

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

First Reading Isaiah 56: 1. 6–7

Today's verses from Isaiah come from the last section of the book, known as Trito-Isaiah or Third Isaiah, in contrast to the first section (Chapters 1–39) and the second (Chapters 40–55) known as Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah. The first section recounts the people's lack of trust in God and their defeat at the hands of the Assyrian army.

The second sees the people of Israel in exile in Babylon and seeks to encourage them and comfort them, assuring them that God has not abandoned them.

The third, written after the return of the Exiles to Israel, sees them attempting to rebuild their lives and the Temple.

However, the task is proving difficult. The atmosphere is one of guilt and frustration. Whereas the focus so far has been to gather together the people of Israel again, the Lord now asks them to open themselves to foreigners and outsiders, some of whom will have been traditional enemies of Israel.

Even though these foreigners may have *'attached themselves to the Lord'*, they are still ostracised and on the margins of society. One way to include them is by letting them worship with the people of Israel in the Lord's House of Prayer. Jesus quoted this passage as he threw out the dealers from the Temple (Matthew 21: 13)

There are obvious links between this reading and this week's Gospel, where we find Jesus broadening the established boundaries between the House of Israel and a foreigner.



'My House will be called
a house of prayer
for all the peoples'

Gospel Matthew 15: 21–28

After a discussion with his disciples on ritual cleanliness and uncleanness, Jesus goes with them towards Tyre and Sidon.

The region of Tyre and Sidon

These were two Phoenician towns in present-day Southern Lebanon. Tyre was 40 miles North West of Capernaum, Sidon 60 miles in the same direction, and the towns were 26 miles apart. It is Gentile – that is non Jewish – territory, where people worshipped Phoenician gods.

A Canaanite woman from that district

Canaanites were ancient enemies of the Jews. A thousand years before, they were living on the Promised Land where Joshua led the Hebrews. God had ordered the Israelites to destroy them (Deuteronomy 20: 17).

The woman needs to overcome ethnic, cultural, political, gender and religious prejudices.

Son of David, have pity on me

Although a pagan foreigner, she is able to use Jewish vocabulary in addressing Jesus.

My daughter is tormented by a devil

Lack of medical knowledge led people to attribute mental illness to demons or evil spirits.

The woman was kneeling at his feet

This is a significant detail: it is the position someone would adopt in front of a King, and supports her calling Jesus 'Son of David'. People kneeling or bowing low in Matthew's Gospel are also linked with healings (8: 2– the cure of a leper, or 9: 18 – the official's daughter brought back to life).

It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house dogs.

In the context of the time, this exchange between Jesus and the woman is not perhaps as shocking as it seems to us. It is typical of the kind of wit admired in the Near East, where the ability to match riddle with riddle and insult with insult was greatly admired.

It can be seen as peasant good humour banter rather than theological debate. Moreover, being compared to a house dog may not be as pejorative as it would be nowadays. In the strict family hierarchy, dogs were part of the food distribution and feeding them was a way of ensuring their loyalty and faithfulness.

You have great faith

This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that someone's faith is called great. Earlier on, Jesus was regretting Peter's 'little faith' (14: 31)