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Manasseh's wickedness and his repentance. The Church in Antioch.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Chronicles 33. Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.

For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had broken down, and he erected altars to the Baals, and made Ashtoreth, and worshipped all the hosts of heaven, and served them. And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, In Jerusalem shall my name be for ever. And he built altars for all the hosts of heaven, in the two courts of the house of the Lord.

And he burned his sons as an offering in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling, and omens, and sorcery, and dealt with mediums, and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. And the carved image of the idol that he made he set in the house of God, of which God had said

to David, and to Solomon his son, In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name for ever.

And I will no more remove the foot of Israel from the land that I appointed for your fathers, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses. Manasseh led Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem astray, to do more evil than the nations whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel. The Lord spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention.

Therefore the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks, and bound him with chains of bronze, and brought him to Babylon. And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty, and heard his plea, and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom.

Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God. Afterward he built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon, in the valley, and for the entrance into the fish gate, and carried it around Ophel, and raised it up to a very great height. He also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah.

And he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the Lord, and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. He also restored the altar of the Lord, and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings, and of thanksgiving. And he commanded Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.

Nevertheless the people still sacrificed at the high places, but only to the Lord their God. Now the rest of the Acts of Manasseh, and his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, behold they are in the chronicles of the kings of Israel. And his prayer, and how God was moved by his entreaty, and all his sin and his faithlessness, and the sites on which he built high places, and set up the Asherim, and the images before he humbled himself, behold they are written in the chronicles of the seers.

So Manasseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his house, and Ammon his son reigned in his place. Ammon was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as Manasseh his father had done.

Ammon sacrificed to all the images that Manasseh his father had made, and he did not humble himself before the Lord, as Manasseh his father had humbled himself. But this Ammon incurred guilt more and more, and his servants conspired against him, and

put him to death in his house. But the people of the land struck down all those who had conspired against king Ammon.

And the people of the land made Josiah his son king in his place. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 33 Judah is gradually descending to the grave of exile, a fate in which they would join their northern sister Israel. Manasseh, the subject of much of the chapter, was both the most wicked of Judah's kings, and also someone who remarkably repented later in his life.

Manasseh's reign likely began around 696 BC, ten years prior to Hezekiah's death, and ended around 642 BC. After a ten year co-regency with his father Hezekiah, he came to sole regency at around the age of twenty-two. Manasseh largely reverses the actions of his father.

He rebuilds the high places that his father destroyed. He restores the altars to Baal, and the shrines to Asherah. He once more defiles the temple as Ahaz had done.

On top of all of this he engages in a litany of perverse and pagan practices. He uses fortune telling, omens, sorcery, mediums, and necromancers. And on top of all of these abominations he sacrifices his sons as an offering in the valley of the son of Hinnom.

Yet in all of these things he has not reached the height of his perversity. Worst of all, he places a carved image in the temple itself. He reduces the lord to yet another in the pagan pantheon of the region, sharing space with idols and false gods within his very own house.

The lord's temple is defiled, transformed into an idolatrous shrine. Abominations are placed in his very presence. To heighten his heroes' sense of their severity, the chronicler juxtaposes his account of Manasseh's sins with reminders of the word of the lord.

For instance, in this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever, and I will no more remove the foot of Israel from the land that I appointed for your fathers, if only they will be careful to do all that I have commanded them, all the law, the statutes, and the rules given through Moses. The hero of the text is to recall the covenant, to recognise just how severe Manasseh's idolatries actually are. Manasseh's sins exceed even those of the Canaanite nations that the lord drove out of the land before Israel came to it.

As the king of a nation that had already been prophetically condemned to exile by the word of Isaiah under the reign of his father, Manasseh seems to be doing all that he can to invite the execution of the sentence. And it is not that they are left without warning. The lord sends messengers to Manasseh and to the people, yet they pay no attention.

Stubbornly persisting in their rebellion, the lord finally brings the judgement upon them.

The king of Assyria comes up against Manasseh, captures him, and brings him in chains to Babylon. The timing of the capture and the exile of Manasseh is much debated by biblical scholars.

Some date it to late in the reign of Manasseh, around 648 BC. They speculate that Manasseh may have supported the brother of Ashurbanipal in his rebellion against him, and when Ashurbanipal put down the rebellion, he presumably captured Manasseh and brought him into exile. Perhaps one of the greater challenges that this dating poses is accounting for all the construction work that is described after this that must be fitted in the short window of time after his release.

Others have dated it to 677 BC or to 675-673 BC, both periods during which there were rebellions in the region in which Manasseh may have gotten involved. One of the challenges for these readings is accounting for Babylon as the site of exile. The city of Babylon did not fall to the Assyrians until 648 BC, and it is not easy to see why Babylon would be the site of Manasseh's humiliation.

One possibility is that Babylon is a more general reference to Mesopotamia, which is being spoken of in this way to draw parallels to events later on in the story. In chapter 36 of 2nd Chronicles, Nebuchadnezzar comes up against Jerusalem and binds Jehoiakim in chains to take him to Babylon. Manasseh then would anticipate the fate of his descendant and of the nation with him.

There is a surprising twist to Manasseh's story. While in Babylon, he humbles himself and turns to the Lord and entreats the Lord's favour. The Lord graciously hears him and brings him back into Jerusalem to his kingdom.

Through this, Manasseh comes to know that the Lord is God. Upon his return to Jerusalem, he engages in a series of construction efforts. He builds an outer wall for the city and raises the height of the wall.

He strengthens the forces in the fortified cities of Judah. And he turns to the ways of his father Hezekiah. He purges the land of all his former idolatries.

He takes away the foreign gods. He takes away the idol from the house of the Lord, and he removes the altars that he had placed in the mountain of the house of the Lord. He restores the true altar and he offers sacrifices upon it.

While he does not establish true centralised worship as he ought to do, the people are worshipping the Lord in the high places and not foreign gods. It is, at the very least, a step in the right direction. Recognising the ways in which Manasseh anticipates the exile of Jehoiakim, we might be able to see some ways in which his experience and his repentance provide a lesson for the nation as a whole.

As even the most wicked king turns to the Lord in the situation of exile, he can be

restored to the land, the walls can be rebuilt, the temple can be re-established as a site of true worship. This is a remarkable message of hope, of the extent of the Lord's forgiveness, if Judah is only prepared to listen to it. Exile might be imminent, but it need not be the end of their story.

Manasseh is quite anomalous in the story of Judah. When we think of the Davidic kings, so many of them start out well and then fall away at some point later on in their lives, or fail in some regard. In the case of Manasseh, the movement is in the other direction.

He starts off as one of the most wicked kings of all and then turns to the Lord and after repenting, the kingdom seems to enjoy some prosperity and security under his reign. The movement does not always have to be downhill. There can be a turning back to the Lord.

Even for a king that has squandered so many blessings and done so much wickedness, there is still a way back. Sadly, Manasseh is succeeded by Ammon his son, who reverses the reforms of his father Manasseh and walks in the ways of the early Manasseh, while failing to repent as Manasseh had done later on in his reign. Once again, the nation suffers political upheaval as a conspiracy is formed against him.

He is put to death in his house and Josiah his son is made king in his place. A question to consider. Ammon is described as following the example of Manasseh his father in doing evil in the sight of the Lord, in the way that he sacrificed to images as his father had done.

Manasseh by this point had repented and yet the impact of the initial bad course that he had set continued to be felt. How can we think about the relationship between the consequences of people's sins and the guilt of them, between God's forgiveness of our sins and God sparing us various other ramifications of them? Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 30. Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul.

And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with

the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Now in those days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them, named Agabus, stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world. This took place in the days of Claudius.

So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. From the end of chapter 11 of the book of Acts, the central site in the mission of the church will start to move out from Jerusalem to places like Antioch.

Antioch will become the sending church for the mission of Barnabas and Saul. Disputes in Antioch will also later precipitate the calling of the Jerusalem council. Although we have just read the gospel going to the Gentiles in the story of Cornelius, we go back to events before this to explain the movement out to places like Antioch.

It was with the persecution that arose after Stephen's death that Christians scattering throughout the empire began to spread the gospel as they went. This was not a concerted, organised mission. It was just a natural outworking of events.

The Lord created the impetus through the persecution and then the church grew as it followed this unexpected wind of the spirit. It was a particular group of early disciples that spearheaded this movement, men of Cyprus and Cyrene. It was through such men that the gospel finally arrived in Antioch.

Prior to this point, the people who had been scattering had been speaking only to Jews. Presumably the people in question here are both Palestinian Jews and Jews of the Diaspora. Antioch was a very natural location to go if you wanted to reach Jews of the Diaspora.

Not only was it one of the top five cities of the empire, it boasted one of the highest populations of Jews outside of the land of Palestine. It is important to remember that the majority of the population of Jews lived outside of the land of Palestine. Jews made up up to 10% of the population of the Roman Empire and they lived in many different regions of it.

By the time the gospel was spread out through people like Paul, practically every city that they would go to would already have a Jewish community set up within it. All of this really prepared the ground for the gospel to be spread. In Antioch, this new centre for Christianity outside of the land of Palestine, the gospel spread not just to the Diaspora Jews but also to the Hellenistic community of the city.

Proselytes and God-fearers, similar to people like Cornelius, were now being brought into the orbit of the gospel message. Not only is the gospel taking root in Gentile cities

among Jewish communities, it is also being spread in those cities beyond their Jewish populations. The ministry of these Cypriots and Cyrenians receives great success and news of their work reaches the ears of the church in Jerusalem who send Barnabas to visit the church.

Barnabas back in chapter 4 is described to us as a Levite of Cyprus. As a Cypriot, he probably knew a number of the people who had gone and formed this church in the first place. He might well have had personal reasons to want to visit, along with the official reasons for which he was sent.

The Holy Spirit leads the way in the mission of the early church, but the church is often sent to these places to witness to what the Lord is achieving. The Jerusalem church's official recognition of what God is doing in various parts of the world is an important part of the development that's taking place. As God spreads his people out in the mission of the church, he is also gathering in, joining people together in acts of mutual recognition, particularly in relationship to the source of it all, in the Jerusalem church from which the mission had first proceeded.

Barnabas had previously played a mediating role in his recognition of Saul as a true convert, advocating for him to the Jerusalem church who distrusted the truth of his conversion. In visiting the church, Barnabas is able to encourage and build them up. His presence among them connects them more closely to the life of the wider church so that they are not just one isolated community.

This is something that will be happening throughout the story of the book of Acts, as many missionary journeys serve to connect the many different churches together in a greater fabric of union. As he did back in chapter 4, Luke presents the character of Barnabas in the most glowing categories. Barnabas is a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and his ministry is extremely successful.

And so he goes to Tarsus to seek Saul, in order that Saul might help him in his ministry. Barnabas had presumably heard Paul's testimony and knew that he was a man appointed to bear Christ's name before the Gentiles. It would only seem appropriate that Saul was involved in this mission in Antioch.

Tarsus, although it was Saul's birthplace and a site of significant learning, it was not a place where there was as large a Jewish community as there would be in Antioch, although we might reasonably assume that Saul was engaged in evangelism in the city of Tarsus, he would have far more promising soil for such a ministry in the strategic city of Antioch. While the early Jesus movement referred to itself as the Way and other things like that, in Antioch they were referred to as Christians for the first time, seemingly by outsiders. In this term their opponents might have sought to characterize them as supporters of a pretended to Messiah status, although it does not seem to be a term that Christians first used of themselves.

By the time that Luke wrote the book of Acts we should presume that it was fairly widespread. Barnabas and Saul ministered in the city of Antioch for a whole year and even after this year was over Antioch continued to be a base for them, strengthening the communication between the cities of Antioch and Jerusalem. During this period some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, bringing word of a famine that would afflict the whole world.

This famine occurred in the days of Claudius, presumably in 45-46 AD. There are several examples of prophets in the book of Acts. Prophecy was one of the ways in which the gift of the spirit at Pentecost was manifest and as a gift within the life of the church it was given great significance.

Prophets seemed to have played a more advisory than directive role. Later on Agabus would foretell the fact that Paul would be captured and imprisoned in Jerusalem and many would seek to discourage Paul from going down there. Yet Paul was free to persist in going to Jerusalem without being seen to disobey the word of the Lord in so doing.

Here the message concerns a worldwide famine that would particularly afflict the people in Judea. Although described as worldwide this is hyperbolic. The point is more that the famine is going to be comprehensively affecting the world around Jerusalem.

Judea and all the places associated with it are going to be hit by this famine. Egypt, Syria, Judea and Greece are all going to feel its impact. The disciples in Antioch respond by gathering together resources to send to the Judean Christians.

This gift to the Christians in Judea and Jerusalem was a way of expressing the unity of the church. Each was giving according to his ability in order to provide for the needs of another part of the church. The church was knit together in one as men from Jerusalem had served the spiritual needs of those in Antioch.

So Antioch in Judea's time of need would provide for their material necessities. Later in the ministry of Paul his mission to the Gentiles involved a collection for the saints in Jerusalem as a very concrete manifestation of the unity of the church as Jew and Gentile that he proclaimed in his theology. A question to consider how in the story of the church's growth to this point can we see that God is the one directing its growth and its movement outward?