

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A

First Reading Isaiah 55: 6–9

Today's passage comes from the end of that part of the Book of Isaiah known as Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah – i.e. Chapters 40–55. It was written towards the end of the Babylonian exile (587–537 BC). When the Persians conquered Babylon, Cyrus, their king, allowed the Jews to return to their land. For two generations, the Jews had kept their identity by telling their grandchildren of the glories of Jerusalem.

However, Jerusalem is now in ruins and many Jews were reluctant to go back, thinking that God has abandoned them and broken the covenant he had made with David (2 Samuel 7: 8–16). So Isaiah seeks to give them some hope. Even in the worst times, God is with them.

Isaiah calls the exiles to take the first steps back to Jerusalem where the Lord can be found. However, the Jews are hesitating about returning here, to a land which most of them do not know. They wonder whether they will be welcome, or whether their lives as settled exiles in Babylon would not be better.

Isaiah shows them that the God they worship is different. He is all-forgiving and compassionate: *The heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.*



However, those who accept the Lord's invitation must change their ways. Isaiah uses two key verbs: 'Seek' and 'Turn back'. They are his answer to those who cannot imagine that God can lead his people – us – to a new life. But with the Lord, all things are possible.

A parallel could be made between this historical journey back to Jerusalem and our own spiritual journey, going away from and coming back to God.

Gospel Matthew 20: 1–16 *The parable of the vineyard labourers*

Chapters 19 and 20 of Matthew's Gospel recount the 80-mile journey between Galilee and Jerusalem. Here we encounter Jesus the teacher more often than Jesus the miracle worker. Today's parable of the vineyard labourers is unique to Matthew, and comes immediately after the story of the rich young man. The disciples, who have left everything to follow Jesus, are disconcerted and he is comforting them.

Parables like this can be described as stories drawn from everyday life with an unexpected twist, thus leaving some ambiguity in our minds to stimulate reflection. So there are many gaps in the story here which are left to our imagination. Why were so many extra workers needed? Why had the workers hired last not been chosen earlier? And so on.

The landowner hires workers for his vineyard

As a result of the reorganisation of Palestine by the Roman General Pompey the Great (63 BC), large sections of the population had been dispossessed of their land. Herod the Great also expropriated large areas, giving the land to officials in his court. Many farm labourers, small tenants and artisans therefore had to look for work on a daily basis from the town square or market place (the *agora*). The grape industry was the most common source of employment. For Matthew's Jewish readers, the vineyard is also an important symbol of the People of God in need (see Isaiah 5; Jeremiah 12: 10; Psalm 80).

Daybreak and the eleventh hour.

At the time of Jesus, the hours were counted from dawn. So daybreak would be the first hour, about 6.00; the third hour about 9.00; the eleventh hour, 17.00.

One denarius a day, a fair wage

This sum was enough to keep a family for a day or two. By law, hired workers had to be paid every evening so that they could provide for their families. Jews were familiar with this, since the rules for paying labourers figured in the Book of Deuteronomy (24: 14–15).

Pay the workers starting with the last arrivals

This is significant for the development of the parable. It raises expectations amongst the long-standing labourers, who assume they are going to get more.

Why be envious because I am generous

Matthew writes at a critical time for the first-century church. The communities were composed of original Jewish converts, present from the 'first hour', while newer Gentile converts who had joined the communities at the 'eleventh hour' were still given the same treatment and recognition. There was general discontent and grumbling.