

# BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 55:6-9; Ps 144 (145); Philippians 1:20-24, 27; Matthew 20:1-16

## Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Matt 19:30 *But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*

Matt 20:1 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6 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?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 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.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.’ 13 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? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to

do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 *So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*”

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This parable is found only in Matthew’s gospel, giving a window into the social and religious world at the time of the writing of this Gospel. It is meant to shock and surprise because it seems to undermine much that is in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Indeed, it seems to go against much that is in Matthew’s own Gospel, where we read: “For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.” (Matt 7:2). The context within the Gospel is Matthew 19, which closes with the words which end this reading. Perhaps 19:30 and 20:16 are the real frames of this story here, on account of the theme of reversal.



It is probable that the parable is dealing again with a situation in Matthew’s community. The question behind the parable seems to be this: newcomers to the covenant, i.e. the Gentiles, should be received on exactly the same basis as those who have been faithful to the covenant for centuries, i.e. the people of Israel. The time aspect of the parable is the key: no matter how long or how short your living of the covenant has been, the very same welcome and grace are given to all. As St Paul puts it, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

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### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) There is a broad background in the Old Testament, where God is the owner

### Thought for the day

The forty-two parables in the Gospels are designed to take us up short and make us think again. Today’s parable is a good example. The actions of the employer and the treatment of the workers simply would not work today as a labour relations strategy and would also not have worked in the time of Jesus. And what is the point? Really that it doesn’t matter when we come to the Gospel, early, middle or late, by routes direct or circuitous, in full stride or falteringly: all that matters is that we come to the Gospel. Achievement counts for nothing; grace is everything, thanks be to God!

### Prayer

The door of faith is always open and you welcome us, O God, whenever our hearts are open. We are grateful for your loving patience and generosity.

of the land promised to the Israelites and the people are his tenants and “employees.” “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.” (Lev 25:23) With that picture of God as the real owner went a sense of utter gratuity for God’s election of Israel.

(ii) There is a terrific OT background in the book of Jonah. Jonah preaches and is successful and still he resents God’s extension of forgiveness to outsiders. The prophet rebukes God in these words larded with irony:

“But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (Jonah 4:1-3)

God’s reply, a little further on, is instructive:

“But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for

you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:9-11)

(iii) There is an intriguing parallel with a rabbinic parable, which may be worth re-telling. Once a rabbi was asked by his disciples which commandments had the greatest rewards, so they could concentrate on these. He replied, I do not know. The rabbi told them this parable: there was once a king who owned a orchard with many different kinds of trees in it. He employed different workers to work on the different species – one to look after figs, another to take care of the apples, and another to tend the vines. In the evening, at the time of payment, the king gave them all different wages – one denarius to the one who looked after the figs, three denarii to the apple man and five denarii to the man who tended the vines.

The workers who received less objected, "Had we known that different wages were attached to different trees, we would all have worked on the vines". The king replied, "But then how could all my garden be cultivated?" The rabbi concluded: however, I do know the reward for the greatest and the least commandments. The greatest is honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land. The least is this: If you come on a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. Let the mother go, taking only the young for yourself, in order that it may go well with you and you may live long. (Deut 22:6-7).

Thus the rewards for the greatest and least commandments are identical! Thus the rabbi explained to his disciples that all the commandments should be kept, from the greatest to the least. Comparing this parable to that of Matthew is instructive.

**KIND OF WRITING**

This is a parable, which takes an ordinary situation, that of day labourers, and goes against natural justice to make the point that while humans must regu-

late wages for justice, there is no limit to God's overflowing grace and generosity.

**NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND**

"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt 5:44-48)

**ST PAUL**

The very same issue of the inclusion of the Gentiles is discussed in Romans 9:

"You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is moulded say to the one who moulds it, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they shall be called children of the living God." (Rom 9:19-26)

**BRIEF COMMENTARY**

**Verse 16** The reversal of first and last refers to the relative demotion of the Israelites and the promotion of the Gentiles. The theme is an old one in the book of Genesis, where it arises in the form of the "reversal of primogeniture". This is a feature of stories, in which the Israelites are the younger brother promoted, purely by God's grace, to a place of eminence in his plan of salvation. The very same reversal has occurred now, quite paradoxically, for the Gen-

**POINTERS FOR PRAYER**

1. "I was there first". Envy easily comes to the surface when faced with the good fortune of others, especially when compared to what seems less favourable treatment of ourselves. Can you recall that feeling in yourself and what it did to you? Can you also recall times when you were content with your lot, even though it seemed others had greater gifts, better opportunities, etc.
2. A parent or teacher who gives a lot of time to a difficult child does not love the others less, but if we are one of those other children we may not see that. Recall a "Jesus person" in your life who helped you to overcome feelings of envy and helped you appreciate that the apparently more favourable treatment of another did not mean a lessening of love for you.
3. Generosity can make us uncomfortable. We feel more comfortable when we see ourselves as having done something to deserve the generosity.

But perhaps you can recall a moment of great need, when you were at the receiving end of someone's generosity, a time when you recognised you had done nothing to 'deserve' that response, a time when all you could do was to say "thanks"?

4. This leads us to the core message of this parable, namely, that God's love is a free gift and not earned. Recall moments when you were particularly conscious of the gift that God's love is to you.
5. "It is too late now" are words sometimes uttered to justify doing nothing about a situation. This parable tells us that where love is involved, it is never too late. Can you recall times when you got a positive response after taking action when you thought it was "too late"?

**PRAYER**

God most high, your ways are not our ways, for your kindness is lavished equally upon all.

Teach us to welcome your mercy towards others, even as we hope to receive mercy ourselves.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

# Seek the Lord, while he may be found

Isa 55:6a Seek the LORD while he may be found,  
 6b call upon him while he is near;  
 7a let the wicked forsake their way,  
 7b and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
 7c let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,  
 7d and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.  
 8a For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
 8b nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.  
 9a For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
 9b so are my ways higher than your ways  
 9c and my thoughts than your thoughts.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Where would we be without Isaiah? In Year A alone, the book of Isaiah is read on twenty-seven Sundays and Feasts, effectively 50% of the first readings. All three Isaiahs (Isaiah of Jerusalem, Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah) were spiritual giants and composers of penetrating poetry. Not for nothing is Isaiah known as the fifth evangelist (an accolade he shares with J.S. Bach).

This portion of a longer poem is a good example. There is no resolution of *near* (immanence) and *higher* (transcendence). Both are real: God greater than our hearts is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. We don't stay on this level of exalted mysticism: the call is practical and should lead to conversion heart and life. Why? Because this mysterious God is full of mercy and will always abundantly pardon. Isaiah can say a lot in a few words.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

This is the concluding chapter of Second Isaiah. In its present location, it also serves as a bridge passage to Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66). Notice that Is 54, 55 and 56 all share the word "covenant." The time of writing is after the Exile, while the reconstruction is going on. Rebuilding the Temple makes sense only if accompanied by renewal of life. Notice that the appeal is no longer simply to the leadership, polit-



ical or religious, but to the whole people.

## KIND OF WRITING

Isaiah 55 is a single unit, forming a frame with Is 40:1ff. It may be outlined as follows:

- 1-2: Everyone is called to the feast
- 3: A new relationship with Darius
- 4: Darius will have sovereignty
- 5: Darius will restore Jerusalem
- 6-7: *All are invited to worship YHWH*
- 8-11: *The Lord defends using Darius*
- 12-13: Goal? Well-being of Jerusalem.

The whole poem summarises the themes of Is 40-55. The echoes with ch. 40 are evident:

- Return to YHWH 55:6-7 / 40:1-2
- Release from Exile: 55:12-13 / 40:3-5
- YHWH v. humans: 55:8-9 / 40:6-7
- YHWH's word: 55:10-11 / 40:6-8

As always, it is worth paying attention to the poetry. The parallelism is clear and energetic: 6b repeats 6a with the added information that YHWH is near. 7b repeats 7a with the added call to go behind actions to the heart. 7d repeats 7c, adding the encouragement of abundant pardon. 8a is echoed in 9c. 8a and 8b teach the same things, moving from mind to action. 9abc offers a cosmic metaphor of transcendence followed by a double affirmation of the "beyond" of God. Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, speaks of the "uneasy synonymy" of biblical poetry and our few verses are a good example.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

*Invitation*  
 Comfort, O comfort my people, says

your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD'S hand double for all her sins.

A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. (Isaiah 40:1-2, 6-8)

*God experienced a hidden (not near)*  
 Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Saviour. (Isaiah 45:15; the Vulgate is evocative here "Deus absconditus"!)

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? (Isaiah 40:27)

There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. (Isaiah 64:7)

*God as mystery*  
 "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7)

You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted. (Psalms 40:5)

How difficult it is for me to fathom your thoughts about me, O God! How vast is their sum total! (Psalms 139:17)

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 145 (144) takes up v. 7cd on God's compassion and reflects further on it. The suggested response echoes the first line of the reading from Isaiah: *The Lord is close to all who call him.*

## THE GOSPEL LINK

Initially, it might see that the link between Isaiah and Matthew is tenuous. However, there *is* a solid link: the unfathomable graciousness of God, who is

“free” to do what he chooses with what is his and he chooses to be compassionate and merciful to all without distinction. Religious people are not always happy with that, as we can see from the end of the book of Jonah cited earlier.

**BRIEF COMMENTARY**

**Verse 6** The invitation is to all, expressed from here on in masculine plural pronouns and verbs. In other times, God withdrew his favour with dreadful consequences such as the exile itself. But *now* the Temple is open again, *now* is the acceptable time, the time of grace. No one is excluded. Cf. Is 40:1-9.

**Verse 7** One group is addressed—the wicked—but good people need not feel left out! We are reminded of Luke 15: who *are* the ninety-nine who need no repentance? Their way is how they live; their thoughts (convictions) are the motives *behind* their behaviour. The unrighteous are those who resist the invitation of YHWH. Cf. Isaiah 53 for a fuller account. In spite of repeated refusal, the offer still stands, open to all.

**Verse 8** All religions reflect this concern. It comes up in a personal and practical way in the Gospel: *But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”* (Matthew 16:23) It is frequent in the Bible. Cf. *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!* (Romans 11:33) It can work positively as well: *For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.* (Psalms 103:11)

The big concern of vv. 8-11 is to show that God’s word may be / must be trusted.

**Verse 9** The gap is also experienced in a practical way. YHWH is using a foreigner, Darius, to achieve his plans. This contrast with the hopes of the returned for independence and autonomy.

**POINTERS FOR PRAYER**

1. The invitation of God is constant and insistent, sometimes loud, other times almost imperceptible. On the spiritual journey, it is part of our task to attune our ears to his voice and to call on him while he is still near.

2. Life takes many surprising turns; it is only when we look back that we can see the pattern devised by God, according to which *all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his*

*purpose.* (Romans 8:28)

3. The sheer mystery, the abyss and beyond of God are part of every authentic spiritual experience. But there is a way in! In the words of Rumi, “Love is the astrolabe of God’s mysteries.”

**PRAYER**

You call to us and we hesitate, loving God. Unlock our hearts that we may hear your voice within and, hearing you, may we call out to you who are near and always ready to welcome us with your abundant mercy and unending love.

**SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS**

**First reading**

*Isaiah 55:6-9*

Our first reading is a great invitation: the door of faith is always open—at least on God’s side!

**Second reading**

*Philippians 1:20-24, 27*

St Paul has a robust and entirely believable desire to be “with Christ”—and yet, he is called now to bring Christ to others. It does place him in a dilemma. Probably our desire to be with Christ after death is not so strong...and yet, why not?

**Gospel**

*Matthew 20:1-16*

It must be said that this reading would not work now or even in the past as a labour relations strategy. As theology, it works really well...as long as we recall that we, the Gentiles, are the latest arrival and still we get the same!

**WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS**

For the next two weeks we have readings from the some Wisdom books of the Bible, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. While these books do come from the past, a foreign country where “they do things differently there,” nevertheless, the appeal to universal human experiences makes these texts unusually direct and helpful. Like regular proverbial wisdom, such passages are best enjoyed in small doses.

**Monday 22 September**

*Proverbs 3:27-34*

How should we behave towards our neighbours? This reading offers a range of advice and perhaps one teaching or other will resonate with my own experi-

ence.

**Tuesday 23 September Padre Pio**

*Proverbs 21:1-6,10-13*

Today, we hear a series of proverbs offering wisdom coming from reflection upon experience. Any one proverb would merit reflection and perhaps there is one that speaks to you today.

**Wednesday 24 September**

*Proverbs 30:5-9*

Our reading today is short and might be underestimated; however it is a gem of wisdom, very true to experience and offering a challenging sense of balance.

**Thursday 25 Sep St Finbarr**

*Ecclesiastes 1:2-11*

For the next three days,

we hear from the book of Ecclesiastes. When read as a whole, it is a surprise to find this book in our Bible, because it is so pessimistic. Our reading today captures that in a reflection upon vanity of vanities. Remember, however, that vanity here does not mean self-regard (cf. selfies!) but rather futility / emptiness. The opening words could be well translated as “futility of futilities” or “the most futile.”



**Fri 26 Sep Sts Cosmas and Damian**

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-11*

This reading is sometimes chosen for funerals and you can see why. The wisdom within is somewhat static: this is just how things are and we must accept it.

**Saturday 27 Sep St Vincent de Paul**

*Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8*

Our final reading from Ecclesiastes is a poem...but about what? If you listen carefully, you will see it is about the dilapidation of old age. For instance, the strong men are our legs and the women who grind are our teeth. And so on.

The end of life is captured marvellously “before the silver cord has snapped, or the golden lamp been broken, or the pitcher shattered at the spring, or the pulley cracked at the well.”

Even though Ecclesiastes can be emotionally reserved, there is a pathos for the human condition in this poem.