

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, SEPT. 18, 2005
(Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time)
(Isa 55:6-9; Ps 145; Phil 1:20c-24, 27a; Matt 20:1-16)

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Our first reading is from the end of “Second Isaiah,” an anonymous prophet from the end of the Babylonian Exile (towards 540 B.C.E.) whose prophecies are included in the Book of Isaiah because he really is one of Isaiah’s disciples and part of this movement. This most important prophet, whose section in Isaiah is called “Book of the Consolation of Israel,” prophesied the end of the exile, but described it as a new exodus (Isa 43:16-21), and, really, a new creation and a new birth for Israel (Isa 43:1-3), a salvation that would reach unto the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). This prophet marks a real outward turning on the part of Israel: Israel, or the “Suffering Servant,” will be a light to the “Gentiles,” that is, the non-Jews or pagan nations (again, Isa 49:6, which old Simeon sees fulfilled in Jesus’ presentation, Luke 2:29-32). Our first reading, then, from the end part of this prophet’s work, is a call to seek the Lord by turning from one’s wickedness and trusting in the unheard of generosity of God, which is unimaginable in its excess. Jesus’ preaching is summarized in Mark 1:15 in similar lines which go beyond this in their specificity and immediacy: the time is complete, the time of the Kingdom has arrived, repent and believe the Good News (“Gospel”).

The Psalm responds appropriately to this message. The Gospel reading reflects this situation of the strange experience of the “always greater God,” *Deus semper maior*. Laborers are hired throughout the day, and at the end, they each get the normal day’s wage. That is all they need, and all they get, whether they worked long and hard or arrived at the last minute. Human thought (see the first reading from Isaiah) greedily (though perhaps “understandably”) calculates how much each will get, but God’s ways are different: each had done what he or she could, and there shall be neither shortness nor surplus to what is needed for the day (see Matt 6:11, 25-34; Luke 12:13-21; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). Matthew also has the Christian-Jewish polemic in mind (“the first shall be last and the last shall be first;” cf. Matt 21:33-46, which must be properly understood).