

## Justice and the Stranger – Part 1 Scripture

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Dear Participant in this Scripture Workshop,

Thank you for joining us for this Part 1 of a two-part presentation under the title “**Justice and the Stranger**”. In this Part 1 we will look at solely at scripture. So, best have a Bible nearby or online, as you reflect on some of the references given in the text. In Part 2 we shall make some application of these texts to the pluralist and multicultural society that is Ireland of 2020. I shall place some points for your reflection at the end of the two parts of these presentation. Feel free to use them as you wish individually or collectively.

I invite you to enter into a moment of silence before you read the inspired texts. Invite the Spirit of God to move and even disturb you!

### **Celtic Blessing for Hospitality**

I saw a stranger yestereen,  
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.

### **Keys to guide our path**

- The people of Israel were designated as an alien people. This was an identity they grew into by their own lived experience, and even resistance! It had consequences for their daily lives, in particular their understanding of the Other: those outside their clan.
- Their understanding of God also developed from “our exclusive God” to a God for all peoples. They moved from a tribal God whom they thought they possessed to a universal God who chose not to be possessed.
- Jesus, the nearness and the wildness of God, the one who identifies with the stranger and the lowly. The one who left the Temple and came to realise who he was in Nazareth, outside the religious institution.
- The early Christian community who had to learn the same lesson as their Jewish ancestors: Jesus was not exclusively theirs to own.

So, let's start by putting our feet into the water! I have included two pages of references illustrating the positive and negative experience of being a stranger. Some of these texts were more important than others. Look at the text from Deuteronomy 10:19 and Leviticus 19:34, the latter being a definition of what it meant to be an Israelite.

### **From a tribal people and God to a universal people and God**

Let's look at some key moments which gave rise to the emerging self-identity and solidarity with the stranger. **A key to Israel's self-understanding was in their growing awareness that their God was not their God exclusively!** If God was not their exclusive property, then to whom did God belong? God will be understood as the God of all people. Consequently, all are children of God, especially the vulnerable. This would have been mind-blowing for a people who believed themselves to be the elect of God: God was *my* God. I am reminded of the Joint Statement of Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2019. In a paragraph about human freedom, the document states that religious plurality is willed by God: *"The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He crafted human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom and the freedom to be different derives."* We shall come back to the implications of this radical statement on Friday in Part 2.

### **High points of Israel's history**

Recalling their own historical experiences which included the great days of power under Kings Saul, David and Solomon c 1020-931 BCE, to becoming the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah 931-721 BCE. Then the northern kingdom collapsed under the Assyrians with the capture of Samaria 721. External pressure and internal weakness led to the demise of the Assyrians 610-609 BCE, but the vacuum was filled by the Neo-Babylonian Empire. It was at this time that the southern kingdom was itself deported to Babylon. "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." Ps 137:1;8-9

The period in Babylon 587-537 BCE became a formative period: they codified their way of life. **This experience of writing and reflection took place under oppression and in exile. This experience accounts for the notable empathy with the outsider we find in Jewish law.** The Greek period 333-63 BCE brought the **threat of assimilation and abandoning cultural distinctiveness**. The response took the form of the Maccabean revolt. Finally, in 63 BCE Jerusalem and its Temple came under Roman control.

The experience of freedom and oppression, independence and imperialism occurred in a time of intense instability, political and religious. It was also the time of great preachers and writers, the classical prophets from the eighth to the sixth century BCE. **It became clear that this one God is also the God of all nations – the story of Naaman the Syrian 2 Kings 5, both a foreigner and a leper. "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" 2 Kings 5:15.** The story tells us that people who were not Israelites can also enjoy the blessing of the God of Israel. The corresponding story in the New Testament is that of Jesus

and the Canaanite woman Mark 7:24-30 which Séan O'Sullivan will deal with later in this series.

When did the jump from understanding God as 'our exclusive God' to being the God of all nations occur? It was a gradual consciousness in the consciousness of Israel. Three factors facilitated this journey:

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

**It is a move from a kind of tribal faith (God is ours) to a universal teaching (there is a God, the creator of everything and everyone). Israel's God is one and there are to be no images. God creates us in God's own image - Gen 1:26. Creation in all of its complexity and paradox comes from him - Job 38-39. He holds everything in being - Ps 115 or 139.**

The sense that there is only one God, who is creator of all is clearly expressed in Second Isaiah – "I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour." Isaiah 43:11; .... "Besides me there is no god" 44:6. See also Is 41:21;42:8;43:8-13;44:6-8;45:16,20;46:5-7. Given this point, we now discover that the salvation God offers to the Israelites is offered as well to the Gentiles. In Isaiah, God's concern for all the nations is clear - Is 2:2-4 // Is 25:6ff "On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for **all peoples** a feast of rich food..." Isaiah 55:3-5; "...**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.**

The prophet's call for a mission amongst the aliens: Is 42:5ff "a light to all the nations"; 66:19, " to the coastlands far away that have not seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations"; Zechariah 14; Tobit 14:6 "Then the nations in the whole world will all be converted and worship God in truth."

The insight that God is not just ours and is concerned not just with us exclusively, will lead eventually within the Christian gospel to a breakthrough in relation to the Gentiles. The creator who wants to save everyone cannot be confined to an ethnic group.

If you are to read anything on the experience of Israel struggling with letting go of their exclusive belief that God was theirs alone, I recommend you to read the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah holds narrow nationalism and religious mean-spiritedness. It appears to have been written at a time when feelings against the foreigner and outsider was at its height. Jonah is unwilling to accept God as God really is, gracious and merciful to all peoples. It clearly illustrates human resistance, an inability to be inclusive and to allow God be God.

By contrast, the Book of Ruth illustrates the special love of the stranger and outsider. Naomi and her foreign widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth, are moving to Bethlehem. As widows and foreigners, they are now belonging to the category of the poor and vulnerable. For such

people, some food was to be left in the fields, that s/he may have food to eat. Ruth gleans in the field of Boaz. He notes her beauty. They meet, marry and Ruth later conceives and gives birth to Obed, who was to become the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. Ruth 4:17. The Book of Ruth is the story of two women of different nationalities, a Moabite and a Jewess. Ruth, the outsider and foreigner enters into the history of Israel by a series of misfortunes.

To end this section, I am always struck by the very desire of God to be emptied of all power, majesty and distance. The very nature of the actions of the Old Testament God mirrors that of the Trinity, namely, God pouring God's life out in identifying with the outcast, the stranger and all who are vulnerable. Yet, the language of our current liturgies addresses God as all-powerful. It is, as if we have ignored the very desire of God to be near us, to be emptied of all power and distance. How refreshing it would be, if our liturgical texts addressed God as, "O powerless and broken God". I am reminded of a French poet who wrote: "Our Father, who art in heaven...stay there!". The resistance of the people of Israel to letting God be God is still alive and well in our liturgical texts.

## The Gospels

The most distinguishing aspect of Jesus' ministry was his **identification with the stranger and vulnerable: "You did it to me"**. The subversive nature of this phrase is in sharp contrast with a whole religious structure putting a space between the stranger and his/her God and his/her community. The policy of exclusion isolated the sick, the poor and non-Jew from his/her family and community. As we said above, when speaking of the God of the Old Testament, God's very nature was to rid God of power and distance. This powerlessness and vulnerability in God was to be seen in Jesus touching, eating and deliberately associating with the foreigner, the leper, the woman at the well, even to Calvary when a soldier and non-Jew declares Jesus' divinity. Despite their theological differences, the various religious factions agreed in principle on several kinds of exclusion. At an ethical level, public sinners were to be excluded. At a political level, the Romans and their functionaries were best avoided. To eat with non-Jews was strongly forbidden. At Jesus' trial, his opponents will not even enter the residence of the Gentile Pontius Pilate (Jn 18:28). Exclusion even applied to what food one may eat. It should also be remembered that Jesus' own disciples practised this kind of exclusion: they dismissed the blind man Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52); they wished to stop others doing good deeds in Jesus' name (Mark 9:38-41); and they were shocked to find Jesus conversing with a non-Jewish woman (John 4). The powerlessness and universality of Jesus was, in time, to be understood by the Twelve (Matthew 16:13-20). Jesus sought identification, whilst some of his followers sought power and prestige as his followers. The self-emptying Jesus, as described in Philippians 2, was not yet on their radar. One explanation for this may be found in Jesus' own self-understanding and the purpose of his mission. We note from the gospels that there is an opening-up or a development in Jesus' own understanding of his mission. What began as an apparent mission exclusively to the people of Israel, later opened up to a mission to all peoples. Hence, we can say, that the resistance of some of the Twelve implies one of two things. It could mean that the teaching of Jesus was not clear to them. It could also mean

that his teaching met with ordinary human resistance. In effect, we have a twin development here: firstly, Jesus' own understanding of his mission; secondly, a development of understanding on the part of the Twelve as to Jesus' mission. The development of their understanding would have been influenced by what they experienced as they observed Jesus' words and actions. They would have noted the following three developments in Jesus' mission:

1. Initially, Jesus limited his mission to the people of Israel Mt 10:5-6; 15:24. It is to his own people that Jesus sends his first disciples.
2. Jesus' open table fellowship - Jesus eats with everyone: tax-collectors Mk 2:15-17; a sex-worker washes his feet Lk 7:36-50; he heals the Steward of a Centurion Mt 8:5-13; he rejects the common opinion that it's not what enters the body makes people unclean Mk 7:17-23; a woman with a flow of blood touches him Lk 8:43-48 and is not condemned. All these actions had a powerful social consequence: the breakdown of the system of exclusion led the excluded to re-enter their family and societal life. The implied theology was also disturbing and subversive: God accepts everyone, especially the excluded, without preconditions.
3. Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman Mk 7:24-30. Her reply is tenacious and witty. Jesus changes his mind. This was to have immense consequences for the subsequent history of Christianity: Luke 4:16-21: "... good news for the poor...for prisoners...the sick...the oppressed." This agenda was to usher in "The year of the Lord's favour". No surprise that this radical agenda, placing the strangers and 'untouchables' in the first place, made them expel Jesus from his local synagogue in Nazareth. Undaunted, Jesus, the nearness and wildness of God, presses his message home by the following examples:
  - The Samaritans are praised in the story of the Ten Lepers Lk 17:11-19;
  - Same in the Good Samaritan Lk 10:29-37.
  - The Samaritan Woman at the well Jn 4
  - Great faith in a Centurion, greater than found in Israel Mt 8:5-13
  - It is a foreigner who acknowledges Jesus' identity Mk 15:39
  - Parable of the weeds among the wheat. An invitation to give all people space and a non-judgemental attitude. Potential is to be found in all Mt:24-43
  - The mustard seed- phenomenal growth and all are welcome to shelter in its branches.

## Paul and others

Toward the end of his mission, Paul placed a very high value on hospitality to strangers: "Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers." Rom 12:13. Paul's move to drop circumcision and the dietary requirements was welcomed by the Gentile converts, but, not so for the Jewish converts Acts 15:2-35. We see it also in Letter to the Galatians and 1 Corinthians. **Also see Acts 10:1-43: "Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.'" Acts 10:34-35.** In this text we get an insight into God and God's dealings with human persons. What God did in Jesus Christ was intended for everyone, emphatically, without ethnic distinction.

The most optimistic expression of the new welcome to Gentiles is in Ephesians 2:13-22 that speaks of “one new humanity”：“But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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. **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,** and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ...So, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” Eph 2:13-19.

Two texts from the later parts of the New Testament testify to this new experience:

“Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you: they have testified to your love before the church. Therefore, we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.” 3 John 1:5-8

The open table-fellowship of Jesus is carried on in the Christian community as we read: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 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.” Heb 13:1-3 (see Genesis 18:1-15 Abraham is receiving God as a guest).

“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.” Col 3:11

### **Pentecost**

Acts 2:1-13 The worldwide nature of the Christian proclamation. The division of languages imposed after the arrogant fiasco of the Tower of Babel is here undone. It is undone, because something which every human being needs to hear has been connected by the Spirit: **that God shows no partiality and has no favourites. We still experience diversity – but it is no longer destructive. Culture, language, ethnic diversity and racial backgrounds are no obstacle.** This has consequences in how we view the stranger – there are no strangers, only brothers and sisters.

## 1 Biblical Texts

### Texts referring to welcoming the stranger:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 10:19

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. Leviticus 19:34

'Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.' Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!' Deuteronomy 27:19

When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, 'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.' 1 Chronicles 16:19-22

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. Matthew 25:35

Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me. Matthew 25:40

"When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you." Lk 14:13-14

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Acts 10:34  
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Romans 12:13

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. Colossians 3:11

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 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. Hebrews 13:1-3

Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that they may become co-workers with the truth. 3 John 1:5-8

### Stories of Hospitality:

1 Kings 17 Elijah and the widow of Zarephath

2 Kings 4 Elisha and the wealthy Shunammite woman offers him hospitality

### Texts referring to refusing the stranger:

[Exodus 22:21](#) “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

[Exodus 23:9](#) “You shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.

[Deuteronomy 23:7](#) “You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land.

[Deuteronomy 24:17](#) “You shall not pervert the justice due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge.

[Deuteronomy 27:19](#) ‘Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

[Jeremiah 22:3](#) Thus says the Lord, “Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

[Jeremiah 7:6](#) if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin,

[Psalm 94:6](#) They slay the widow and the stranger...And murder the orphans.

[Ezekiel 22:7](#) They have treated father and mother lightly within you. The alien they have oppressed in your midst; the fatherless and the widow they have wronged in you.

[Ezekiel 22:29](#) The people of the land have practiced oppression and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and needy and have oppressed the sojourner without justice.

[Matthew 25:43](#) I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’

[Zechariah 7:10](#) And do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.’

[Malachi 3:5](#) “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear Me,” says the Lord of hosts.

[Galatians 2:14](#) But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

### Stories of inhospitality:

Gen 19 – Sodom

Judges 19 – Gibeah’s crime

1 Samuel 25 – Encounter of Nabal with David

Contrast Gen 19 // Judges 19.



## Bibliography

- Ryszard Kapuściński. The Other (Verso: London- New York, 2018)
- Kieran J. O'Mahony, OSA What the Bible Says About The Stranger(Irish inter-Church Meeting, 2009)
- Christine D. Pohl. Making Room-Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition (Eerdmans, Michigan, USA/ Cambridge, UK, 1999)
- Pope Francis. Fratelli Tutti (Vatican, 2020)

### **Reflections:**

1 *Can you identify a moment in your own life when you have had to shift your perspective on a fundamental belief or attitude with regard to your belief, to another person, to an attitude?*

2 *Can you name some shifts in Ireland's self-identity...and name what gave rise to this/these shifts in our national identity?*

3 *This handout illustrates how a change in understanding of God's identity impacted on Israel's self-identity. How do you understand that link?*

4 From Fratelli Tutti No 41: Pope Francis October 4<sup>th</sup> 2020

*"I realize that some people are hesitant and fearful with regard to migrants. I consider this part of our natural instinct of self-defence. Yet it is also true that an individual and a people are only fruitful and productive if they are able to develop a creative openness to others. I ask everyone to move beyond those primal reactions because "there is a problem when doubts and fears condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even – without realizing it – racist. In this way, fear deprives us of the desire and the ability to encounter the other".*

*Comment on No 41 of Fratelli Tutti in light of the experience of the people of Israel and your own experience.*