

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, May 27, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B: Exodus 3:1–6; Psalm 93; Romans 8:12–17; John 3:1–17\**

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is the retired chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth<sup>1</sup>—the majority of the Jewish Ashkenazi community in England and in some other countries of the British Commonwealth.<sup>2</sup> I’ve been reading his blog for a little over a year now—since Bishop Charles Jenkins shared one of Lord Sack’s posts with me. His primary audience is part of the Orthodox Jewish community in Britain and the Commonwealth, but I’m pretty sure he has many readers like me.

I don’t know enough about Judaism to follow everything that he writes. Most weeks more than one ordinary Hebrew religious term is new to me. As a pastor, I like that almost always he writes about religion, not explicitly about the political issues of the day. He writes in a way that encourages his readers to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rabbisacks.org/>, (accessed 27 May 2018).

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Chief\\_Rabbis\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Hebrew\\_Congregations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chief_Rabbis_of_the_United_Hebrew_Congregations)[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Chief\\_Rabbis\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Hebrew\\_Congregations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chief_Rabbis_of_the_United_Hebrew_Congregations), (accessed 27 May 2018).

be responsible for their own beliefs and actions. His posts come out on Wednesdays. This week's was called, "Lifting Heads."<sup>3</sup> And as I read it, I knew I wanted to talk on this Trinity Sunday about what he had written. It was about being responsible children of God.

He began by telling us something about the Torah, the Law, that is, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and our Bible, that I did not know. Although biblical Hebrew has many verbs that meant "to count," when counting people (taking a census), the Hebrew words that are used mean "to lift the head."<sup>4</sup>

The verb used also means "to lift" in the sense of bearing away a burden or "to carry something away."<sup>5</sup> It's used in phrases that mean "to be favorably disposed toward someone," "to raise the voice," "to weep," and "to bear fruit."<sup>6</sup>

Lord Sacks asks, "Why not simply say 'count' instead of 'lift the head'?" He answers, "If we are each in the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://rabbisacks.org/lifting-heads-naso-5778/>, (accessed 27 May 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. E. Jenni with C. Westermann, trans. M. Biddle, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), II:769.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 771–72.

image of God, then every one of us has infinite value . . . None of us is substitutable for any other . . . Discovering God, singular and alone, our ancestors discovered the human individual, singular and alone.”<sup>7</sup>

He goes on to recall the first words that Moses is told to speak to Pharaoh, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my first-born son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go.’”<sup>8</sup> In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds the congregation of Israel, “You are the children of the LORD your God.”<sup>9</sup>

I’m going to get to the Trinity, but before I get there, I want to repeat something many of you have heard me say more than once. In Luke, both Jesus and Adam are called, “son of God.”<sup>10</sup>

I don’t ever remember reading those words in Luke. But I can remember the first time I heard those words read in worship. It was December 7, 2007, the eve of our patronal feast, December 8, the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (And as soon as I heard those words, I knew I had a sermon for Christmas Eve.)

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<sup>7</sup> Sacks, *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 4:22.

<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 14:1. NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Luke 3:38.

Bishop Mark Sisk was with us that night to preside at Solemn Evensong as we inaugurated our Legacy Society. It was the first time we had had Solemn Evensong on the eve of our patronal feast since I became rector.

The second reading that night was Luke’s genealogy of Jesus—the only part of Luke that is never appointed to be read in public worship in the Episcopal Church. That night I heard for the first time that Jesus was “the son of Adam” and that Adam was “the son of God.”<sup>11</sup>

Quite honestly, though the words from Exodus about God’s children are optional and we do read them here at Morning or Evening Prayer on the fifth Friday in Lent (but never on a Sunday or feast day), I never appreciated their importance before now. But the words from Deuteronomy are never appointed to be read. (I’m going to see if I can do something about that.)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 3:38.

<sup>12</sup> “Any Reading may be lengthened at discretion. Suggested lengthenings are shown in parentheses” (*BCP* [1979], 934).

Lord Sacks reminds us that Pharaoh did not treat God's children as individuals, only as "those people"—his slaves. If any of them died, it did not matter. The people became "just numbers," like the tens of millions, if not a hundred million victims of twentieth-century dictatorships.<sup>13</sup>

Last point from Rabbi Sacks. He writes, "The point being made by the Torah, though, is that *what matters is not how we see ourselves but how we see, and treat, and behave toward others.*" He continued, "The world is not short of self-important people. What it is short of is those who make *other people* feel important—who 'lift their heads.'"<sup>14</sup>

For the Jewish tradition, it is the Lord God who lifts the heads of God's people. The Hebrew scriptures are the record of God's behavior lovingkindness towards humankind.

Jesus, the Son of God, was born into this chosen people to whom God had revealed that how we humans see and act towards others is of supreme

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<sup>13</sup> Sacks, Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

importance to our Creator. We believe that he revealed this to us by showing us that the dead live and that we can understand and speak of the Lord God as three persons.

Through the prophet Ezekiel the Lord God proclaims, “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out . . . I will rescue them . . . and [I] will bring them into their own land . . . I will feed them on the mountains of Israel . . . they shall lie down in good grazing land . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice.”<sup>15</sup>

In John, Jesus tells his friends, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Advocate . . . you know him, for [the Spirit] dwells with you, and will be in you.”<sup>16</sup>

I close with the last verse of today’s gospel lesson, “For God sent the Son into the world, not to

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<sup>15</sup> Ezekiel 34:11–16.

<sup>16</sup> John 14:15–17. My translation.

condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”<sup>17</sup>

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> John 3:17.