

TRINITY CHURCH LIME ROCK
November 20, 2016
Christ the King Sunday
Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is the last Sunday before Advent, Christ the King Sunday. The reference is of course to the Hebrew Scripture reading that promises a king for Israel and to "King of The Jews" inscription on the cross. It used to be called "the Sunday next before Advent", which I really like. "The Sunday next before Advent" has a certain ring to it---it tells us we have come to the end of the year- which sometimes feels like the 233rd Sunday after Pentecost, if Easter has been early! But it also winds up the liturgical year, which we will begin again next Sunday with the lighting of the Advent calendar and the return to Year A readings in the lectionary.

But our liturgy did not simply rain down from heaven like manna! The first so called Christians, or Followers of the Way, were a sect within Judaism. They were all Jews - exploring an alternative way of worship while remaining within the synagogue. And our liturgy today reflects some of the Jewish liturgical pattern of Jesus' time. First there was a reading from the Torah, also called The Law, comprised of the five books of Moses. The Torah was read **in total** each year from the first chapter of Genesis - the Creation- through the last chapter of Deuteronomy -the death of Moses. That meant spending about **40** minutes on the **FIRST** reading each Sabbath! So let's never complain about long readings!

Second came a reading from the "former prophets" which dealt with the life of the Jewish people from the death of Moses through the Second Book of Kings. Finally came a reading from the "latter prophets" - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the "Book of the Twelve" or what we call the "minor prophets" - minor because they were short books, not unimportant ones! Then the synagogue leader, or perhaps an invited guest, would interpret one or more of those readings.

In between the readings, psalms were sung, perhaps to break up the length of passive sitting by the congregation. Today, at Morning Prayer, we are singing canticles. Sound familiar? An opening prayer and collect, and three readings, interspersed by a recited or sung psalm and a gradual hymn before the sermon. Just as we see in the Word of God section in our bulletin each week.

In the earliest years following the death of Jesus, stories about him were told during the Sabbath services – the **oral** tradition kept Jesus alive in the congregation, just as our Gospel **readings** do today. It was not until about 40 years **after** the Crucifixion that the writers of the synoptic Gospels –we call them Matthew, Mark and Luke – began to write down these stories. And as they were told in the context of the synagogue, the stories of Jesus’ life closely paralleled stories in the Hebrew Scriptures which foretold the coming of the Messiah. In fact, scholar Jack Miles says that “the NT is like a skin on every square inch of which is tattooed the OT”.* In those early years from 40-90 CE (give or take) the writers of the first three Gospels, still in the Jewish tradition, worked hard to present Jesus as the promised Messiah of the OT. Their stories reflect these efforts.

But for many of the Jews, the new faith was “a bridge too far” and by 88 CE, the Followers of the Way had parted company with the synagogue. However, an increasing number of Gentiles joined their movement, which did not have all the laws and restrictions of Judaism.

Thus, by 150 CE (give or take) Christianity was a primarily Gentile religion. Without the traditional teachings, or midrashes of the rabbis that helped folks make sense of the meanings of Scripture, new understandings – often at odds with the original sense – emerged. If you were a Jewish Christian in 80 CE, let’s say, you would know that “lamb of God” referred to the lamb without blemish whose blood was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat in the Temple on Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement. It had nothing to do with the death of Jesus, an interpretation that came later on. For us today, a minimal understanding of Hebrew Scripture themes of justice, righteousness and liberation is essential to understanding New Testament stories .

Many of the Gospel stories that connect Jesus to Hebrew Scripture heroes are familiar to us. In the story of Joseph (he of the many colored coat), Joseph has a father named Jacob, and he is guided by dreams. He saves his people from famine by allowing them to live in Egypt. In the story of Jesus, the protective father is named Joseph, and Jesus' grandfather is Jacob. Joseph the father of Jesus also has dreams, and as a result saves his family by taking them to Egypt. Eventually just as the people of Israel are called out of Egypt, Joseph is called to take **Jesus** out of Egypt and back to Palestine. And whereas Joseph feeds his people with tangible bread, Jesus feeds his followers with himself and his teachings, "the bread from heaven".

Jesus is also connected to Moses – Moses is pursued by pharaoh, babies are slaughtered, and Moses liberates his people, taking them out of Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land. Jesus is pursued by Herod, babies are slaughtered, and Jesus liberates his people from the consequences of sin and alienation from God.

The people of Israel are in the desert for 40 years. Moses has to deal with a lack of food, testing God at the waters of Meribah, and finding the people worshiping the golden calf. Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days and his three temptations involve the same themes - a lack of food , a proposed testing of God by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple and worshiping Satan. And whereas Moses provides his people with water from the rock, Jesus offers the Samaritan woman "living water". Same story, different context. Moses and Jesus – two individuals the Gospel writers match in many ways, trying to make the case for Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Miracle stories – of healings, resuscitation of dead people, the appearance of water in a dry land and feedings of large groups appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, as they do in some of the stories told about Jesus in the synoptic Gospels.

Other parallels – John the Baptist preaches the same message as Elijah , saying that the Kingdom of God is at hand. They even wear matching outfits of camel hair

and leather belts! The twelve disciples recall the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus's five teaching segments in Matthew parallel the Five Books of Moses. And both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament focus on the coming of the Reign of God on earth, when peace will be restored among the nations.

As we move into Advent and then stories of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, I hope that perhaps you will recall some of these parallels in the Scripture readings. We are not so far from the people of Israel as we sometimes think! They faced the same issues as their successors in the Gospel stories and as we do today. All of them, and all of us, pray for the coming of God's Reign on earth and the reconciliation of all people to one another and to God. Let it be so.

- *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* p. 65