

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

Second Reading Romans 8: 35, 37–39

These last four weeks, we have been reading and praying the eighth chapter of St Paul's letter to the Romans. (See the Prego Plus for Sunday 16 OTA for more background details about this particular letter, and also on Chapter 8). It is an important chapter, and its last ten verses were possibly written as a hymn to God's love. The love of Christ – that is the love that Christ has for us – has been made known to us in his death and resurrection.

Living as a Christian, even today, can be difficult – and St Paul has experienced all the difficulties he mentions here. They are related mostly in the fourth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians and the eleventh chapter of his second letter, but the power of Christ's love for us enables us to triumph over them. Jesus delivers us from the fear of death and even frees those who so fear life they want to put an end to it.

The angels Paul mentions could be good or bad elements. At the time of writing this letter, Paul was very interested in angelology (the doctrine concerning angels). Some were seen as a heavenly council surrounding God, but others were malevolent fallen angels (see Ephesians 6: 12) who sided with Satan.

Paul continues listing the forces which ancient people considered hostile to humankind. In particular, these include the height and depths – astrological measures for assessing the proximity or remoteness of stars, which were believed to control human destiny. Even they cannot separate us from the love of God for us, made visible in Christ Jesus.



Gospel Matthew 14: 13–21

The Feeding of the 5000

This story occurs with slight variations in all four Gospels. In St Matthew, it comes straight after the news that John the Baptist has been beheaded on the orders of Herod. Matthew follows Mark's account very closely but differs in some important aspects: here there is an emphasis on Jesus's compassion for the people; the disciples are the ones who should provide food; and there are strong parallels between this event and the Last Supper, with the institution of the Eucharist (Matthew 26: 26–29). Matthew gives fewer details than Mark, increasing the symbolic significance of the story.

This episode echoes several multiple feeding stories in the Old Testament: the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16); the quails in the wilderness (Numbers 11: 31–35); Elijah and the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8–16); and Elisha, who fed a hundred people with two barley loaves (2 Kings 4: 42–44).

Jesus withdrew by boat to a lonely place

The exact location of the lonely place is not identified. It was probably in the region of Bethsaida, close to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, not far from villages or towns where the crowd would have been able to buy food.

All we have is five loaves and two fish

The food – five loaves and two fish – which the disciples carried with them, would probably be enough to feed their own group. The loaves would likely be made of barley grain (wheat was reserved for rich people); while fish, a staple food at that time, could be dried, cured or salted, and was easily carried.

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said the blessing

Jesus blesses the food as in a traditional Jewish meal. However, his words are the same as those of the Last Supper: taking, blessing, breaking, giving. For today's Christians, they are very much associated with the Eucharist.

Those who ate numbered about five thousand men

The size of the crowd may be inaccurate since oral tradition always tends to increase numbers. But it represents the whole of Israel, where the symbolism is reinforced by the remaining baskets, twelve being the number of the tribes of Israel.

