

What the Bible Says About The Stranger

**Biblical Perspectives on Racism, Immigration,
Asylum and Cross-Community Issues .**

A Study Guide

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"for my parents who know how to welcome"

The Churches' Peace Education Programme
1999

This study guide uses the New Revised Standard Version, which is an ecumenical translation. Occasionally, reference has been made to the so-called "Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical" books, used by the Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but not by Reformed Churches. Readers who do not regard these texts as authoritative are invited to treat them as further echoes, within the Jewish tradition, of themes found in the Hebrew Bible.

We wish to express our gratitude to the author and to all who assisted in the editing and preparation of this publication.

What the Bible says about the Stranger is the eighth title to appear in the *What the Bible Says about...* series, which is extensively used by adults and senior students in post-primary schools.

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ISBN 0 905911 28 8

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Celtic Blessing for Hospitality

I saw a stranger yestreen,
I put food in the eating place
drink in the drinking place
music in the listening place
and in the sacred name of the Triune
He blessed myself and my house
my cattle and my dear ones
and the lark said in her song
often, often, often
goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

Preface

As I complete this study-guide in the last year of the millennium, the world has just marked the fiftieth anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which dates from 10th December, 1948. The importance of this document has not decreased in the fifty years since it was written. On the contrary, its significance has, if anything, increased. As we become more and more conscious of being one world, we are increasingly aware of our common humanity. We are moved by the vision of a common ideal and by the desire for common standards for all persons irrespective of race, religion or jurisdiction. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights expresses this in its very first two articles.

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, nonself-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Religion has been and still is a powerful persuader in our societies. One of the tasks of believers is to look to their classical texts and see how the urgent human and ethical questions of the day are reflected in them. In the case of the Christian churches, our classical text is the Bible, which, significantly for our theme, is both Jewish and Christian in origin. The very collection itself is "trans-national", in a manner of speaking.

What does the Bible have to say about the way foreigners and refugees are treated? What does the Bible have to say about cross-cultural and cross-community issues? Given that the Bible is both a reflection of human experience (static fact) and a resource for profound change (dynamic ideal), we find in the Bible both the *fact* of discrimination and ethical *ideals* which challenge and eventually undermine any abuse of our fellow human beings on the grounds of race, religion, gender and so forth. Thus we may find for today material in the Bible which helps us to recognise discrimination and which arms us in the struggle against it.

For our Irish context, where discrimination on the basis of religion has not been unknown, it seems to me important to add that while here we are dealing primarily with racism, immigration and asylum seekers and therefore in the first instance with foreigners who come to our shores, cross-community issues are not at all to be excluded. It is often the case that the near neighbour is a greater stranger than the (safely) distant foreigner.

The sections below follow the traditional divisions of the Bible. It is my wish to allow the different experiences and voices to be heard in their literary and historical settings, with all their individuality. The sheer variety permits us to see the issue in an enriching kaleidoscope of perspectives.

Introduction: The Tower of Babel

Expressions such as "discrimination" and "racism" are not found in the Bible. Although these modern "-isms" and "-tions" were unthought of and perhaps unthinkable in antiquity, the reality to which they refer, and the ethical questions raised by them, are very much present in the Bible.

In ancient times, people were not unaware that there were differences between nations. Colour, language, religion, tribe and territory all play their part in the biblical view of the outsider, called, in some modern versions of the Bible, the "alien". For example, one of the most memorable tableaux of the Hebrew Bible reflects on the puzzle of the variety of languages. The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9) belongs to a category in ancient writings known as an aetiological tale. This means a tale which is used to explain some puzzling aspect of life. For instance, why is there pain in childbirth (Genesis 3:16)? Why do Hebrews not eat the sinew on the hip (Genesis 32:32)? In the case of the tower of Babel, why are there so many mutually incomprehensible languages?

The story ends with the common experience - confusion of tongues - as anybody who has tried to learn a foreign language or been abroad knows. But the story starts with the human race originally sharing one common language. This ideal picture of perfect mutual comprehension had never been experienced by anyone, except in miniature within one's own culture. So, what happened to bring about the change? According to the story, the humans became very confident of themselves and wanted to build a tower up to heaven. This rattles the deity sufficiently for "God" to put a stop to their co-operative efforts by the simple and effective device of introducing a variety of tongues. Co-operation is no longer possible and the project has to be abandoned.

In psychological terms, human pride has led to a state of affairs where people no longer understand each other and can no longer work together. In a story used to explain the origin of diverse languages, we stumble across an observation which is as true today as ever it was: a

distorted sense of our own importance creates mutual incomprehension and renders co-operation impossible. The new context of unfamiliarity and foreignness allows suspicion and fear to flourish.

Questions for reflection

Language remains both a potent symbol of mutual incomprehension and 'a means of mutual enrichment. It is always more than just the words: a culture, a society, a way of looking at the world is encapsulated in a language.

What has my own experience been of being a foreigner?

When has another person's language made communication difficult for me - a foreign language, professional jargon, religious terminology, the generation gap, gender differences?

Language is only one example of obstacles to mutual understanding. What about other obstacles, such as social background or sexual orientation or religious affiliation?

When has the difference between myself and others been a source of enrichment and joy for me?

What has helped me to set aside suspicion and be more open to people who are different?

Paper 1: The Pentateuch

The Pentateuch (the Torah or first five books of the Bible according to Jewish tradition) contains material which seems to be in tension with itself. At a surface level, we have a national epic with three broad elements: the nomadic life of the tribes (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), the Egyptian period (Joseph and succeeding generations), the period of the Exodus and the possession of the Promised Land (Moses, Aaron and Joshua). The latter stages of the national epic recount a great deal of invasion, battle and extermination. At another level, an ethical concern emerges, in particular towards the defenceless and the exiled (the orphan and the widow, the resident alien). Part of the motivation of this ethical concern comes from the Israelites' recollection of having been in exile, and of having suffered themselves. Having the same experience of exile and suffering promoted understanding and compassion.

In the early period of the patriarchs, the family of Abraham is nomadic. They live with their flocks and by their wits. To capture something of the flavour of their life, one could read Genesis 12 and 13. In the end, after experiencing deep family division and later severe famine, the family of Jacob joins their brother Joseph, in the safety and relative prosperity of Egypt. It turns out that Joseph, the immigrant, is a source of blessing not only for his own family but for the host country as well. By means of Joseph's gifts as a far-seeing administrator, Egypt prepares well in seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine which follow (Genesis 41). A long time afterwards, a king arose in Egypt who "did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1: 8), a phrase with an ominous ring to it. This pharaoh began a systematic extermination of the Hebrews, apparently on the all too familiar grounds that these foreigners were becoming "too many" (Exodus 1-2). Although frustrated by the Hebrew midwives in his wish to kill all male children at birth, this Pharaoh did make life miserable for the Hebrews, forcing them to make bricks while withholding the materials necessary. Exclusion from a means of livelihood has often been the experience of the exile and the refugee.

Eventually, God expresses concern in the pregnant words of the Book of Exodus, "I know". God is speaking to Moses and calls on him to be the instrument of liberation. God is portrayed as a God who feels and notices suffering, whose desire is for his people to be free, who holds out to them a different future in a land to which he will bring them (Exodus 3). After various vicissitudes, the Hebrews eventually manage to escape through the Red Sea, although it will be another forty years before they actually enter the Promised Land, the Land of Canaan. It is during this wandering in the desert that the Ten Commandments and much of the ethical material of the Israelites is set down.

The violent entry of the Hebrews into the Promised Land is described with a forthrightness which leaves little doubt about their lack of sympathy for those who had always lived there. They are to be destroyed. The writer even says that their destruction will be an acting out of God's will (Exodus 23:20-33).

Fortunately, this combination of military might and political right sits rather uneasily with the vigorous ethical strand in the Pentateuch. This ethical teaching is based on the Israelites' memory of having been aliens. Time and time again, in the Pentateuch, we are reminded that the Israelites were aliens themselves. Abraham, the great forefather, had been a "wandering Aramean" (Genesis 12; Deuteronomy 26:5). "You were once aliens and slaves yourselves" (Deuteronomy 10:19-22; 24:17-22; Exodus 22:21-24; 23:6-9; Leviticus 19:33-34). On the basis of that painful memory, "you are to be merciful to the stranger in your midst". In particular the resident alien is accorded certain religious and political rights, as well as duties. The alien is entitled to a day of refreshment in the week (Exodus 23:12) and may keep the Passover (Leviticus 19:34). A special consideration is recommended when harvesting, in that aliens with no means of support are to be left the gleanings (Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19; Ruth 2). Even slaves have rights (Exodus 21:1-11).

This combination of religious tolerance and economic assistance comes to a climax in the arrangements for the *Jubilee Year*. This is the year

when debts are to be cancelled and slaves are to be set free. Such a merciful attitude is highly ethical and the basis for it is made plain in three texts in the Torah, which are themselves arresting:

Deuteronomy 10:19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. 21 He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. 22 Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Leviticus 19:34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Num. 15:29 For both the native among the Israelites and the alien residing among them - you shall have the same law for anyone who acts in error. 30 But whoever acts high-handedly, whether a native or an alien, affronts the LORD, and shall be cut off from among the people.

The ancient Israelites are commanded to love God, to love their neighbours as themselves, and even to love the stranger to the same extent. The ancient Israelites are reminded that they too, (in their ancestors), had been aliens; that they are related to the Edomites -their traditional enemies - (Deuteronomy 23:7), and that even the Egyptians are to be treated well, in spite of everything. The practical expression of this love is equality before the law (Deuteronomy 27:19). 'The alien as much as the native can expect to receive fair treatment and justice.

Another institution in ancient Israel has a bearing on the question of justice: the *city of refuge*. The fundamental texts here are Exodus 21:12-14 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13. This was a system whereby those guilty of accidental homicide could seek legitimate asylum in a certain number

of named cities. In this way, the perpetrators of what we would call "manslaughter" are protected from the full rigour of vengeance for a murder. That sense that there are places where one might escape injustice is a striking part of the covenantal relationship within Israel. A place of asylum is envisaged, even if only in special circumstances.

The Pentateuch itself contains apparently contradictory traditions. The narrative tradition recounts both the violent escape from Egypt and the violent invasion of Canaan. Mercy is not to be shown, except in well advertised cases such as Rahab and her family. On the other hand, an ethical tradition is clearly present, one which, to our ears, comes close to the human rights language of modernity. How both traditions come to be side by side in the same set of texts may be explicable by time and politics. The great national story takes us back to somewhere in the 13th century BC. The actual writing down of the story in the form we now have it is usually dated to the Exile (587 BC) or even later. Thus a long period of maturation and a sharper, more recent experience of exile has tempered the imperialism of the early account. The Israelites, once again, are no longer in control of their own territory. Even the return from exile itself this time was permitted by Cyrus, "the Lord's anointed", (literally "messiah") who was a Persian! This double tradition means that in the traditions we see unvarnished imperialism and a kind of racism, side by side with a moral reflection which speaks with a much more nuanced, compassionate and ethical voice. The Bible exhibits a robust realism and is not afraid to portray the dark side of the human experience. This double tradition constitutes an invitation to recognise reality but not to be bound by it.

Questions for reflection

1. What groups have arrived recently in Ireland, as political/economic refugees?
2. What is their legal status - especially in regard to residence and the right to work? What do you believe it ought to be?
3. Look again at the texts which remind the Israelites of their own history of having been aliens. What are the parallels with Irish history?
4. Look again at the biblical tradition of equal economic and religious rights accorded to strangers? How does our practice compare?
5. Take biblical accounts of the cities of refuge. Legally, in its own context, what is the message? As an image of asylum, what does it say to us today?

Paper 2: The History of Israel and the Prophets

Teachings of any kind cannot be grasped without some idea of the context from which they came. We begin with a brief overview of the history of Israel and of the cultures with which it interacted. The alternating experiences of power and dis-empowerment which marked Israelite history may go some way to explaining the variety of attitudes we find towards other nations in the Old Testament.

Looked at from the outside, it was more typical for the Hebrews, even in the Promised Land, not to have control of their own destiny than to have control of it.

Because of its geographical location, Palestine has always been a kind of international cross-roads. At the time of Jesus, Palestine was under Roman imperial control. A Roman functionary, Pontius Pilate, declares the fate of Jesus. Scholars use the death of Herod the Great (4 BC) to date the birth of Jesus. However, at that time, Roman rule was a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the Romans there was a short period of national independence under the Maccabees, which took place during the Hellenistic Period, initiated by Alexander the Great. The Persians had preceded the Greeks, and these in turn had been preceded by the Neo-Babylonian Empire and by the Neo-Assyrian Empire. David and Solomon ruled over an independent Israel in a short-lived united monarchy.

Looked at from the inside, from within their national and religious consciousness, the Israelites had a national epic of origins which took in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and later, in Egypt, the story of the Exodus, as we saw in Paper 1. The entry into the land under Joshua is told with almost unrelieved aggression towards the natives. At least in its story-telling, this is Israel in imperialist mode. At last the people of Israel is able, once at least, to direct its own destiny, but apparently unable to act in a way different from its own experience of being oppressed.

Given that the nature of the conquest is difficult to reconstruct, we must wait until the time of David for anything we would recognise as history and chronicle. The united monarchy under Saul, David and Solomon (c. 1020-931 BC) divided into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah (931-721 BC). Under pressure from the revived Neo-Assyrian Empire, the northern kingdom, Israel, collapsed with the capture of Samaria in 721 BC. External pressure and internal weakness led to the demise of the Assyrians (610-609 BC). The resulting vacuum was filled by the New Babylonian Empire. It was during this period that the southern kingdom, Judah, was itself overcome and its inhabitants deported to Babylon. From that period come the mournful words of Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon
- there we sat down
and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

ending in the bitter, if understandable, words,

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

Although the Exodus stands out in the Pentateuch as the event which initiated the history of Israel proper, the most formative period for the actual text of the Bible was the Exile (587-537 BC). Instead of collapsing passively under the inevitable, the Israelites in effect created their religious system: the final writing down and editing of the traditions, the creation of the legal code, the drawing up of the distinctive dietary laws and the establishment of the synagogue. Under threat of extinction, this people responded by a powerful re-imagining and re-statement of their identity. It is highly significant that this great period of writing and reflection took place under oppression and in exile. That experience very probably accounts for that notable empathy with the outsider we find in Jewish law.

The threat of loss of identity continued in the Greek period (333 BC-63 BC) with the conquest by Alexander the Great. It led to a time when

pressure to assimilate and abandon cultural distinctiveness was very great. Inevitably, there was a political response in the form of the Maccabean revolt. The First and Second Books of Maccabees tell of religious intolerance and persecution. These stories may very well be the first example in history of persecution for the sake of religion alone, because, ordinarily, paganism is tolerant of pluralism. Stories of martyrs for religion, never too distinct from nationality, are first recounted in 1 Maccabees 2 and 2 Maccabees 7. By this time Rome was beginning to stir, and in 63 BC Jerusalem and its Temple came under Roman control. The national question was never far from people's minds and the cry arose "How long, O Lord?".

This necessarily very brief account of external international events and internal national reaction over a thousand-year period must serve as a backdrop to two sections in our reflection: the Prophets and the Wisdom Literature.

The experience of freedom and oppression, independence and imperialism occurred in a time of intense instability, both political and religious. Nevertheless, it was also the time of those great preachers and writers, the classical prophets, from the 8th to the 6th century BC. In terms of religious ideas it was, yet again a truly fertile and creative time, during which religious thought moved beyond the confines of nationalism, both theological and political. Gradually it became clear that God is one and that all creation belongs to God and that this one Creator God is also God of all the nations.

Questions for Reflection

1. The kind of person I am depends very much on my background. How have I been shaped by the convictions and practices of the society and community where I was born and grew up and in which I now live?

2. What are the factors which have shaped our society and given us our identity as a country? How do these factors shape our attitudes to people from backgrounds different to our own?

Paper 3: The One God of all Creation

It might seem to the casual reader that in the Bible we find a consistent, monotheistic faith in God. Is this the case?

The faith of Israel receives classic formulation in the *Sh 'ma Yisrael*, still an essential part of daily prayer for Jews:

Deut. 6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

To our modern ears, long accustomed to monotheism, it sounds as if this is a statement of monotheistic faith, i.e. a belief in only one God. We also hear it somehow in the light of Genesis 1:

Genesis 1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

But, just as the God of Abraham was originally Abraham's God, likewise, the *Sh'ma Yisrael* represents an originally national, "ethnic" faith, i.e. "We have only the one God, whatever about other nations" How and when did Israel make the journey from having only one God of Israel to believing that this God was also Lord of all creation and of all peoples?

The journey from this relative monotheism ("henotheism" is the technical term) to an absolute monotheism was made only gradually in the

consciousness of Israel. It is only by the time of Second Isaiah (an anonymous Exilic prophet, not to be confused with the 8th century BC Isaiah who wrote Is 1-39) that we encounter a clear monotheism. The journey from the earlier relative monotheism is facilitated by three factors:

- Israel's traditional worship of only one, imageless, God;
- The growing unease with idols and false gods;
- The gradual awareness that Yahweh, our God, is the creator of all that is.

In brief, we see a movement from *our* protecting deity to *the* transcendent creator.

It is clear from the earliest traditions that Israel's own God is *one* and that there are to be no images. He is already unlike anything we could produce. On the contrary, he creates us in his image (Genesis 1:26). Creation in all its complexity and paradox comes from him (Job 38-39). This God holds everything in being, as we read in Psalms 115 or 139.

Psalm 115:3 Our God is in heaven, he creates whatever he chooses. 4 They have idols of silver and gold, made by human hands.

Psalm 115:5 These have mouths but say nothing, have eyes but see nothing, 6 have ears but hear nothing, have noses but smell nothing.

He is in heaven, incomparable. The Israelites need to be reminded of this frequently, as we see in Hosea or even more clearly in Jeremiah 10:1-5 (Like scarecrows in a melon patch, they cannot talk, they have to be carried, since they cannot walk. Have no fear of them: they can do no harm - nor any good either!); Also in Jeremiah 51:15-19 (By his power he made the earth, by his wisdom set the world firm, by his discernment spread out the heavens). In a word,

Jeremiah 10:6 Yahweh, there is no one like you, so great you are, so great your mighty name.

The sense that in reality only one God exists, who is the creator of all, comes to clear and complete expression for the first time in Second Isaiah. See, for example:

Isaiah 43:11 I, I am Yahweh, and there is no other Saviour but me.

Isaiah 44:6 Thus says Yahweh, Israel's king, Yahweh Sabaoth, his redeemer: I am the first and I am the last; there is no God except me.

Isaiah 45:5 I am Yahweh, and there is no other, there is no other God except me.

The reader could also take a look at Is 41:21; 42:8; 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 45:16- 20; 46:5-7. The later development of these ideas can be found in Wisdom 13:11-15 and Bar 6.

A logical consequence of this higher understanding of God as the only transcendent creator of all things and of everyone is that he concerns himself not only with Israel but with all the nations. This widening of salvation to include the nations is found precisely where we would expect to find it. Second Isaiah, the clearest monotheist, is likewise a theologian of God as saviour of all the nations.

Questions for reflection

1. The experience of faith begins with family and community; in other words in quite specific and concrete contexts. Have I been able to see that God is the God of all races, peoples and languages? How?
2. There is only one God, but this God is the God of all, who cares equally for all and is no "respector of persons". What are the consequences for my treatment of peoples of different national and religious backgrounds?

Paper 4: The One God of All Nations

As a counterpoint to the national histories produced and published by the various chroniclers, the voices of the prophets add a distinct, sometimes discordant, melody. They are, of course, voices of the classical tradition, trying to bring people back to fidelity to the covenant as found in the Pentateuch. But, even though they are national figures, they are not confined to national issues. The prophetic writings promote an awareness of others which includes other nations as part of God's plan of salvation. This is a surprising development, which takes place under the influence of two discoveries. As we have seen in Paper 3 the first discovery is that Yahweh is not the God of the Israelites only (henotheism) but the one God of all creation (monotheism). The second discovery is that the salvation he offers to the Israelites he also offers to the Gentiles. How did such a revolution come about?

Already in the second chapter of Isaiah, God's concern for "all the nations" is clear:

Isaiah 2:2 In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

This wonderful inclusion of the nations is found also in the Little Apocalypse of Isaiah (c. 7th century BC) at Isaiah 25:6ff.

Isaiah 25:6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Although this text is an advance from Isaiah 2:2ff, nevertheless, Isaiah 25 teaches that the offer of salvation to all nations is not only *by means* of Israel, but by means of *becoming Israelites*. In practice, this would mean joining the religion of the Israelites and accepting their pivotal role in God's history with humankind. Nevertheless, viewed within the limits of the period it is an impressive and generous insight. It responds to a peculiarly Israelite difficulty. In the non-Jewish world of antiquity, polytheism was generally tolerant. Concern for the salvation of others by means of conversion to one's own religion was not actually an issue: you have your gods and we have ours. The same easy indifference accounts for syncretism, i.e. the tendency to "pick and mix" beliefs from a variety of sources. But in the prophetic texts of Israel we see the dawning realisation that God is one alone. With that conviction arises the consequent question, how will the other nations fare?

In the middle of First Isaiah, an unexpected text jumps off the page:

Isaiah 19:2-2 The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them. 23 On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. 24 On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, 25 whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

This is a text which presumes some kind of Jewish settlement in Egypt, as in Jeremiah 44:1 (or it may be a later text which has been added).

Second Isaiah, writing during the Exile, in his Book of Consolation, takes this awareness of God's concern with all the nations a step further:

Isaiah 49:6 he (the Lord) says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Isaiah 55:3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

This is a new role for Israel - to be the means by which God is made known to other nations. In the last part of Isaiah, it becomes clear that what is envisaged is conversion to the faith of Israel, as we read:

Isaiah 42:6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

Isaiah 60:3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

This vision comes to expression too in the prayer book of the Israelite religion, the Psalter:

Psalms 87:4 Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia - "This one was born there," they say.

The reader may like to read the story of Jonah. It constitutes a quite ironic reflection on narrow nationalism and religious mean-spiritedness.

The new attitude towards the nations is not based on any discovery of the joys of pluralism. On the contrary, it is rooted in a sense of responsibility towards God and a desire to be true to an understanding of God who is not exclusive to one nation.

Although the distinctive duality remains, the prophets call for a mission among the aliens: Isaiah 42: 5ff ; 66:19; Zechariah 14; Tobit 14:6. The insight that God is not just ours and concerns himself not just with us will lead eventually within Christianity to a breakthrough in relation to the Gentiles. The Creator who wants to save everyone can no longer be confined to an ethnic group. The place of other *nations* in God's plans is a biblical issue, in both the Old and the New Testaments. However, the wider question of the role of other *religions* in God's plan for humanity is a modern question which is not raised in the Old Testament, except in the context of the worship of false gods.

Questions for Reflection

1. Church members often think "our God" is just that, "ours" and no one else's. Have you encountered that attitude in yourself or others?
2. Prejudice against other cultures is often supported by religious differences. Am I genuinely convinced that "my/our" God is truly the God of everyone in every time and place? Have I any contact, not only across Christian denominations, but with other religious faiths, in my community?
3. How can people of different religions live at peace with each other, and so contribute to a peaceful co-existence not only in our country, but on this planet?

Paper 5: The Book of Ruth

The Bible makes use of a wide variety of literary styles and it contains not only laws and historical chronicles, prophetic exhortations and warnings, but even some material cast in the form of the short story. Examples would be Esther and Jonah. A particularly well-loved tale is an extremely brief book in the Bible, the Book of Ruth. The story itself is easily summarised, but a summary overlooks the detail and the subtlety of the telling, which disclose the heart of the Book of Ruth.

The events which the story describes are located in that difficult period between the entry to the land and the establishment of the monarchy. Briefly, a famine occurs. A man, named Elimelech, from Bethlehem, and his wife, Naomi, emigrate to Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea. They bring their two sons with them. Some time afterwards, Elimelech dies and Naomi is left a widow in a foreign country. Having taken Moabite wives, both her sons Mahlon and Chilion die, leaving Naomi alone with her two foreign daughters-in-law. Naomi hears that food is available once more in Judah and wishes to return. With great fairness, understanding and generosity, she offers each daughter-in-law the chance to return to her own family and wishes them well. One of them, Orpah, takes up the offer, but Ruth, the other, clings to her mother-in-law in words which are very moving,

Ruth L 16 But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. 17 Where you die, I will die - there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

Eventually mother-in-law and daughter-in-law arrive destitute at Bethlehem where Naomi is barely recognised. Both women have lost husbands, Naomi has lost sons, and Ruth has forgone the chance of offspring. They now belong to the category of the extremely poor. For such people, the system of gleaning was devised, whereby reapers were

not to "vacuum" everything into their bags, but to leave a significant amount for the truly destitute. Ruth begs to be allowed to glean in the fields of Boaz and she sets about her task. Thus she comes to the attention of Boaz himself. They meet and marry. Such a marriage dramatically reverses the fortunes of the small female family unit and they enjoy a new-found prosperity. Not only that, but Ruth conceives, bringing the joy of a lineage to Naomi. The child is named Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of (King) David (Ruth 4:17).

Apart from being a carefully compact and deeply felt story, the Book of Ruth gives rise to thought. The story is an example of love between two women of different nationalities. This love happens in spite of the desperate situation of both women. Already, at this level, Ruth, the Moabitess is a source of comfort to Naomi, the Israelite woman who, because of the love of her daughter-in-law, is not absolutely bereft. As well as that, Ruth has energy and is ready to work, when it is her turn to be in exile. Because of her qualities, she gains Boaz for a husband. When material prosperity is crowned by fertility, Ruth becomes a source of happiness and blessing not only for Naomi and Boaz, but for all Israel: from her is descended the great King David, the very paradigm of the good monarch, whose career became the focus of nostalgic hope for generations and for centuries.

In a word, a foreigner enters the history of Israel by a series of misfortunes. This very same foreigner, now herself an exile, becomes a source of blessing, a matriarch through whom God gave Israel the gift of King David.

Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the different religious, ethnic and racial minorities where I live?
2. Have I experienced the foreigner as gift?
3. How are people from other cultures perceived to be a threat?
4. What have Irish people brought to countries to which they have emigrated?
5. What benefits have those of different religions and races, who now live among us, brought to Ireland?
6. Are there potential benefits which we, individually or as a nation, might not experience because of our lack of openness to strangers?

Paper 6: The Wisdom Literature

Within the Bible, a strand of literature is present which is truly international and can teach us about our common humanity and our shared quest and shared resources as human beings. This is the "wisdom literature" of the Old Testament. We will use it to reflect on our common human experiences and on God as creator of all.

(a) Common Human Experiences

The wisdom literature is marked by an absence of themes which concern Israel as a nation. Thus, for instance, the national story of the Exodus from Egypt and entry into Canaan is largely missing. Likewise, specific theologies such as those of the Covenant and the Temple are not at all central. Even well known figures such as Moses and David and profound experiences such as the Exile are given scant treatment. Those concerns which marked out Israel as distinct, even superior, are also absent. Instead we find an awareness of experiences which are common to all human beings, irrespective of nation or language or religion, i.e. the struggle for the meaning of life (e.g. Ecclesiastes), living a good life (e.g. Proverbs), sexuality (e.g. Song of Songs), death and the question of evil (e.g. Job). These are questions which every human being faces once such basic requirements as food and shelter have been met.

The fact of existing at all gives rise to at least two possible responses: a reaction of wonder, and a reaction of despair. Such despair we see most clearly in the Book of Ecclesiastes, one of the most philosophical books in the Bible. Within it, Ecclesiastes is portrayed as a king who has looked at the meaning of life and tried to satisfy his quest for meaning and satisfaction in a variety of ways - power, money, success, love. He is sharply aware of the contingency of existence and suspects that this fact of being thrown unaccountably into being has actually no meaning at all. His awareness of the hunger of the human heart tells us something which is true of us all.

Ecclesiastes is not an unfeeling intellectual: sympathy and pathos mark his description of the decline of old age, (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8)_ Though he sees no solution he suffers the human predicament.

For Ecclesiastes the fact of death places an unavoidable question mark over all our achievements. Not only death, but also the experience of evil and unaccountable suffering belong to the puzzle of life which affects every human being (Job).

The wisdom literature treats the human hunger for something more in life from a completely different standpoint. The Book of Wisdom takes up the wonder at our existence in words which speak to everyone and its attitude is very different from that of Ecclesiastes. The writer seeks wisdom, that gift from God which can guide us through life and lead us to him (Wisdom 7-9). The fact of being thrown into existence is a matter for wonder-filled engagement and part of a search for elusive wisdom, as memorably described in Job 28. The wonder of human love and human sexuality is a cause for celebration and delight, as we read in the Songs of Songs.

Such texts in our classical tradition remind us of those things which every human being experiences. It is tempting to see the "outsider", the "immigrant", the "refugee", the "traveller" only as a problem, someone (something) who must be dealt with administratively. Once we permit ourselves to see the human face of the stranger, we realise that this is someone with parents, with children, with a history, with dreams. Then, of course, "administration" is no longer adequate. If we permit ourselves to see the person as someone like us, equally facing into the puzzle of life and death and love, our common human experience will then have its say.

Questions for Reflection

1. Shared human experiences alert us to the shared humanity of us all, irrespective of colour, creed or nationality. In what concrete ways has this become obvious to me?
2. How can we see others not simply as problems, but as people like ourselves facing the mystery of life, with all its challenges - material, relational, religious and philosophical?

(b) Creation Theology

We have described above two great movements in human reflection and religion: the prophetic discovery that the one God desires salvation for all and in the Wisdom writing the awareness that we share a common human question and challenge. These great movements in human reflection and religion make sense in the light of the Bible's understanding of men and women created in the image and likeness of God.

Israel was surrounded by a world which believed in many different gods. Polytheistic religion had no difficulty in creating images of the gods because, although higher and more powerful, the gods as such were not essentially different from human beings. In contrast, the monotheistic religion of the Bible was utterly convinced of the unique character of its God, for whom no image could ever even approach being adequate. In stark contrast to the efforts of the surrounding culture to create God in the image and likeness of humans, the biblical story of creation tells how God creates humans in God's own image and likeness.

There has, of course, been much discussion about what in us humans resembles God. The authentic resemblance may be in our role vis-a-vis creation: humans are to be in the created world in the same way as God is towards the created world, i.e. creative and caring. The fundamental datum here is that all humans bear the likeness of God and therefore a likeness to each other, since all without distinction, are in the image and likeness of God. Although this is a late religious and theological understanding of human beings, nevertheless it provides the religious rationale for the universalism evidenced in the prophetic writings and in the wisdom literature. Although this understanding of being in God's image and likeness comes in the first chapter of the Bible, in the order of writing it seems to be a late addition, a kind of logical conclusion which serves paradoxically to act as the preface to what had been written earlier. This "being in God's image", an icon of God, is true of *all* humans beings, without distinction of culture or class, colour, creed or gender.

A document such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights speaks of the dignity of the human person. This dignity is the ground of certain rights, freedoms and duties. In itself, it is rooted in an understanding of the uniqueness of each person. The hope of the Universal Declaration is to find common ground to reach common standards of treatment and a way of living together on the planet so that we will all show deep respect for the individual dignity of each other. In the Bible, this reflection goes a significant step deeper. The biblical view of the human person grounds this dignity not only in the uniqueness of each individual, but in God's self. Because every single human being, without exception and without distinction, is made in God's image, the imperative to respect each man and woman on the planet is as strong as it could possibly be. Those who believe in God know that dealing with fellow human beings, especially the deprived and the destitute and those in danger, is not a matter only of politics or legislation or economics. It is also a matter of faith. The deep significance of each of us is grounded in the very being of God. This is true of me. It is true of the people I love. It is true of those I don't love. It is true of everyone.

Questions for Reflection

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|----|---|
| 1. | How have I experienced this deep reality which all humans share? |
| 2. | In what ways do we categorise immigrants, refugees and people who are simply 'different'? Why do we do this? |
| 3. | How can I promote an approach to those in need which shows that in a most fundamental fashion we resemble each other and our needs are similar? |

Paper 7: The Gospels

The ministry of Jesus took place during a time of political occupation and Jewish religious revival in Palestine. The occupying and tax-levying power was the Roman Empire. It sparked several revolts in the early Christian Era. The religious revival, as is the nature of these things, took several forms. The Sadducees and Scribes took great interest in the building and completion of Herod's Temple. The Pharisees were engaged more with the people, bringing to them the teaching of Moses and their own traditions, touching especially the dietary and purity regulations. The Essenes and the people in Qumran had retired to the desert, there to live in perfect observance of the Law until God should intervene and provide a new Temple and a new, unpolluted priesthood. In spite of their variety, all the various religious groups agreed in principle on several kinds of exclusion. At an obvious ethical level, public sinners such as prostitutes, and outcasts such as lepers, were to be kept at more than arm's length. At a political level, one did not have anything to do with Romans and their functionaries such as tax-collectors and military figures. In particular to eat with the Gentile entailed religious "pollution" and at Jesus' trial in John's gospel, his opponents will not even enter the residence of Pontius Pilate (John 18:28).

This system of exclusion received its metaphorical and practical expression in the Jewish dietary laws, the *kosher* regulations. Because certain foods and the use of certain vessels were declared ritually unclean, socialising with outsiders was rendered impractical and impossible. This had a metaphorical dimension. The regulation of *what* was allowed into one's physical body became a means of controlling *who* was allowed into the social body. And because these rules were concerned not just with food but with "purity" i.e. being fit to pray, they had a religious grounding.

The Christian approach to foreigners shows both continuity and discontinuity with Jewish tradition. In the New Testament, as in the Hebrew Bible, the religion of foreigners is despised. But the new

movement appropriated elements of the Jewish tradition in a radical way. This is true, for instance, in the way in which it reinterprets the following texts from the book of Leviticus:

Leviticus. 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Leviticus. 19:34 The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

On Jesus' lips, these words become the cornerstone of Christian ethics.

Luke 10:27 He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

Matt. 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Already in Paul, the earliest Christian writer, this synthesis is being offered:

Romans 13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 13:10 Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Gal. 5:14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

In Christian practice, this meant an attitude of decided openness to "Gentiles" - accepting them as full members of the community, without prior pre-condition. This sea-change did not happen without a great struggle which is reflected in many texts in the New Testament. The fact that the early church *had* to struggle to arrive at this openness could mean one or both of two things. It could mean that the teaching of Jesus on the matter was not unmistakably clear. It could also mean that his challenging teaching met with ordinary human resistance. There seems to have been a three-stage progress. The first of these is that Jesus limited his mission initially to the People of Israel. The second stage is Jesus' open table fellowship - but the implications of this powerful gesture are not followed through until we come to the third stage which is Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. We glance briefly at each moment.

First Stage

It seems clear that initially the mission of Jesus was to the People of Israel alone.

Matt. 10:6 but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Matt. 15:24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

It is to his fellow nationals, rather than to the Gentiles, that Jesus sent out his first disciples.

Second Stage

Nevertheless, Jesus ate with everyone. It was shocking and offensive. He eats with a tax collector (Mark 2:15-17). He allows a prostitute to wash his feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50). He heals the servant of a centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). He explicitly rejects the common opinion that what enters the body makes people unclean (Mark 7:17-23). A woman with a flow of blood touches him and is not condemned (Luke 8:43-48). All these actions had a powerful social consequence: the breakdown of the "caste" system of dividing people into clean and unclean. The implied theology was also disturbing: God accepts everyone without pre-condition.

Third Stage

The implications of this "hospitality of the kingdom" become explicit during that mysterious encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. At first Jesus, contrary to our usual picture of him, is disinclined to be of help, as we read:

Mark 7:24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syro-Phoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The reply of the Syro-Phoenician woman is both tenacious and witty. Jesus changes his mind and the result of the encounter is the fundamental re-orientation of his mission, with immense consequences for the subsequent history of Christianity.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman took place in territory associated with Elijah - that prophet who was markedly, even offensively, open to foreigners. It is not accidental that in the gospel of Luke Jesus makes explicit reference to Elijah, as he draws out the full implications of his opening sermon at Nazareth:

Luke 4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon

me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

"The Year of the Lord's Favour" meant that all the preaching of the Kingdom was under the banner of Jubilee - Jubilee now extended fully and as of right to Gentiles.

This shift in perspective gives rise to several stories in the gospels in which Gentiles and non-Jews feature. The Samaritans are praised in the story of the Ten Lepers and in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 17:11-19; 10:29-37). The Samaritan Woman makes a remarkable journey of faith in her conversation with Jesus by the well (John 4). Jesus finds immense faith, greater than he found in Israel, in a centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). When Jesus dies, it is a foreigner, the Roman centurion, who acknowledges the identity of who it is that has died (Mark 15:39). Many of the disputes in early Christianity were caused by the need to work out fully the consequences of Jesus' actions with regard to "outsiders".

Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the untouchables of today? Are they always foreigners?
2. By what systems of exclusion do we keep "others" at a distance ... in our country, our neighbourhood, our street, our parish, our family?
3. If "ethnic" exclusion is impossible in the light of Jesus' own preaching and practice, what are the consequences for my living of Christian values?
4. It is not uncommon for people to leave prejudices unexamined until they actually meet someone in the flesh. How have I been obliged to re-think my attitudes as a result of meeting people of different culture, ethnic, or religious background?
5. Read the poem *The Kingdom* at the end of the study guide. Is it a good reflection of the challenge of the Kingdom of God?

Paper 8: Early Christian Writings

Towards the end of his mission, Paul placed a very high value on hospitality to strangers - he locates it between the sharing of the community and the blessing of those who persecute us.

Romans 12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Such unreserved openness was not to be presumed at the start of the Christian movement. The practical form of the question was the relationship between Jew and Gentile, to which they devote a great deal of the remaining documents of the New Testament. The *agent provocateur* here is Paul. His readiness to drop circumcision and *kosher* rules in the light of Christ was understandably popular among Gentiles but was to prove deeply disturbing to Jews who were Christians. We see this issue in his letter to the Galatians and in 1 Corinthians. It is likewise reflected in story form in the Acts of the Apostles (*10:1-43*). Here we hear the liberating words:

Acts 10:34 Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Behind this story lies an insight into God and God's dealings with humans. This is an insight found across the New Testament that what God did in Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection, was intended for everyone, emphatically without ethnic distinction. The fact that now everyone, without distinction, was a candidate for the kingdom implied a new ethical attitude towards those who had been ethnic "outsiders". Alas, it also brought with it a break with Judaism, which is deeply felt in the New Testament. Its most pained expression is in Romans 9-11.

The most optimistic expression of the new welcome to Gentiles is in Ephesians (2:13-22) which speaks of "one new humanity":

Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Its most eschatological expression is found in Revelation 21.

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them."

I close this reflection with two texts from the later parts of the New Testament which testify to this new acceptance:

3 John 1:5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; 6 they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; 7 for they began their

journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. 8 Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.

The open table-fellowship of Jesus is carried on in the Christian community as we read:

Hebrews 13:1 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

In this final commendation in the Letter to the Hebrews, the reference is to Abraham at the oak of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15). The story is one of the ten tests of Abraham, and, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Abraham is receiving God as guest. Hospitality is no mere human transaction - "I was a stranger, and you welcomed me". In this text, several strands of biblical reflection come together: the universal promise to the patriarchs, the command to love the resident alien, Jesus' unreserved hospitality, the removal of ethnic boundaries in the Kingdom, the vision of humanity no longer at odds with itself

Finally, I cannot close without mentioning an unusual feature of the Greek language in the New Testament, which is not without its potential for meaning. The English word *xenophobia* (fear of foreigners) comes from *phobia*, meaning fear, and *xenos* meaning a foreigner, a guest. The two meanings of *xenos* seem contradictory. The move from foreigner to guest implies a journey. This is first of all a journey in society's attitudes to foreigners - later Greek society did not automatically think of the stranger as enemy, but rather as guest. It constitutes an invitation to replace *hostility* with *hospitality*. It means looking beyond the strangeness of the other and instead seeing him or her as a brother or sister. After all, we are all, in one sense, guests ... and *foreigners*.

Colossians 3:11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Belonging to the new Israel depends not on ethnic origin, but rather on living justly, with generosity and compassion.

Questions for Reflection

1. The first two generations of Christians struggled with the questions of inclusion. How do we experience this today in our country and in our church community?
2. What practical steps can we take in our neighbourhood and church community towards a greater acceptance of others?
3. The vision of one humanity united in God lies at the heart of the New Testament. What are the implications for us today as a result?
4. Are there examples of institutionalised exclusion in Ireland today?
5. How can individuals encourage more inclusive structures and attitudes in the places where they live and work?

Conclusion: Pentecost

As a dramatic tableau, the scene of Pentecost in Acts (2:1-13) expresses very richly this insight of the New Testament into the world-wide nature of the Christian proclamation. A list of nations, beginning with "devout Jews of every nation" continues

Acts 2:9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs.

It covers the known inhabited world (literally the *oikumene*). The remarkable thing is not that such a variety of nations should be gathered at Jerusalem, but rather that the polyglot mutual incomprehension is somehow overcome (Acts 2:6b-8)

Acts 2:6 ...each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

The scene has a literary and theological motif stemming from the book of Genesis. The division of languages imposed after the arrogant fiasco of the Tower of Babel is here undone. But it is not merely a question of overcoming languages. Rather, all present understand, because something which every human needs to hear has been communicated by the Spirit: God shows no partiality. We still experience diversity - but it is no longer destructive. All who have heard the gospel have heard something which reaches so deeply into the human heart that culture and language, ethnic and racial backgrounds are no obstacle.

Questions for Reflection

1. What in Christianity helps us to see that all are equal before God?
2. The experience of being together overcomes differences of race, language and culture. When have you experienced that kind of gathering? What was it that helped people to bond?
3. How can I/we make that vision a reality in my/our own sphere of influence?

The Kingdom

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf

R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1999*, Published by J M Dent & Sons
(Reproduced with the permission of Orion Publishing Group Ltd.)

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