

Lent 2012



Economic Justice

Themed Biblical Study Resource
Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland



Lent Resource 2012, Full, A4 Version

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*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall
bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your
forehead. (Deut 6:6-7)*



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Introduction

As Christians, we understand the character and purposes of God through the collected books that make up the Bible (Old and New Testaments). Yet, real difficulties can arise as we attempt to read this book across the ‘gap’ of time and space. Increasing awareness of our historically shaped consciousness and the impact of linguistic and cultural relativism have contributed to the growing sense that the ‘gap’ is too wide for these ancient texts to still speak reliably to us. This loss of confidence has left many of us feeling estranged from the very source of our Christian faith. Fewer Bible studies and sermons that are only cursorily mention the Bible are symptomatic.

One of the express aims of the Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland (BACI) is to draw on the many excellent insights of scholarship that can help us to bridge the gap. We believe that an informed reading of Scripture will actually encourage the faith of the Church. This is not a simple task but with humility and discernment the Bible will continue to witness to the Word, the eternal wisdom of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Last year BACI sponsored a Lent course on the theme of creation. Once again this year’s theme has been chosen so that the Church of Ireland can participate in the Anglican Communion’s “Bible in the Life of the Church” project (see www.anglicancommunion.org). This three-year project has two specific aims:

1. to discover how Anglicans worldwide read their Bibles and
2. to begin to provide some of the tools that will enable a deeper engagement with Scripture.

The Lent course for 2012 is, appropriately enough, on the theme of economic justice. Week by week, selected passages are given along with short commentaries, suggestions for further reading and questions for group discussion.

BACI now enjoys the support and patronage of both Archbishops, and so we extend a warm invitation to all parishes and dioceses to join us in this adventure.! Our hope and prayer is that this Lenten resource will not only further the conversation between biblical scholarship and the Church but will, more importantly, continue to open us up to the transformative wisdom of the Scriptures.

Please take the time to consider the process and results of your Bible study. Not only the content but also the method of reading the Bible influences our understanding of it. To assess how the Church of Ireland and the Anglican Communion read the Bible, we strongly urge you to share your thoughts and the way your group interacted with the study with BACI and the ACC. On the last two pages (43-44) of this resource are feedback questions. Please take the time to answer the questions and return them to BACI.

Preface

Lenten Thoughts

As we begin to prepare for Holy Week and Easter, it is interesting to note that economic considerations were an important motivation in the plot to have Jesus killed. Not only did Jesus's expulsion of the money lenders from the temple anger the religious leaders (Mark 11: 15-18), John makes it part of motivations for Jesus's betrayal (John 12:1-8). It is one of the wonderful reversals we see take place between the pre-Easter city and the post-Easter city (Acts 2: 44; 4: 32-35).

Governments still wrestle with economics, and we continue to live through a period of history in which the complexities of globalisation can seem overwhelming. However, economic justice remains an urgent task, and our recent experience of the question here in Ireland has once again put the challenge into sharp focus. At a grassroots level the 'Occupy' phenomenon that started on Wall Street in September 2011 (and has spread to many cities around the world) is an indication that people are looking for new ways of organising the way we manage financial resources. There is a growing sense that something important has been lost, and people are searching for values that will better express our human condition.

So, in general terms, what does economic justice look like? How can the Church contribute to the great problems of our own day? In more specific terms, what does economic justice look like in our own communities? How might our lives need to change in order to bear witness to the God revealed in the Scriptures? These are some of the big questions that are addressed by this year's theme.

The Bible is full of good things to say about economic justice. It speaks to the local, the national, the international and even to the cosmic dimensions of justice in which economic justice is an important expression. As ever, the answers do not just fall effortlessly off the page. If, in the spirit of Proverbs 2:4, we are to 'make our ears attentive to wisdom', then we will need to read, talk and pray as if we are searching for hidden treasure. We will then move beyond simply an intellectual engagement with our topic and, in very practical ways, we will begin to model communities in which economic justice is a reality. This vocation will at times be costly and painful, but it will also have the potential to create surprising oases of joy.

Social justice as faith in action

Deuteronomy is the fifth of the five books of the Law (the *Torah*) in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Law has a strong sense of the world as set in order by God, from the creation narratives of Genesis to the ordering of human relationships towards one another and towards God in the legal codes of the subsequent books. The covenant between God and God's people is the key expression of this ordering of relationships in Deuteronomy. Covenant speaks of God's lasting commitment to the people on the one hand, with the ongoing obligations of the appropriate human response to God's favour on the other hand.

Deuteronomy 15 is grounded in this relationship of blessing and obedience: the land is God's gift, and how the Israelites must act in this context is fundamentally shaped by that fact. Deut. 15:1-6 requires the remission of debts every seventh year. The cycle of poverty, degradation and exploitation which long-term indebtedness presupposes is interrupted by the restoration of relationships to their divinely-gifted state where there will be enough for all to live as functioning members of the community. This seven-yearly restoration clearly echoes the pattern of Sabbath (Gen. 2:2-3; Ex. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15). The ideal circumstances of Deut. 15:4-5 are tempered by the recognition in verses 6-11 that reality does not always measure up to ideal standards, but this does not lessen the obligations of mutual support and solidarity that constitute covenant faith. To give to the needy neighbour, to restore the debt-ridden fellow-member of the community to his or her status within that community is to act in acceptance of God's blessing and God's gifts.

The following set of injunctions, in Deut. 15:12-18, develops the theme of the Sabbath restoration of relationships specifically in relation to members of the community who have been reduced to bonded labour, presumably, again, as a result of becoming caught in an inescapable trap of indebtedness. What is envisaged, however, is not merely the legal end to a period of bondage in the seventh year, but the recognition of the right of one's fellow member of the community of covenant faith to the means necessary for a dignified and secure life within that community. The right of freedom, like the land, is God's gift. Freedom in the land, however, does not mean independence, but interdependence before God.

In a similar vein, the Letter of James characterises God as one who gives generously (Jas. 1:5, 17), and who defends the rights of those under social and economic pressures (Jas. 1:9, 27; 5:4), which have resulted in them being pushed to a marginal place within the prevailing social order. Jas. 2:1-17 offers a number of concrete examples of how followers of Jesus Christ are challenged, or better, *obliged* by the faith they claim to identify themselves wholeheartedly with God's view of the world. Within the prevailing earthly social order, the rich may possess power and status, but the real nature of this power and status is exploitative and oppressive, defying God's order of the universe (Jas. 2:2-3, 6-7). The poor and destitute (Jas. 2:2, 15), however, have no hope but their dependence on God; they cannot provide for themselves and can only trust in God's provision (Jas. 2:5). Those who have no hope but God's faithfulness exemplify dependence on God for anyone who would claim the faith of Jesus Christ.

Faith is not a superficial claim to believe; it is a deep commitment of utter identification with the purposes of God. To have faith is to act in accordance with God's will, and God's will - God's *Torah* - requires selfless, generous, even costly loyalty to one's fellow, one's neighbour, one's brother or sister (Jas. 2:8, 15-17).

Deuteronomy 15:1-18

Every seventh year^a you shall grant a remission of debts. ²And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it from a neighbour who is a member of the community, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. ³From a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. ⁴There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, ⁵if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. ⁶When the Lord your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

⁷If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near', and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.'

¹² If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you for six years, in the seventh year^b you shall set that person free. ¹³And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. ¹⁴Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing-floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. ¹⁶But if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you', because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, ¹⁷then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave for ever.

You shall do the same with regard to your female slave.

¹⁸Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired labourers; and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do.

James 2:1-17

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor^c person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith^d and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

⁸You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. ¹³For judgement will be without mercy^e to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

- A. (Deut. 15:1) The seventh year: the principle of release in the seventh year is first expressed in Ex. 21:2, within one of the oldest passages of the Law, with reference to the release of male slaves; a sabbatical fallow year for land is laid down in Ex. 23:10-11. As well as Deut. 15, the ideal envisaged by the sabbatical principle is also further developed in Lev. 25.
- B. (Deut. 15:12) The ancient Babylonian law-code of Hammurabi provided for release from debt-slavery after three years; it seems likely that a practice known elsewhere in the ancient world has been codified in the Hebrew Bible in a way that ties it into the symbolic importance of the Sabbath.
- C. (Jas. 2:2) The Greek word translated as “poor” does not simply mean “not well-off”, but has the much stronger sense of “destitute”; someone who has lost his means of living and his status within society.
- D. (Jas. 2:5) The poor who are “rich in faith” and “heirs of the kingdom” may suggest early Christian prophets who lived in accordance with Jesus’ injunction in Luke 9:2-3 to proclaim the kingdom without regard to the provision of their daily needs, thus living in radical dependence on God, and, in practice, on those who would welcome them and provide for them.
- E. (Jas. 2:13) Mercy is an important biblical concept, which has strongly relational overtones. Mercy is often associated with the restoration to their place in society of those who have lost their livelihood and status, such as the demon-possessed man of Mk 5:19, the “tax collectors and sinners” of Matt. 9:11-13, or the debt-slaves of the parable in Matt. 18:33.

Week One

Questions

1. How do we regard debt in our society? To what extent is our attitude to debt informed by our Christian faith?
2. Does the idea of debt remission make us uncomfortable? Why might this be? Is debt remission even practical in today's complex global economy? How might we observe the spirit, if not the letter, of the obligations laid down in these passages?
3. What is the relationship between economy and community?
4. Are there discrepancies between God's will, as discerned in Scripture, and the prevailing social and economic wisdom in our world today? Which do we find it easier to identify with? How deep is such identification in practice?
5. Who is our 'neighbour', our 'brother or sister'?
6. How do issues of lending and borrowing impact the Church of Ireland?

Can the rich be saved?

In Amos 6, we see the rich as passive spectators, watching disaster unfold around them yet seemingly inured from it all by a firewall of prosperity. Verses 4-6 describe in graphic terms the luxuries that continue to surround them and which continue to occupy their full attention and demand their unswerving devotion. Instead, they should have been grieving at what was happening around them (verse 6b), and vigilant to the impending threat of disaster (verse 3).

This was a time, approximately 760 BCE, of economic prosperity in the northern kingdom. Jeroboam (I:I), seemingly an able administrator, had cashed in on the decline of other nations around him. He took control of trade routes, the nation boomed and a rich upper class came into being. Archaeological excavations, including the discovery of the Samaritan ostraca, have demonstrated the grandeur of Jeroboam's fortress city together with the luxury and false worship which so vexed Amos. Amos saw beyond the affluence to deeper realities of impending judgement.

Would the rich listen to this severe critic of their lifestyle and their attitude? There would always be the temptation to write Amos off: a mere shepherd and, coming from the southern kingdom (Tekoa; see I:I), how dare he interfere with his criticisms of life in the northern kingdom! Subsequent history supplies its own commentary on this: Damascus and Samaria were overrun by a resurgent Assyria in 721 BCE; its people were taken away into exile and the land re-populated by people from elsewhere.

This is one of many passages in the Old Testament where the prophets denounce a selfish, unseeing materialism going hand-in-hand with superficial religiosity. It is tempting to draw parallels with our own situation, when Europe and the wider world continue to teeter on the brink of economic disaster. Those who are well-off are always in danger of refusing to see the situation and respond in any meaningful way.

Mark 10:17-34 admirably demonstrates how the gospels can be read as story rather than simple historical record. The rich man, in contrast to Amos 6, is portrayed in this story as an active participant. His actions and emotions, and those of the people around him, are vividly recorded. He runs up to Jesus (verse 17); his quest is sincere, as Jesus clearly sees (verse 21: 'Jesus looked at him and loved him'). He knows that keeping commandments, however important, is not enough; something more personal is required. Most significantly for our theme, faced with the challenge to sell all and then follow Jesus, 'his face fell' – disappointment, dismay, the realisation that for him, 'the price is too high'. But to his credit, he sees clearly the choice he has to make.

In this man's case, his possessions were an obstacle to wholehearted discipleship. No wonder the watching disciples were filled with consternation (verse 26). In the rest of the New Testament, however, it becomes clear that some of Jesus' followers and early Christians were rich. The danger is that we see this as somehow letting us off the hook. Christian discipleship will inevitably involve loss of some sort (thus consider Peter's words in verse 28). This loss could well in some way be financial; many of the temptations that face us are to do with money and possessions (thus verse 23; see also I Timothy 6:6-19, contra Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 2 Corinthians 8,9).

AMOS 6

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,
and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,
the notables of the first of the nations,
to whom the house of Israel resorts!

² Cross over to Calneh, and see;
from there go to Hamath the great;
then go down to Gath of the Philistines.

Are you better than these kingdoms?
Or is your territory greater than their territory,

³ O you that put far away the evil day,
and bring near a reign of violence?

⁴ Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,^a
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;

⁵ who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;

⁶ who drink wine from bowls,^b
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

⁷ Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

⁸ The Lord God has sworn by himself
(says the Lord, the God of hosts):
I abhor the pride of Jacob
and hate his strongholds;
and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

⁹ If ten people remain in one house, they shall die. ¹⁰And if a relative, one who burns the dead, shall take up the body to bring it out of the house, and shall say to someone in the innermost parts of the house, 'Is anyone else with you?' the answer will come, 'No.' Then the relative shall say, 'Hush! We must not mention the name of the Lord.'

¹¹ See, the Lord commands,
and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.

¹² Do horses run on rocks?
Does one plough the sea with oxen?
But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood—

¹³ you who rejoice in Lo-debar,^c
who say, 'Have we not by our own strength
taken Karnaim for ourselves?'

¹⁴ Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation,
O house of Israel, says the Lord, the God of hosts,
and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Wadi Arabah.^d

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up^e and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ¹⁸Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.”’ ²⁰He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ ²²When he heard this, he was shocked^f and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ ²⁹Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

- A. (Amos 6:4): Ivory decor was popular for inlays in furniture and for wall panels. One of the principal sources of ivory was elephant tusks, which were imported from Aram (where Syrian elephants were not yet extinct). For those who could afford it, the best quality meats came from specially bred sheep and cattle that were kept in stalls (see Malachi 4:2) and fattened with barley prior to slaughter.
- B. (Amos 6:6): possibly they were not only drinking to excess in these large bowls but perhaps also of profaning sacred objects. Banqueters in the ancient world were often treated by a generous host to fine oils that would be used to anoint their foreheads. This provided a glistening sheen to their countenance and also would have added a fragrance to their persons and the room. (See also Psalm 104:15 – but here as something to celebrate, not condemn!).
- C. (Amos 6:13): ‘Lo-debar’ is Hebrew for ‘nowhere’ and is likely a pun by Amos on a location in Ammonite or Aramean territory. The context implies that the Israelite kingdom had just conquered the city or had had a military victory in the area. Amos sees the rejoicing caused by this as only masquing Israel’s own conquest.
- D. (Amos 6:14): ‘Lebo-Hamath’ is likely the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, in the northernmost reaches of Palestine; ‘Wadi Arabah’ is a seasonal river either near Jericho or in the Transjordan, in either case the southern border of Northern Israel. The phrase thus represents the totality of the kingdom.
- E. (Mark 10:17): Few people ran under the hot sun. His whole attitude speaks of earnestness and even urgency. It is possible that Peter’s words in verse 28 are an attempt to contrast the young man’s failure to face the challenge of discipleship with their own response.
- F. (Mark 10:22): ‘His face fell’ – a rare Greek verb is used to describe a very strong emotion.

Week TWO

Questions

1. What are the modern equivalents of the luxuries cited in Amos 6:4-5? How many of our own habits and possessions should rightly be classed as luxuries but are unthinkingly assumed to be necessities?
2. How concerned are we at the economic situation that has developed in recent years? While it is easy to blame others (e.g. bankers!), is this a mechanism for blinding ourselves to our own attitudes and responsibilities? Are our concerns chiefly about how we are affected rather than concern for others?
3. What sacrifices are we willing to pay to play our part in helping to put things right?
4. Do you know of any churches that run courses in Christian discipleship? If so, do you know if they include material on Christian attitudes to, and use of, money and possessions?
5. Have you heard of the Old Testament principle of tithing, in which one-tenth of our income is given to the Lord (e.g. Leviticus 27:30-32)? If so, have you ever considered putting it into practice?
6. Would you consider getting together with other Christians and sharing (at least some) details of your regular income and expenditure, being willing thereby to be accountable to each other within such a group?
7. What financial pressures and temptations threaten the reality of your own discipleship?

Exalting the humble and meek

Reading the four Gospels, they give a far more colourful picture of Mary than only being 'meek and mild'. She is a woman of initiatives and deep thoughts. After the Archangel Gabriel had foretold the birth of Jesus, she goes to her relative Elizabeth with 'haste'. After the two women have greeted each other, Mary bursts into song.¹ This song is in the history of the Church known as the 'Magnificat'.²

It is a powerful song in two parts. The first part (verses 46-49) conveys Mary's personal feelings. She praises God for what he has done to her. Her words reveal that Mary knows her life will never be the same again and the world will never be the same again. The second part of Mary's Song (verses 50-55) widens the perspectives. It is about us, and all who fear the Lord are drawn in. It tells us about God's power and what God can do. Then as well as now as well as in the future.

This part of the song sets out how God wants us to live. Indeed we may well be changed as we consider the three challenges that meet us. The first challenge is about moral change: 'He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.' (1:51). The Christian faith involves the death of our own pride. If we live close to Christ and follow his teaching, then there is no room for being stiff-necked. Instead we are shaped by love, humility and forgiveness. The second challenge is social: 'He has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly' (1:52). The Christian faith ends our thinking about prestige. If we take this verse seriously, it means that all of us, no matter our financial situation, class or background, have the same value. Hence all in our society should have access to the same services in terms of health, education and social opportunity. The third challenge relates to economic change: 'he has filled the hungry ... and sent the rich away empty' (1:53). The Christian faith strives for a society where no one has too much and no one has too little. Such a society is based on the principles to give with joy and to be hospitable.

These three challenges lead to change. Taking them seriously means that our complacency is confronted, and if we listen carefully it may indeed force us out of our own comfort zones. Reciting or singing these familiar and traditional words is at the same time both comforting and challenging.

The main question in Psalm 73 is why the wicked and arrogant prosper and why the good, honest and godly (righteous) suffer, struggle and face difficulties. To the righteous, this is a conundrum or even a scandal. This theme is familiar in other biblical texts, for instance, there are many parallels with the Book of Job. There are also parallels with Psalm 37 and 49. The conclusion reached in all these different texts, however, differs. As in Psalm 49, there is a realisation in Psalm 73 of the transitory nature of worldly wealth.

Verse 17 is the turning point in Psalm 73, and after that the psalmist sees the solution to his problem: walking closely with God will open one up to his counsel, guidance and protection. At the end of the day it is only God that can receive us with honour. The psalmist reaches the conclusion that no matter how many worldly goods we have, unless we have God as well, something is missing. To be a whole person requires faith, which is a timeless insight.

1. It should be noted that some early manuscripts of the Gospel according to Luke ascribe the song to Elizabeth rather than Mary. It is also interesting that this song echoes the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sam 2:1-10).

2. Latin *Magnificat anima mea* means 'my soul magnifies'.

Psalm 73

A Psalm of Asaph.^a

¹ Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.

³ For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity^b of the wicked.

⁴ For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.^c

⁵ They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.

⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace;^d
violence covers them like a garment.

⁷ Their eyes swell out with fatness;^e
their hearts overflow with follies.

⁸ They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.

⁹ They set their mouths against heaven,^f
and their tongues range over the earth.

¹⁰ Therefore the people turn and praise them,
and find no fault in them.

¹¹ And they say, 'How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'

¹² Such are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.

¹³ All in vain I have kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.^g

¹⁴ For all day long I have been plagued,
and am punished every morning.

¹⁵ If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way',
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.

¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,

¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end.

- 18 Truly you set them in slippery places;^h
you make them fall to ruin.
- 19 How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!ⁱ
- 20 They are like a dream when one awakes;
on awaking you despise their phantoms.
- 21 When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
- 22 I was stupid^j and ignorant;
I was like a brute beast towards you.
- 23 Nevertheless I am continually with you;^k
you hold my right hand.^l
- 24 You guide me with your counsel,
and afterwards you will receive me with honour.
- 25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
- 26 My flesh and my heart may fail,^m
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.
- 27 Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
you put an end to those who are false to you.
- 28 But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
to tell of all your works.

Luke 1:39-58

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaptⁿ in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

⁴⁶ And Mary said,^o
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.^p
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

Psalm 73

- A. (73:1): Asaph – was an ancestor of the Temple singers and one of David’s chief musicians. For instance I Chronicles 25:1 and 2 Chronicles 5:12.
‘pure in heart’ – honest and faithful to God in word and action.
- B. (73:3): ‘prosperity’ – could also mean ‘good health’.
- C. (73:4): ‘sleek’ – could also mean fat. In other words referring to some one rich and affluent.
- D. (73:6): ‘necklace’ – a symbol worn as a sign of importance.
- E. (73:7): ‘eyes swell out with fatness’ – wealth and riches have made them arrogant and conceited.
- F. (73:9): ‘set their months against heaven’ means to be against God.
- G. (73:13): ‘washed my hands in innocence’ means to prove oneself without guilt. It is a symbolic action. A cleaning ritual performed to prove innocence. This could have been part of an oath of purification, e.g., Deut. 21:6. Pilate also washed his hands as a sign of innocence when Jesus was brought before him, Matt. 27:24.
- H. (73:18): ‘in slippery places’ – means that someone’s life is like a slippery path on which they may fall.
- I. (73:19): ‘terrors’ this could mean misfortunes or demons.
- J. (73:22): ‘stupid’ – means that the psalmist found it hard to believe that there is divine justice and righteousness.
- K. (73:23): ‘I am continually with you’ – to realise that one belongs to God.
- L. (73:23): ‘hold my right hand’ – to be honoured.
- M. (73:26): ‘my flesh and my heart’ – the sum of one’s vitality

Luke 1:39-58

- N. (1:41): ‘Leapt’ – the movement of the baby as Mary greeted Elizabeth indicated a future relationship between the two babies. i.e. John recognises Jesus as Lord. Elizabeth also recognises this and filled by the Holy Spirit, she interprets her baby’s leap and she makes the first Christological confession in verse 43. There is a ‘leaping’ parallel in Gen. 25:22 when Esau and Jacob leapt in Rebekah’s womb.
- O. (1: 46-56): The Magnificat, Mary’s Song of Praise, follows the Hebrew poetry pattern. Words, phrases and expressions clearly have their roots in the Old Testament. For instance, ‘for the Mighty one has done’ (Luke 1:49), can imply past, present or future time, which is a common trait in Hebrew poetry. There are similarities and parallels with Hannah’s Prayer or Song of Praise in I Sam. 2:1-11.
- P. (1:48-49): Mary’s lowliness is contrasted by God being the Mighty One.

Week Three

Questions

1. Who are the rich, arrogant and mighty today? And who are the lowly, humble and meek?
2. The Magnificat is a powerful song, full of challenges: moral, social and economic. What does this song say to you? What does this song say to the Church? How do we handle and justify the fact that some people 'jump the queue' because they have the financial resources to do so, rather than individuals being assessed according to need, for instance, when it comes to health matters?
3. How do we view an 'austerity budget' and the European economic crisis in the light of the Magnificat? Who is 'lifted up' and who is 'brought down'?
4. How do we approach the issue of the righteous person's suffering and the prosperous non-believer's success?
5. Psalm 73 reaches the conclusion that without faith we cannot become a whole person. How does your faith improve you and what does it bring to your life?

Choosing Poor Values

Both passages this week invert normal human ways of thinking about economic values, although they represent very different kinds of texts and the original audiences were quite divergent.

The first passage, from Ezekiel, is a prophetic and poetic lament over the city of Tyre. Tyre was a very wealthy city, known for its long-distance maritime trade and its fabulously expensive purple dye. Likely written around the time of the siege of Tyre by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the early 6th Century BCE—not long in time from that king’s conquest of Jerusalem—the prophet depicts Tyre as a massive and expensive flagship which suddenly and unexpectedly sinks in the middle of a voyage. Not only can the ship’s finery not save it from sinking to the bottom of the sea, but its wide-ranging trade partners can only watch in horror. Wealth cannot persuade God to withhold judgement. When read with Ezekiel’s subsequent oracle against Tyre in chapter 28, the prophet shows that wealth made Tyre prideful as well as feel secure. The Phoenician cities (of which Tyre was the most important at the time) were long-time trade partners of the Israelite kingdoms, and they shared a similar culture. Though seemingly directed at wealthy Tyre, the lament was really meant for the ears of Judaeans who were facing subjection and exile. One can almost sense a feeling of pity as well as warning in Ezekiel’s perspective on Tyre.

The second reading comes from Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, another version of which appears in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-12). The form of the first section is unique in the literature of the period, although it echoes covenant blessings and curses such as those of Deuteronomy. Unlike these, however, Luke’s blessings and woes describe a present state rather than a future one. Our normal perspective on poverty and wealth is inverted, with the poor called blessed and the rich lamented. These are followed by a list of injunctions for the use and attitude one ought to hold towards possessions and money; rather than valuing the prestige or profit which a relationship could proffer, Jesus commands the valuing of people through a series of difficult imperatives. Spoken to ‘his disciples’, the words as presented by Luke seem to imply that the original listeners were a mix of poor and rich, though Luke was writing for a (presumably wealthy) patron.

In both passages those deemed successful by the world are almost pitied for choosing the wrong set of values; while money may buy things valued by many, these are not the things which are to be valued by God’s people. Instead, God’s people need to choose what the world sees as ‘poor’ values.

Ezekiel 27:1-36

The word of the Lord came to me: ²Now you, mortal, raise a lamentation over Tyre, ^a ³and say to Tyre, which sits at the entrance to the sea, merchant of the peoples on many coastlands, Thus says the Lord God:

O Tyre, you have said,

‘I^b am perfect in beauty.’

⁴Your borders are in the heart of the seas;
your builders made perfect your beauty.

⁵They made all your planks
of fir trees from Senir; ^c
they took a cedar from Lebanon
to make a mast for you.

⁶From oaks of Bashan
they made your oars;
they made your deck of pines
from the coasts of Cyprus,
inlaid with ivory.

⁷Of fine embroidered linen from Egypt
was your sail,
serving as your ensign;

blue and purple from the coasts of Elishah ^d
was your awning.

⁸The inhabitants of Sidon and Arvad ^e
were your rowers;
skilled men of Zemer were within you,
they were your pilots.

⁹The elders of Gebal and its artisans were within you,
caulking your seams;
all the ships of the sea with their mariners were within you,
to barter for your wares.

¹⁰Paras and Lud and Put ^f
were in your army,
your mighty warriors;
they hung shield and helmet in you;
they gave you splendour.

¹¹Men of Arvad and Helech
were on your walls all round;
men of Gamad ^g were at your towers.

They hung their quivers all round your walls;
they made perfect your beauty.

¹²Tarshish ^h did business with you out of the abundance of your great wealth; silver, iron, tin, and lead they exchanged for your wares. ¹³Javan, Tubal, and Meshech ⁱ traded with you; they exchanged human beings and vessels of bronze for your merchandise. ¹⁴Beth-togarmah exchanged for your wares horses,

war-horses, and mules. ¹⁵The Rhodians^j traded with you; many coastlands were your own special markets; they brought you in payment ivory tusks and ebony. ¹⁶Edom did business with you because of your abundant goods; they exchanged for your wares turquoise, purple, embroidered work, fine linen, coral, and rubies. ¹⁷Judah and the land of Israel traded with you; they exchanged for your merchandise wheat from Minnith, millet, honey, oil, and balm. ¹⁸Damascus traded with you for your abundant goods—because of your great wealth of every kind—wine of Helbon,^k and white wool. ¹⁹Vedan and Javan from Uzal^l entered into trade for your wares; wrought iron, cassia, and sweet cane were bartered for your merchandise. ²⁰Dedan traded with you in saddlecloths for riding. ²¹Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your favoured dealers in lambs, rams, and goats; in these they did business with you. ²²The merchants of Sheba and Raamah traded with you; they exchanged for your wares the best of all kinds of spices, and all precious stones, and gold. ²³Haran, Canneh, Eden,^m the merchants of Sheba, Asshur, and Chilmad traded with you. ²⁴These traded with you in choice garments, in clothes of blue and embroidered work, and in carpets of coloured material, bound with cords and made secure; in these they traded with you. ²⁵The ships of Tarshish travelled for you in your trade.

So you were filled and heavily laden
in the heart of the seas.

²⁶Your rowers have brought you
into the high seas.

The east windⁿ has wrecked you
in the heart of the seas.

²⁷Your riches, your wares, your merchandise,
your mariners and your pilots,
your caulkers, your dealers in merchandise,
and all your warriors within you,
with all the company
that is with you,

sink into the heart of the seas
on the day of your ruin.

²⁸At the sound of the cry of your pilots
the countryside shakes,

²⁹and down from their ships
come all that handle the oar.

The mariners and all the pilots of the sea
stand on the shore

³⁰and wail aloud over you,
and cry bitterly.

They throw dust on their heads
and wallow in ashes;^o

³¹they make themselves bald for you,
and put on sackcloth,
and they weep over you in bitterness of soul,
with bitter mourning.

- ³² In their wailing they raise a lamentation for you,
and lament over you:
'Who was ever destroyed like Tyre
in the midst of the sea?
- ³³ When your wares came from the seas,
you satisfied many peoples;
with your abundant wealth and merchandise
you enriched the kings of the earth.
- ³⁴ Now you are wrecked by the seas,
in the depths of the waters;
your merchandise and all your crew
have sunk with you.
- ³⁵ All the inhabitants of the coastlands
are appalled at you;
and their kings are horribly afraid,
their faces are convulsed.
- ³⁶ The merchants among the peoples hiss at you;
you have come to a dreadful end
and shall be no more for ever.'

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:[¶]

‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ ‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² ‘Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

²⁴ ‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ ‘Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ ‘Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

²⁷ ‘But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² ‘If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend[¶] to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.[¶] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ ‘Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure,[¶] pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.’

- A. (Ezekiel 27:2): Tyre was a major maritime city on an island (in what is now the Lebanon). It was Phoenician, and famous in antiquity for its trading and trading colonies throughout the Mediterranean world.
- B. (Ezekiel 27:3): Hebrew word can be understood normally as 'I' or as 'ship', in keeping with the metaphor in the rest of the chapter.
- C. (Ezekiel 27:5): Senir is Mount Hermon in the Ante-lebanon range, famous as a sacred mountain.
- D. (Ezekiel 27:7): location unknown; Cyprus has been suggested, although it was not a known source of purple (while Tyre itself was).
- E. (Ezekiel 27:8–9): Arvad, Sidon, and Gebal are other important Phoenician ports, at this time less prosperous than Tyre.
- F. (Ezekiel 27:10): Paras, Lud, and Put: usually understood as Persia, Lydia, and Libya, three countries far apart.
- G. (Ezekiel 27:11): Gammad is otherwise unknown.
- H. (Ezekiel 27:12): Tarshish was in southern Spain on the Guadalquivir River. It was known for bronze trading and even had trade links with Britain. It was where Jonah was said to flee to.
- I. (Ezekiel 27:13): Javan, Meshech, Tubal: all areas in Anatolia, modern-day Turkey and Armenia.
- J. (Ezekiel 27:15): Dedan, an important trading city in Arabia. Emendation gives Rhodians.
- K. (Ezekiel 27:18): Helbon in northern Syria was known for the excellence of its wine.
- L. (Ezekiel 27:19): Likely a list from southern Arabia, areas known for the spice trade.
- M. (Ezekiel 27:23): 'Eden' likely refers to a region near Armenia or Kurdistan.
- N. (Ezekiel 27:26): The east wind is notorious for being violent and dangerous.
- O. (Ezekiel 27:31): Traditional acts of mourning.
- P. (Luke 6:20-26): The 'blesseds' appear in Matt. 5:1–12, where the list is much longer; but the woes are unique to Luke. Luke only has 'the poor' while Matthew gives 'the poor in spirit'.
- Q. (Luke 6:34): the word 'to lend' only appears here and in Matt. 5:42. Lending for interest to other Jews is forbidden in the Torah; this saying of Jesus, then, must either refer to lending to Gentiles (members outside the group) or to the expectation of receiving the principle back, rather than interest. In either case, it is more strict than the Torah's injunctions on lending.
- R. (Luke 6:35): Word translated 'expecting nothing in return' only appears here in New Testament. Properly means 'despair.'
- S. (Luke 6:38): the 'measure' uses the language of grain transactions

Week FOUR

Questions

1. What is it about wealth which the passages find objectionable?
2. Do the two passages share concerns or ideas? How do they differ?
3. What response do you think Ezekiel wanted from his listeners?
4. What response do you think Luke expected from his audience?
5. What values do these readings consider important for the heavenly economy?
6. What don't the passages say about the rich?
7. What are the dangers of riches in these passages?
8. What are the dangers of poverty in these passages?
9. How do these passages contribute to a biblical understanding of economic justice?
10. What practical suggestions do these passages make for being an economically just people?
11. What do these readings say about the values current in the Church of Ireland?

Finding a Fast and a Feast that the Lord Would Choose

This week's texts emerge from contexts in which factions threatened to undermine the witness of God's people in the world. The texts engage the question of what it is that makes our ritual observances acceptable to God. Both passages make the point that neither fasting nor feasting is inherently pleasing to God, but that each must be embraced as a practice of social justice and each must convey the equality and embrace of the kingdom of God.

Isaiah 58:1-14 comes from the period immediately following the return from Babylonian exile. Beginning in chapter 56 and continuing through the end of the book of Isaiah, the prophet turns his attention to the conditions in Judah following the return. This is a period of rebuilding. It is a period in which the temple and its structures as well as the power dynamics of the community are being negotiated for a new context. Who will control Jerusalem and its day-to-day functioning? Who will have charge of the temple and how will it be administered? Who has a right to claim the land, and with it the possibility of agricultural production and economic stability?

The returning exiles did not return to an empty land. There were people already living there who considered themselves worshippers of Israel's God. Some of these seem to have been descendants of those brought into the land by the Assyrians after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE. They claimed to have been worshipping Israel's God since then (Ezra 4:2). Others were presumably those left behind in the land at the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and their descendants. Each of these groups, as well as the returning exiles themselves, had a stake in the questions concerning the make-up of the new community in Jerusalem, and each had a stake in the question of who had the right to be called the people of God.

The returned exiles busied themselves with setting up a new community. Their activities are largely profiled in Ezra and Nehemiah. They rebuilt the temple and the city wall. They focused heavily on obedience to the Law of Moses. Ezra read this law aloud to the people (Neh. 8:1-12) and they promised to obey it. The leaders of this group defined those who belonged within the community of the faithful as those who were ethnically pure and as those who kept the law. They forced Jewish men to divorce foreign wives (Ezra 10:1-44; Neh. 13:23-27) and closed the gates of the city to enforce the keeping of Sabbath (Neh. 13:19-22). These practices limited who could belong to the community, and they also limited who had access to power and to land. In the ancient world land passed largely through inheritance, and the divorcing of foreign wives had implications for land inheritance as well as for the welfare of the women and their children.

In this context of debate over the identity of God's people, the prophet responsible for Isaiah 56-66 makes shocking statements about the inclusion of foreigners and eunuchs among those whom the LORD would bless and give a place within the temple if they kept the Sabbath (Isaiah 56:3-7). The Sabbath then, for this prophet, becomes a means for breaking down barriers between people. It is the means by which one might gain a place within the community, not a means or a time for exclusion.

The passage under consideration builds not only on debate about Sabbath keeping and religious identity in its historical period, but also upon a connection between Sabbath keeping and economic justice in Deuteronomy. Throughout Deuteronomy the people are exhorted to care for the widow, the orphan, and the

foreigner resident among them. The commandment to keep the Sabbath differs somewhat in Deuteronomy from the parallel commandment in Exodus. In Exodus the Sabbath commandment is justified with reference to the rest of God at the end of the seven days of creation. In Deuteronomy, however, the Sabbath is commanded with the instruction that none of the household is to do any work so that ‘your male and female slave may rest as well as you’ (Deut. 5:14). The commandment is justified and reinforced with reference to Israel’s memory of slavery in Egypt. In these ways, the prophet turns Ezra and Nehemiah’s interest in keeping the law against them in the debate over the identity of God’s people. The law itself requires care for the foreigner and links the Sabbath with justice for workers and slaves. Isaiah 58 calls the returnees’ fasts inappropriate and ineffective because they ‘serve their own interests’ (Isa. 58:3, 13) and ‘oppress all [their] workers’ (Isa. 58:3).

While the time period and imagery of the first passage may be unfamiliar to us, the second passage is etched into our corporate consciousness as portions of it appear in our liturgy for the Lord’s Supper. The words of institution which appear within it (I Cor. 11:23-25) are part of a larger argument that Paul is making throughout the letter about the nature of the church and the Christian community. Like the prophet, Paul writes for a community in which there are factions (I Cor. 11:18-19) and here as well, the division has to do with determining who is ‘genuine’ (v. 19). Providing a suitable response to that sense of division is the first indication that Paul gives of the reason for writing the letter we now know as I Corinthians (1:10-11). Paul launches the body of his letter with an appeal to the believers at Corinth ‘that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose’ (1:10). He describes the divisions he sees in the Corinthian church as mimicking the world’s mode of grasping for power and rejects these as the opposite of the spirit of Christ (1:18-31). Elsewhere in the letter he refers to the believers as the body of Christ (12:12-27).

This focus on unity within the church and the description of the Christian community as the ‘body of Christ’ illustrate that the threat of eating and drinking in an ‘unworthy manner’ (I Cor. 11:27) is intimately tied to the concerns Paul expresses over factions (I Cor. 11:18-19) and ‘humiliating those who have nothing’ (I Cor. 11:22). Paul is concerned that the Corinthian church’s celebration around the Lord’s table ought to express the unity of the body of Christ and ought to act out a type of justice and equity that differs from the world’s notions of prestige and power (I Cor. 11:32).

Isaiah 58

Shout out, do not hold back!^a

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practised righteousness^b
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.

³ 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves,^c but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?^c
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:^d
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹ The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹² Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;⁶
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

¹³ If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honourable;
if you honour it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;
¹⁴ then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-34

¹⁷ Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.¹ ²⁰When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper.^g ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner^h will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves. ³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. ³¹But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. ³⁴If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

- A. (Isaiah 58:1): 'Shout out do not hold back': There is a tension between the command to shout out without restraint and the content of that shouting. One expects a joyful proclamation; the reference to a 'trumpet' is a *shofar* – a musical instrument associated with temple liturgy. One expects that the shouting will call the people to worship, but instead it is to announce to them their rebellion. This tension between the expectation created by the first half of the verse and the second continues into verse 2, and in both cases highlights the prophet's sense that the people's appearances as holy people are deceiving.
- B. (Isaiah 58:2): 'as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness': The phrasing here implies that they are not righteous. Whatever their fasting is, it is not producing righteousness.
- C. (Isaiah 58:3 & 5): 'humble ourselves': This phrase is difficult to translate. The verb means to afflict or deny oneself. The word translated ourselves is notoriously difficult to render in English and means persons but often with specific attention being drawn to their animating breath or spirit and desires. The phrase here translated 'humble ourselves' is used by the book of Leviticus as an expression of the special sort of fasting that accompanied the annual Day of Atonement ritual (Lev. 16 and 23). In the regulations for that ritual, any Israelites who did not 'humble themselves' would be cut off from the people.
- D. (Isaiah 58:6-7): The prophet outlines a very different mode of self-denial and calls upon the hearers to embrace fasting not as a ritual but as a time of letting the interests of others come before their own. The fasting that is outlined is one that is profoundly bound up in righting socio-economic wrongs.
- E. (Isaiah 58:12): This verse contains imagery of rebuilding. In this time period there was a focus on reconstruction of Jerusalem's city walls and temple. Here the rebuilders are promised a place in the history of reconstruction if they will attend first to the issues of social and economic justice.

I Corinthians II:17-34

- F. (I Cor. II:19): This verse should be read as sarcastic. In light of Paul's broader message in the letter and his opening exhortations to be of one mind, it would seem that he is either citing the language of those who have written to him about these matters or is rejecting their implied position through sarcasm.
- G. (I Cor. II:20): 'it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper': Paul calls the Corinthians' celebrations not the Lord's Supper because it does not honour the Lord and instead they seek to honour themselves. There is a marked contrast between the 'Lord's Supper' (v. 20) and 'your own supper' (v. 21).
- H. (I Cor. II:27): 'in an unworthy manner': Given the thrust of the letter and the broader context this unworthy manner should be seen as eating without regard for the other members of the body of Christ. This is particularly the case in light of the following note that judgement is for those who 'eat and drink without discerning the body' (v. 29) and of Paul's anger over the Corinthians' practice of 'humiliat[ing] those who have nothing' (v. 22).

(Isaiah 58:1-17):

1. After reading the text aloud, ask the group to react to the images of the text. Do any depictions jump out at you? How do you respond to them?
2. Divide the group in two. Ask one group to generate a list of things they can say based on this text about a fast that is pleasing to God, and the other group to make a list of things this text says about a fast that is not pleasing to God. Compare the two lists. As a group discuss whether you can make some general comments about the differences between the two fasts. What is the nature of a fast that pleases God?
3. To Discuss: How do our Lenten fasts compare with the two types of fasts described in this passage? Why do we fast during Lent? What would a fast motivated by economic justice look like for us?
4. To Discuss: What is the relationship between economic justice and self-interest? How do they relate in this text? How do they relate in modern society? Can they co-exist and if so, in what way?
5. To Discuss: This passage sees the outgrowth of economic justice being restoration. What would such restoration look like for our society?
6. To Discuss: How can we as a faith community embrace a fast that the Lord would choose? What would that look like? What practical measures might we take as a group?

(I Corinthians II:17-34):

1. Paul draws a distinction between the Lord's Supper and our own. How would we articulate the differences between these? How does Paul describe each? What should the primary emphases of the Lord's Supper be according to this text?
2. What about the Corinthians' practices 'humiliate[s] those who have nothing'?
3. What sort of divisions does our community face? In what ways are we responding appropriately to these? In what ways can we improve?
4. How does Paul use the quotation from the tradition (v. 23-26) to respond to the divisions among the Corinthians? Why do you suppose he does this? Does his argument work for you?
5. What does Paul mean by eating in 'an unworthy manner'? What makes a communion celebration worthy? What do we do that is either worthy or unworthy? What can we do to make our table celebrations more focused on the body of Christ?
6. Give each member of the group a copy of the most recent communion liturgy from the congregation's worship. Ask them to interact with the liturgy in light of their reading of this passage. What elements of the liturgy reflect an interpretation of this passage? What about the liturgy points to economic justice? How focused are we on those issues in our celebration of Holy Communion? How can we make them more prominent?

(Drawing the texts together):

1. Based on these two texts, how would you describe the relationship between ritual observance and social and economic justice?
2. How should Christians think about self-interest in light of these texts?
3. What is the relationship between community identity and economic justice? Do we have a special responsibility for those within our group's boundaries? Do economic circumstances tempt us to re-draw those boundaries? How can our community respond to these pressures?

Additional Resources

Further Passages on Justice

- **Job 29–31**

Job contrasts his good deeds to the poor and vulnerable with his suffering and asks for justice

- **Deuteronomy 24:17–22**

Laws providing for the poor, widow, and alien

- **James 5:1–6**

Condemnation of rich oppressors

- **Mark 14:3–9**

Jesus anointed with costly perfume

- **Revelation 18**

Condemnation of systems of greed

- **Micah 3:5–12**

Prophets and teachers corrupted by money

On Justice:

- Biddle, Mark E. "The Biblical prohibition against usury." *Interpretation* 65[2011]: 117-127.
- Colwell, Matthew. "Practicing Sabbath Economics: How to Live in the Light of God's Abundance and Provision." *Sojourners Magazine* 37.5 (2008): 20-24.
- Crainshaw, Jill. "Living the Feast: Liturgical Etiquette for Beulah's Table." *Liturgy*, 22.1 (Feb 01 [2007]): 19-26.
- Gadzekpo, Richard. "A Survey of the Deuteronomist's Theology of Poverty Alleviation." *AME Zion Quarterly Review* 120 no 2 (2007): 9-13.
- Hann, Roelff. *The Economics of Honor: Biblical Reflections on Property and Money*. trans. By Bert Hielema. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009.
- Jensen, David Hadley (Interviewee). "David H Jensen: Global Weariness and Sabbath Rest." *Insights* 122.2 (2007): 12-15.
- Myers, Ched. "'God Speed the Year of Jubilee!' Jesus' New Economy of Grace: The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics." *Sojourners* 27 (1998): 24-28, 36-39.
- Myers, Ched. "Why Sabbath Economics?" *Living Pulpit* 12 no 2 Ap-Je (2003): 14-15.
- Petersen, Eugene. *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987: pp 63-83.
- Witherington, Ben, III. *Jesus and Money*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010.

On particular Books:

- Cook, Stephen L. *Conversations with Scripture: Second Isaiah*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2008.
- Heffelfinger, Katie M. *'I am Large, I Contain Multitudes.' Lyric Cohesion and Conflict in Second Isaiah*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Moxnes, Halvor. *The Economy of the Kingdom. Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988.
- Schmidt, Frederick W. *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of Luke*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2009.

On the Church of Ireland and Reading the Bible:

- Olhausen, William and Jason M. Silverman. "Where Angels Fear To Tread? Considering the Bible in the Church of Ireland." *Search* 34.3 (2011): 182-187.
- Pierce, Andrew. A description of the use of the Bible in the Church of Ireland. Clare Amos and Stephen Lyon, eds. Norwich Press, forthcoming.

Additional Resources

Web resources on Justice

“Bible and Social Justice overview.” http://www.umc-gbcs.org/atf/cf/%7B325AB72F-313E-4CC3-BB1A-EF0A52968A8D%7D/The_Bible_and_Social_Justice.pdf

Artson, Rabbi Bradley Shavit. “Biblical Economic Justice: Supply and Demand Isn't Enough” *Huffington Post* 9 Jan 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-bradley-shavit-artson/supply-demand-isnt-enough_b_1178974.html

Beatitude Society. “Poverty and Economic Justice.” <http://www.beatitudessociety.org/resources-regarding-poverty-economic-justice>

Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice. <http://clbsj.org/>

Episcopal Network for Economic Justice. <http://www.enej.org/>

John Mark Ministries. “Economic Justice.” <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/1477.htm>

Mott, Stephen and Ronald J. Sider. “Economic Justice: a Biblical Paradigm.” *Transformation* 17.2 (2002):15-63. http://www.ocms.ac.uk/transformation/articles/1702.050_mott.pdf

Theology Library: Economic Justice. <http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/economic.htm>

For group prayer

collects

Heavenly Father,
Whose children suffered at the hands of Herod:
By your great might frustrate all evil designs,
And establish your reign of justice, love and peace;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Almighty God and Father,
You have so ordered our life
That we are dependent on one another;
Prosper those engaged in commerce and industry
And direct their minds and hands
That they may rightly use your gifts in the service of others;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Lord,
Who has taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth;
Send Thy Holy Spirit,
And pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity,
The very bond of peace and of all virtues,
Without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee;
Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake.

O God,
Whose never-failing providence ordereth all things both in heaven and earth;
We humbly beseech thee to put away from us
All hurtful things,
And to give us those things which be profitable for us;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

O Almighty God,
Whose blessed Son called Matthew the tax-collector
To be an apostle and evangelist:
Give us grace to forsake the selfish pursuit of gain
And the possessive love of riches:
That we may follow in the way of your Son Jesus Christ,
Who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever.

O almighty and everlasting God,
Who hast graciously given unto us
The fruits of the earth in their season;
We yield thee humble and hearty thanks for this thy bounty;
Beseeching thee to give us grace rightly
To use the same to thy glory,
And the relief of those that need;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit,
One God, world without end.

Some prayers from Christian Aid's *Dear Life*.

God of all creation
in your teeming and orderly world,
we have disturbed the balance –
the rich forcing the poor
to wreck environments.
Help us to renew the landscape,
restoring what has been destroyed,
so that life may continue,
precarious but able to endure.

God of the just weight
and the fair measure,
let me remember the hands
that harvested my food, my drink,
not only in my prayers
but in the marketplace.
Let me not seek a bargain
That leaves another hungry.

God give strength
to those who are passed over
for the necessities of life.
For you have always chosen
those who are called nothing,
of no account, officially not there –
and with them fashioned your will for our
world.

O God, you promise a world
where those who now weep shall laugh,
those who are hungry shall feast,
those who are poor now and excluded,
shall have your kingdom for their own.
I want this world too.
I renounce despair.
I will act for change.
I choose to be included
in your great feast of life,

O God, you took upon you
the yoke of humanity
and the burden of love,
and did not find it easy;
let us learn from you
to share the weight of all this aching world,
that our souls may be light,
and our hearts rested,
as together we are carried by you
in Jesus Christ.

Some Prayers from the Iona Community

O God, you are always true to us in love
and we are left wanting to say sorry
for our faithlessness to you and one another,
for our forgetting the poor and the broken,
for our failure to cherish creation.
Give us life, O God, to change,
And enable us to change that we may live.

Spirit of truth and judgement,
who alone can cast out
the powers that grip our world
at this point of crisis,
give us your discernment,
that we may accurately name what is evil,
and know the way that leads to peace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Spirit of integrity,
you drive us into the desert,
to search out our truth.
Give us clarity to know what is right,
that we may abandon the false innocence
of failing to choose at all,
but my follow the purposes of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

God of history,
you share our joys and crushing sorrows,
you hear the cries of the afflicted,
you fill the hungry,
and you set free the oppressed.
We pray for the end to all injustice.
Inspire us with God's all embracing love,
challenge us with Jesus's sacrificial love,
empower us with the Spirit's transforming
love,
that we and all God's children may live and
be free. Amen.

O God of all creation,
lead us in your way of love
and fill us with your Spirit.
Choose us to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
to bring sight to the blind
and set free the oppressed.
So shall your new creation come
and your will be done. Amen

These materials were compiled and written through the efforts of the following :

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This study material is a project of the Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland, intended for the free use of all, and to enable the Church of Ireland to interact with the Anglican Consultative Council's Bible in the Life of the Church project.

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The Biblical Association for the Church of Ireland exists to enrich and deepen the use of the Bible in the Church of Ireland by encouraging rigorous and faith-based biblical study.



You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. (Deut 6:6-7)

Feedback

How to participate in the ACC

As part of the Anglican Consultative Council's project 'The Bible in the Life of the Church', BACI is seeking feedback on this study itself as well as reflection on how the Bible is read in the Church of Ireland today. To do this, we encourage all groups who use this resource to answer the questions on this and the following page and return them to BACI at baci.anglican@gmail.com. We would hope for at least one response per group, but individuals are also encouraged to relate their experiences. BACI will collate and forward the results to the ACC.



What was the group? (Parish, diocesan, ad hoc) _____

Was this a new or established group? _____

How many of the passages were studied? _____

Who was present? Was there an 'expert'? _____

Did the group discuss equally, or was there a speaker? _____

How involved were the members? _____

Were other biblical passages mentioned or discussed? If so, which? _____

How similarly or differently did people interpret the passages? _____

Were links made with people's lives? _____

What energised the group? _____

What were the group going to do with what they learned? _____

Did they find the selection and notes helpful? _____

Any critiques of the material? _____

What would your group have liked to make the study more relevant or interesting? _____

Feedback

How to participate in the ACC

Reflecting on the Study itself, please consider these questions:

In what ways did your group engage with the Bible? _____

Did you find your study confirming what you already knew/believed, or was it challenging/transformational? Why? _____

Thinking about what you have just done, what were you doing with the Bible, and why were you doing it? _____

Was there evidence of examples of behaviour relating to interscriptural awareness – the range of diversity of biblical material and relationship with other texts; interplay between scripture and personal experience; any overt disagreements with scripture? How did the group handle these? _____

What do you think this means for the way the Bible is read and used today in the Church of Ireland? Does anything need to change? _____

Any other comments or observations? _____
