

A few Sundays ago we heard Paul's response to the obscurity of God's ways. It was not a cry of frustration or defeat. On the contrary it was an exclamation of praise: "How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! . . . To him be glory for ever! Amen" (Romans 11:33-36).

Why praise God for divine inscrutability? Because, as we are reminded today, God is more loving, generous and forgiving than we human beings could ever imagine. The ever-present danger for us as human beings is to think of God in terms of our lesser selves, to impose on God the limits of our own capacities for life and love. The word of God today tells us this is folly. The goodness of God knows no bounds.

The gospel story exposes the calculus we use in our daily lives. We measure out love on the basis of what we judge another to deserve or what we feel we can afford to give. Today we thank God for not being like us!

A reading from the prophet Isaiah

55:6-9

First Reading

Seek the Lord while he is still to be found,
call to him while he is still near.
Let the wicked man abandon his way,
the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn back to the Lord who will take pity on him,
to our God who is rich in forgiving;
for my thoughts are not your thoughts,
my ways not your ways – it is the Lord who speaks.
Yes, the heavens are as high above earth
as my ways are above your ways,
my thoughts above your thoughts.

Chapter 55 in the book of the prophet Isaiah gets plenty of airing in the course of the liturgical year. We heard most of it at the Easter Vigil and short extracts from it on the 15th and 18th Sundays of Ordinary Time. What we hear today falls between those two excerpts.

It is a call to conversion: "Seek the Lord while he is still to be found. . .". Whatever the original context – perhaps Israel's return from exile in Babylon – the appeal to turn to God is perennial. Here it is an attractive invitation, not a threat. The Lord is not unreachable but is "still to be found". Those who seek and find the Lord will discover that God is not economical in love like us but is "rich in forgiving". It is a bountiful blessing for us that "my ways are above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts". This declaration paves the way for us to hear the parable in today's gospel reading.

The tone of the text from Isaiah is one of great encouragement. This is the spirit in which the reading should be proclaimed. The language is clear and direct, and the phrases are short. The reader should be able to communicate its positive message persuasively.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 144:2-3, 8-9, 17-18

Responsorial Psalm

R. The Lord is near to all who call him.

I will bless you day after day
and praise your name for ever.
The Lord is great, highly to be praised,
his greatness cannot be measured. R.

The Lord is kind and full of compassion,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
How good is the Lord to all,
compassionate to all his creatures. R.

The Lord is just in all his ways
and loving in all his deeds.
He is close to all who call him,
who call on him from their hearts. R.

The response to the psalm mirrors the opening line of the reading. Isaiah's counsel was to "Seek the Lord while he is still to be found." The psalm response declares, "The Lord is near to all who call him". It is a simple confession of faith which allows us to reaffirm our trust in God.

The verses are taken from Psalm 144/145. As noted on the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time, this psalm is such a positive hymn in praise of God's goodness that it is used several times in the course of the liturgical year.

The verses are uniform both in size and tone. They are variations on the theme of God's loving-kindness and should be readily proclaimed in a spirit of praise and thanks. The first two lines of the second verse repeat in summary form an ancient confession of Israel's faith. Variations of it are found in several places in the Old Testament (eg Exodus 34:6).

A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Philippians

1:20-24, 27

Christ will be glorified in my body, whether by my life or by my death. Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would bring me something more; but then again, if living in this body means doing work which is having good results – I do not know what I should choose. I am caught in this dilemma: I want to be gone and be with Christ, which would be very much the better, but for me to stay alive in this body is a more urgent need for your sake.

Avoid anything in your everyday lives that would be unworthy of the gospel of Christ.

Second Reading

Today's reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians is the first of four selected for this and succeeding Sundays. This is the only time in the three year cycle that we have a series of readings from this letter.

Paul wrote from prison but because he does not say where he is confined – whether Ephesus, Caesarea or Rome – the letter is difficult to date. In spite of his imprisonment it is strikingly joyful. Variations on the word "joy" occur sixteen times. This is not to say there were no difficulties at Philippi. There was disunity in the community and problems with false teachers. Nonetheless the letter is remarkably sunny.

More's the pity that we begin reading from the latter part of the first chapter. This means that we do not hear the beautiful prayer for the Philippians that follows the initial greeting, nor do we hear the account that Paul then gives of his circumstances. It is highly recommended that readers (and congregations for that matter) cast their eyes over all that precedes today's text.

These omissions make today's reading a little difficult. Not only do we have no context, but we are immediately caught up in a debate that Paul is having with himself. Would it be better for him to die and be with Christ or to stay alive and continue his mission? Paul's arguments are generally rabbinical in style, even when they are with himself. Readers will need to study this text closely to identify the pros and cons that Paul presents.

They will note that the two verses before the conclusion are omitted; this makes his word of advice sound abrupt. The reading as a whole is short but it has its challenges for the reader.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

20:1-16

Jesus said to his disciples: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day, and sent them to his vineyard. Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place and said to them, "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage." So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more men standing round, and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us" they answered. He said to them, "You go into my vineyard too." In the evening, the owner of the vineyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first." So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each. They took it, but grumbled at the landowner. "The men who came last" they said "have done only one hour, and you have treated them the same as us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all the heat." He answered one of them and said, "My friend, I am not being unjust to you; did we not agree on one denarius? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the last-comer as much as I pay you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why be envious because I am generous?" Thus the last will be first, and the first, last.'

Gospel

Jesus' parable on the labourers in the vineyard still has the capacity to raise hackles, and that's encouraging. It's doing what Jesus meant it to do. It offends our sense of what is fair and just. It uncovers our ingrained habit of calculating what others do or don't deserve from us or how much we feel we can or can't give of ourselves. This seems to have been Jesus' original purpose – to shock his hearers with a story of divine generosity not limited by legalistic or self-interested rules of rationing.

Like the majority of the parables this one will be familiar to most people, so it calls for a special effort to proclaim it afresh. There is an inbuilt dynamism to the story which helps. The tension builds up with each successive hiring until the payment is made at the end of the day, and we hear the punch-line: "Why be envious because I am generous?" The final saying about the first and the last seems to be added on to the parable as a general maxim.