

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES (YEAR B)

Third Sunday of Advent

Second Reading 1 Thessalonians 5: 16–24

This reading is taken from the end of St Paul's letter. He urges the Thessalonian Christians to follow his instruction, secure in his faith that God has made it possible for them to do so (v. 24).

Paul gives a list of final instructions by which they must live as they await the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Be happy, pray constantly ...

The advice given to the Thessalonians is fitting for us today, during Advent. As we remember the birth of Jesus and wait for the time of his return, our waiting is not passive. Rather, it is a time of activity and preparation, doing what God expects us to do.



Never try to suppress the Spirit

Paul again stresses the importance of the Holy Spirit – compare 1 Corinthians 12: 4–11, where he details the variety and unity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of prophecy ...

He counsels the Thessalonians that care should be taken in the use of the gifts. Prophecy is singled out for special attention and respect.

Hold on to what is good ...

The 'good' is that which is of the Spirit, whereas evil is devoid of the Holy Spirit.

May the God of peace keep you ...

God has called you, he will not fail you.

Paul addresses his final prayer to God asking that the people be made 'blameless', assuring them that they do not achieve perfection through their own willpower – but rather through the presence of God who has 'called them'.

Gospel: John 1: 6–8, 9–28

The gospel passage this week comes from St John. Whereas Matthew, Mark and Luke give a more or less chronological account of the life of Jesus from a similar point of view ('Synoptic gospels'), John includes what he calls 'signs' – stories of miracles to help us believe.

A man came sent by God

The first two verses of today's passage come from the Prologue. Scholars think this may have been originally a free-standing document focusing on Jesus as Word of God, to which the two verses concerning John the Baptist were added at a later stage.

Being sent from God gives John authenticity and authority.

He came as a witness

Giving witness is an important notion in John's Gospel. Numerous people and events are said to bear witness to Jesus the Word (the Samaritan woman, the crowds, the Holy Spirit, and the disciples, to name but a few. Interestingly, the Greek word for witness is *martyrios*, which has also given us the word martyr – that is, the ultimate witness.

In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels where John the Baptist is seen as a forerunner of the Messiah, here his role is to be a witness, pointing to someone else.

Last week we saw John the Baptist proclaiming Jesus's coming. He was acting as an official herald. This week, in bearing witness, a more personal connection with Jesus is highlighted.

The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem

In John's Gospel, the Jews are always portrayed as people hostile to Jesus; they represent the leaders in Jerusalem.

Priests and Levites were people empowered by the Law to make religious decisions. This highlights the official character of their visit.

Who are you?

John defines himself, not only in terms of who he is not (i.e the Messiah, Elijah, the Prophet), but also in terms of who he is (a witness, a voice crying in the wilderness).

The Jews believed that Elijah, and a Prophet greater than Moses, would return to earth to take part in establishing the Kingdom of God. (See Malachi 3: 23–24 and Deuteronomy 18: 15.)

Here John does not identify himself primarily in terms of his baptising activities, but the Pharisees questioning him nonetheless want him to justify his actions.

Bethany

This village of Bethany is in Transjordan, and must not be confused with the Bethany near Jerusalem where Lazarus and his sisters lived.

