.

It is an astonishing prayer revealing the desire of the departing Jesus for his friends throughout time, a prayer for the Church to the ends of the ages. But even in its beauty there is a warning, which is made clearer if you observe the negative in it. To the extent that we are disunited, to the extent that we reflect human divisions instead of divine unity, we do not bear God's name. To the extent that we promote separation, and seek to preserve our own power and agendas, we do not share in the glory which the Father has given the Son.

Putting that the right way round again, to the extent we do reflect God's glory and bear witness to his name, we shall draw closer to each other. So if we draw further apart from each other, we draw further apart from God. The final prayer of the Son to the Father is that we should not be divided.

Multi-Narrative Pilgrimage (2019)

Prepared by Richard LeSueur

Multi narrative pilgrimage is travel that immerses one in a soulful engagement with a land, its peoples and their history, favouring every narrative. It is responsible Christian travel.

Context: Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries globally. According to the United Nations World Trade Organization (UNWTO) tourism accounted for 10% of the global economy in 2016 and is projected to increase by 4% or more, annually until 2030.

Last year Israel welcomed 4 million tourists up 14% from the previous year, and up 38% from 2016. Christian pilgrims comprise 56% of those who visit Israel.

A study of Catholic pilgrimage sites in Europe has reported that Western Europe's 6,000 pilgrim centres are generating over 60 million 'religiously motivated' visits each year. This phenomenon is being called a renaissance in pilgrimage; a resurgence of interest to encounter places of spiritual significance.

One might ask is this renaissance in pilgrimage only because travel is becoming more accessible or more affordable. Is it because of an increase in disposable income or the Baby Boom effect, or is something deeper taking place? The churches of Europe are empty but its pilgrim routes are overflowing. What might we learn from this?

On "Jerusalem Sunday," consider giving attention to the global resurgence in pilgrimage and to wonder what spiritual principles might comprise 'responsible tourism' for Christians, especially those visiting the biblical lands of Israel-Palestine and Jordan. In over 30 years of leading pilgrimage programs to Israel the best term I have found to inform the development of travel itineraries is "multi-narrative pilgrimage." Jesus did not favour one people nor the story of one people. Christian pilgrims who follow a Lord who said "Blessed are the peacemakers," deserve to be immersed in the totality of a land; in the story of all of its peoples, their hopes and dreams, and a geography made sacred by the activity of God in salvation history.

Desolation and Companionship (2022)

*Prepared by the Rev. Professor Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, Chair,
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“I will not leave you desolate; I am coming to you.” (John 14:18 NRSV Updated Ed)

What are we to be and become for Companions in Jerusalem? How are we to speak and think so that those in the parishes of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem not consider that they have been forgotten or abandoned? How do we bring comfort to those remaining faithful in situations of desolation? Indeed, what do we ourselves need when feeling abandoned and forsaken?

Companionship simply means having another whom you know and trust be with you instead of remaining solitary. It does not require that you ‘do’ anything rather it presumes that you will offer your presence to stave off the fear that comes from feeling abandoned.

The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land are in one of the more difficult locations of the Anglican Communion and Lutheran world as it comprises churches that are either in war zones and or occupied territories of the middle east. The point being not that one needs to identify either with the occupier or the occupied but rather that you be with the one who is your companion so that they not feel deserted in situations of seeming hopelessness.

Taking our lead from the many sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John about companionship, which is seen as synonymous with friendship, one can see how important these synonymous concepts are in the Gospel.

“Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command”. (John 15:12-15) This is no sentimentalised notion of friendship or companionship. It is a hard statement in that it requires the willingness to suffer physically as well as spiritually with those with whom we are companions.

In our set Gospel reading from the Gospel of John there is this remarkable phrasing:

17:22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,

17:23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Most of us as Christians in Canada have little idea of what it means to be persecuted for our beliefs or have feelings that we cannot express our religious sentiments. In these sayings of Jesus is found the notion that together we can withstand the pressures of the secular age and or political persecution.

The Canadian Companions of Jerusalem made a promise some 10 years ago that we would be as one with the people of the Diocese of Jerusalem not only in what we might be able to raise in funds but even more importantly by how we would stand in loving companionship with all the people of the parishes of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem.

To do so we have gained a certain trust and made certain inroads to understanding the pressures felt by those in the Diocese. We hope that in no small way those of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem have touched our hearts and made us more sensitive as to how we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We do these things because we believe that the meting out of God's love is the diplomacy which is so needed.

17:26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

This is the activity that Jesus initiated and we now continue. On this Sunday we do so as Companions of Jerusalem, so that God's love might be known to the ends of the earth, to be sure. But our particularity this Sunday is on the people of the various parishes of Jerusalem, Gaza, West Bank, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, that they might know of our prayers. This Sunday in particular we think of the situations of so many in the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land so that they do not fear that they have been abandoned and orphaned by the rest of us.



Anglican Church of Canada

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