

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Isaiah = I-ZAY-uh

An intense and poetic reading. Let its language carry your proclamation.

Slight pause between "ways" and "my."
In these last three lines, the Lord is presumably speaking, through Isaiah.

For meditation and context:

READING I

This reading comes from the final chapter of the second portion of Isaiah known as "Deutero-Isaiah." Chapters 40 to 55 were most likely written after Israel had been exiled to Babylon. The basic warning found in today's reading focuses on the temptation to make God operate in a way that corresponds to human understanding. God's ways do not always correspond with ours.

The reading opens with the command to "seek the Lord." Searching for the Lord is possible because he allows himself to be found, and the author says that God is

LECTIONARY #133

READING I Isaiah 55:6-9

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

**Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call him while he is near.
Let the scoundrel forsake his way,
and the wicked his thoughts;
let him turn to the LORD for mercy;
to our God, who is generous in forgiving.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
As high as the heavens are above the earth,
so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.**

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18 (18a)

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

Every day will I bless you,
and I will praise your name forever
and ever.

Great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.

The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and of great kindness.

The LORD is good to all
and compassionate toward all his works.

The LORD is just in all his ways
and holy in all his works.
The LORD is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth.

indeed "near." Recall that the pattern of seeking God for the Israelites was generally found in the sacrifices offered in the Temple, now destroyed by the Babylonians. Because of their exile, the Israelites had to find a new way to seek the Lord, one that was more personal in nature. Isaiah suggests that the Lord can be found when one turns from evil and seeks the Lord's mercy. Because God "is generous in forgiving," one can trust that the past will be overturned as new way of living begins.

It is in the context of assuring Israel that the repentant sinner will be restored to relationship with God that Deutero-Isaiah cautions against trying to overly scrutinize God's ways. Searching for the Lord does not mean imposing human standards upon him. While the mercy of God is abundant, one should not attempt to measure it according to the world's sense of justice. The Lord transcends all human thought. Even though God's ways and wisdom are mysterious and beyond us, true worship of God demands conversion of life and constant journeying to find and follow the way of the Lord.

Philippians = fih-LIP-ee-uhrnz

A passionate exhortation, expressed in a tone of vulnerability.

Slight pause between "me" and "life."

Paul expresses a moving thought here: Though he longs to be united with Christ in heaven, he recognizes the value of remaining in the flesh to do God's work.

A long parable but one told with a clear-eyed economy whose message is crystal clear.

Slight pause between "too" and "go."

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

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians

Brothers and sisters:

Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to **me life is Christ, and death is gain.**

If I **go on living in the flesh,**

that means **fruitful labor for me.**

And I **do not know** which I shall **choose.**

I am **caught** between the **two.**

I **long to depart this life and be with Christ,**

for **that is far better.**

Yet that I remain in the flesh

is more necessary for your **benefit.**

Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ.

GOSPEL Matthew 20:1-16a

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

Jesus told his disciples this parable:

"The **kingdom of heaven** is like a **landowner**

who went **out at dawn** to hire **laborers** for his **vineyard.**

After **agreeing** with them for the **usual daily wage,**

he **sent** them into his **vineyard.**

Going **out about nine o'clock,**

the **landowner** saw others standing **idle** in the **marketplace,**

and he **said** to them, '**You too go** into my **vineyard,**

and I will **give** you what is **just.'** >>

READING II

At the beginning of the Letter to the Philippians,

Paul greets them with thanksgiving and a prayer for the fruition of the community before he turns to a lengthy description of his state of imprisonment. Given the backdrop of prison, it is no wonder that Paul ruminates on the possibility of death in today's reading. Paul begins by acknowledging his body as a means of glorifying Christ. The analogy of the body suggests that Paul is totally dedicated to the Lord. Every part of his being, in life and in death, functions to serve Christ.

Paul continues by exploring the possible outcomes for himself, the value of his life versus the value of his death. On the one hand, continuing to live, even from the confines of jail, allows Paul the opportunity to spread the message of the Gospel. On the other hand, if Paul were put to death, he would enter into an even deeper relationship with Christ. While Paul assesses that the latter option of death and eternal union with Christ is far more valuable, he knows that it is better for the infant Church that he continue to live.

Omitted from our reading are verses 25 and 26, in which Paul announces that he will renew his commitment to encourage the community and will one day return to them. In the meantime, he expects that they will behave "in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ." He has provided them with all the tools they need to live in Christ; now it is up to them to put it into practice.

GOSPEL

It is important to notice that the parable begins with the kingdom of heaven being likened to the "landowner" and not to the vineyard.

Slight pause between "too" and "go."

Don't overdo the workers' grumbling tone.

Likewise, don't overdo the landowner's pedantic tone. Allow his equanimity to all the workers he hired to characterize your tone.

So they went **off**.
 And he went out **again** around **noon**,
 and around **three o'clock**, and did **likewise**.
 Going out about **five o'clock**,
 the **landowner** found **others standing around**, and said
 to them,
 'Why do you **stand here idle all day**?'
 They **answered**, 'Because **no one** has **hired us**.'
 He **said** to them, '**You too go** into my **vineyard**.'
 When it was **evening** the **owner** of the **vineyard** said
 to his **foreman**,
 '**Summon** the **laborers** and **give** them their **pay**,
beginning with the **last** and ending with the **first**.'
 When **those** who had **started** about **five o'clock** came,
each received the **usual daily wage**.
 So when the **first** came, they **thought** that they would
 receive **more**,
 but each of them also got the **usual wage**.
 And on **receiving** it they **grumbled** against the **landowner**, saying,
 'These **last** ones worked **only one hour**,
 and you have **made** them **equal** to us,
 who **bore** the **day's burden** and the **heat**.'
 He **said** to one of them in **reply**,
 'My **friend**, I am **not cheating** you.
Did you not **agree** with me for the **usual daily wage**?
Take what is **yours** and **go**.
 What if I **wish** to give this **last** one the **same** as you?
 Or am I not **free** to **do** as I **wish** with my **own money**?
 Are you **envious** because I am **generous**?'
Thus, the **last** will be **first**, and the **first** will be **last**."

In fact, for those who heard this parable from the mouth of Jesus, the image of the vineyard most likely conjured up the idea of Israel. Isaiah 5 foretells the future of Israel as a vineyard that produced bad fruit and which God judged. The point of this parable is that the landowner's method of care is quite unlike anything we may expect.

The parable suggests that those who are waiting to be hired are loafing around rather than being proactive in their pursuit of work. When the landowner returns for a final time at five o'clock, he appears to be perplexed at their ongoing inactivity, as he asks

them "Why do you stand here idle all day?" Their simple excuse that no one has hired them does not dissuade the landowner from sending these men into the vineyard. But what could they possibly accomplish with such short time left in the day?

This question does not seem to cross the landowner's mind as he instructs his foreman to begin paying those who began their work at the end of the day with the same "usual daily wage" that is due those who started work at nine in the morning. When the first workers get nothing more than those who arrived last in the vineyard

their excitement turns to resentment, as they grumble and complain that they deserve more.

The generosity of the landowner does not pair with typical human understanding of justice, but that is the very point of this parable on the kingdom of heaven. God's invitation to share in the kingdom is far more universal than we might think. What matters the most is responding to the call of discipleship no matter the time in one's life. S.W.