

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked person forsake their way,
and the unrighteous person their thoughts;
let that person return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

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Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A reading from the letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians.

Pause - and look up at the assembly

Brothers and sisters:
Christ will be exalted now as always in my body,
whether by life or by death.
For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.
If I am to live in the flesh,
that means fruitful labour for me;
and I do not know which I prefer.
I am hard pressed between the two:
my desire is to depart and be with Christ,
for that is far better;
but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.
Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.



Pause for **THREE** seconds
then look up at the people
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING – A 25

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord

Jesus spoke this parable to his disciples.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner
who went out early in the morning
to hire labourers for his vineyard.

After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage,
he sent them into his vineyard.

When he went out about nine o’clock,
he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;
and he said to them,

‘You also go into the vineyard,
and I will pay you whatever is right.’

So they went.



When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock,
he did the same.
And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around;
and he said to them,
'Why are you standing here idle all day?'
They said to him,
'Because no one has hired us.'
He said to them,
'You also go into the vineyard.'
When evening came,
the owner of the vineyard said to his manager,
'Call the labourers and give them their pay,
beginning with the last and then going to the first.'
When those hired about five o'clock came,
each of them received the usual daily wage.
Now when the first came,
they thought they would receive more;
but each of them also received the usual daily wage.
And when they received it,
they grumbled against the landowner, saying,
'These last worked only one hour,
and you have made them equal to us
who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'
But he replied to one of them,
'Friend, I am doing you no wrong;
did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?
Take what belongs to you and go;
I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.
Am I not allowed to do what I choose
with what belongs to me?
Or are you envious because I am generous?'
So the last will be first,
and the first will be last."



SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

Reading I: Isaiah 55:6-9

The hymn contained in Is 55:1-11 was used as the fifth reading at the Easter Vigil. Here only the second of its three stanzas is used.

The reason for its selection is indicated by the caption that calls attention to the last two verses: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.”

These words underline the teaching of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard in today’s gospel.

Responsorial Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18

A somewhat different though overlapping selection of verses from this psalm is commented on for the fourteenth Sunday of series A and the thirty-first Sunday of series C. The second and third stanzas, especially the latter, match both the Old Testament reading and the gospel today.

Again, as we shall see, the difference between God’s thoughts and our thoughts, according to the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, is that God’s justice is not a quid pro quo affair but is characterized by mercy and forgiveness.

Reading II: Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a

This week we turn from Romans, which we have been reading for the past several Sundays, to Philippians. The latter was written while Paul was in prison. Traditionally this imprisonment was identified with that at Rome (Acts 28:30-31).

There is, however, a growing consensus among scholars today that the imprisonment in question must have occurred during Paul’s stay at Ephesus (ca. 52-55, though the absolute chronology of Paul’s life is somewhat conjectural).

It was during this supposed imprisonment (of which there are hints in some of the letters, for example 1 Cor 15:32) that the great controversial letters were probably written: Galatians, 1 Corinthians, much of 2 Corinthians, and Philippians.

The view is also gaining ground that Philippians, like 2 Corinthians, is a compilation from two or three short letters written by Paul to the community at Philippi over the space of several months. These fragments were subsequently put together when they were edited for the later use of the Church. The letters may be identified as follows:

Letter A, Phil 4:10-23. Paul’s thank-you for the “care packet” sent by the Philippians to him in prison by a messenger from Philippi named Epaphroditus.

Letter B, Phil 1:1-3:1; 4:4-7. News about Paul's welfare and prospects in prison. Epaphroditus' recovery from illness while with Paul; Paul's desire to send Timothy to Philippi soon; and warnings against the possible arrival of false teachers.

Letter C, Phil 3:2-4:3, 8-9. An attack on the false teachers after their arrival at Philippi.

Today's reading thus comes from Letter B. Paul faces the possibility of martyrdom. If we are right in placing the imprisonment at Ephesus in 52-55, we know that his worst fears at this time did not come true: he was released and was able to visit his churches once more before he was arrested again, this time in Jerusalem, and transported to Rome.

Our reading consists of the Apostle's vivid meditation on the prospects of life and death. He is in a state of tension, pulled both ways. Whether he lives or dies, Paul is convinced that Christ will be honoured in his body, that is, either by Paul's labours for the gospel (see the catalogues of sufferings in 2 Cor 12, etc.—that is what being an apostle meant for Paul) or by actual martyrdom.

In either case, it is not Paul's own personal salvation that is at stake. He does not simply want to escape from his labours into personal bliss with Christ; rather, he believes that his martyrdom will in some way contribute, perhaps even more effectively than his apostolic labours, to the fulfilment of God's purpose in salvation history.

"To live is Christ"—the great Pauline saying highlighted in the caption to this reading does not mean simply the enjoyment of mystical communion between the believer and the Lord but the execution of the apostolic mission.

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16a

As we have noted in previous discussions of our Lord's parables, there are three possible levels of exegesis: (1) the parable as taught by Jesus; (2) the parable as modified in the oral tradition; (3) the parable as presented by the evangelist in the context of his Gospel.

At the level of Jesus' own teaching, the parable of the wicked husbandman must have concluded with the question "Or are you envious because I am generous?"

The context in which it was originally told must have been a complaint of Jesus' opponents that he was paying more attention to the outcast than to the respectable members of society.

Jesus takes a situation as familiar in daily life then as now—long lines of unemployed waiting for a job. But he depicts the behaviour of the employer in a quite surprising way. Out of pity for the unemployed and their families, the employer generously gives a full day's wages to everyone.

That is what God is doing in Jesus' ministry—giving the tax collectors and prostitutes an equal share with the righteous in his kingdom. Obviously, the parable is not a moral lesson about labour relations!

At the level of the oral tradition, the proverbial phrase “the last will be first, and the first will be last” has been added. This looks like a reapplication of the parable to the situation of the post-Easter community. Israel has rejected the gospel, so Gentiles have been drawn in.

The evangelist shows his own understanding of the parable by appending it to the discourse, Mt 19:23-30. Here Peter, as the spokesman for the Twelve, proudly claimed that they, unlike the rich whom Jesus was criticizing, had left everything to follow Jesus.

They will indeed be rewarded, for they will sit on twelve thrones with Christ, receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But then comes a warning: “many that are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Mt 19:30).

In Matthew, this does not mean that the disciples are the last who will turn out to be the first, whereas the rich are the first who will turn out to be last. What Matthew means—or makes Jesus mean—is that those who forsake all and follow Jesus, and who are therefore the first, may turn out to be the last.

The parable of the labourers in the vineyard follows right upon this as a warning to the Christians in Matthew's church not to hanker after rewards. Rewards are not denied, but they are not the purpose of toil for Christ and his kingdom. They always come as a surprise. Paul, in the second reading, exhibits precisely the kind of attitude Jesus is enjoining in Matthew's presentation.

Reginald H. Fuller