

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C

Psalm 1

Scholars believe that this psalm, placed at the beginning of the Psalter, was added later as an introduction. Its purpose is not legalistic; rather it aims to show that the psalms are a pathway to happiness. It shows the whole community hope and promise if they follow the law of the Lord at all times. To the original audience, this meant following the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch or Torah), books of teaching and instruction.

However, happiness is not just about following a strict set of rules; it is rather the result of a certain lifestyle. Two pathways can be followed, one leading to happiness, the other to destruction.



The psalmist uses the striking images of a tree growing in optimum conditions, near water – this will have particularly spoken to a people living in an arid environment – or of chaff being blown away in the wind. This, too, is a familiar image for an agricultural society. Indeed, both images are often used in Scripture. The image of the tree, for example, occurs in Psalm 127 (128) and the chaff in Luke 3: 17.

The psalmist does not condemn specific actions, but rather focuses on a crescendo of bad attitudes, culminating in keeping the company of scorners – that is, those who ridicule the way of God.

We might think that life is not so clearly divided into black and white, and that there are many grey areas, but Scripture is fond of these stark contrasts – compare the house built on rock or sand (Matthew 7: 24–27) or the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25: 3).

The response to the psalm ('Happy are those who have placed their trust in the Lord') is taken from Psalm 39 (40), and of course it is easy to see the parallels with this Sunday's Gospel, where we hear Luke's version of the Beatitudes. These contrast those who walk with the Lord with those who do not.

Gospel Luke 6: 17, 20–26

This week and for the next two Sundays, we hear extracts from the 'Sermon on the Plain' from St Luke's Gospel. It is so called in contrast to the 'Sermon on the Mount' in St Matthew's Gospel.

We have here Luke's version of the Beatitudes: these are not only shorter than the ones Matthew gives us, but also include a second section with opposites to the Beatitudes, the 'Alas ...' or 'Woes'.

Jesus stopped at a piece of level ground

Just as Moses came down from the mountain to tell the people about the Law, Luke portrays Jesus on top of a hill when he prays, but coming down to the 'level ground' to connect with the people who follow him in large numbers.

People from all parts of Judaea and Jerusalem and from ...Tyre and Sidon

As well as the disciples, Jesus is addressing two different groups of people: Jews from Judaea and Jerusalem, and Gentiles from Tyre and Sidon, a populated area to the North West and South of Galilee, forming present day South Lebanon. Luke is showing here the universality of Jesus's appeal.

Fixing his eyes on the disciples

These Beatitudes not only apply to the disciples who have given up everything to follow Jesus, but also to any potential disciples in the crowd.

'Happy' versus 'Alas'

The four Beatitudes parallel the four 'Warnings': poor vs. rich, hungry vs. full, sadness vs. laughter and persecuted vs. being popular. Jesus turns social values upside down. Then as now, society valued the rich more than the poor. It is interesting to note that originally Luke was writing his account for a rich and well respected person, His Excellency Theophilus (Luke 1: 4).

The Fourth Beatitude

Luke describes here the traditional process of exclusion and excommunication from a synagogue: physical exclusion, public insults, and social disgrace in having your name crossed out from the official register. We read an example of this two weeks ago (4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Luke 4: 21–30).

Rich and Poor

These are not only material conditions. They can also apply to our spiritual state. Matthew clarifies this by calling people 'poor in spirit'. Being poor is also being willing to sacrifice all (material goods, laughter, reputation) for the sake of the Kingdom, 'on account of the Son of Man'.

Being rich is to be self-satisfied and unaware of the needs of others. (See Luke 12: 16–21, the rich fool; or 16: 19–26, Dives and Lazarus.) The focus should be to use our possessions for the greater good.