

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

First Reading Jeremiah 20: 7–9

The life of the Prophet Jeremiah took place at a time of great political upheaval in the Middle East. His ministry spanned a period of forty years (627–587 BC). About halfway through it, he witnessed Babylonian expansionism. The little land of Judah, where he lived, sought to play Egypt (to its south) and Babylon (to its north and east) against each other. This was a dangerous policy and God asked Jeremiah to warn the people that they faced ruin. However, they had no wish to listen to him, and Jeremiah was caught between his wish to do as God wanted and the 'Insults and derision' from the people of Judah. In the end, of course, the Babylonians won the struggle, Jerusalem was destroyed and the people of Judah were exiled to Babylon.

The passage we read and pray today is part of Jeremiah's lament to God. He explains how he has wanted to follow God's guidance but has been made a 'laughing stock'.

This type of lament can also be found in the Psalms: there are about sixty which are classified as Psalms of Lament. They tend to follow a pattern which we also find here, comprising (a) a complaint addressed to God (You...); (b) an explanation of how it affects the prophet or psalmist (I ...); and then often (c) a mention of the people who are at the origin of the problem (They ...).



However, despite Jeremiah's torment, 'There seemed to be a fire burning in [his] heart' which he cannot control. He will continue speaking out.

Gospel Matthew 16: 21–27

This passage follows last week's, when Simon acknowledges Jesus as Messiah and is given the name Peter. Here for the first time Jesus speaks of his passion, death and resurrection.

He was destined to go to Jerusalem

So far, Jesus had stayed in small towns gathering followers and making himself known through miracles and healings. The following four chapters will relate his journey to Jerusalem, the city where prophets are put to death (Matthew 23: 37).

Suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes

These three groups make up the Sanhedrin, an assembly of 23 to 71 men, appointed in every city to act as supreme court. Elders were lay readers. It is interesting to note that Matthew does not mention Pharisees.

Peter started to remonstrate with Jesus

Jewish culture could not imagine a Messiah who would suffer and be killed. Their long-awaited new leader would be able to bring them glory and fame. Peter here is voicing the feelings of the other disciples and the people.

Get behind me, Satan!

Jesus sees in Peter a continuation of the temptations Satan put in his way in the desert at the beginning of his ministry. (Matthew 4: 10)

You are an obstacle in my path

The Greek word used here: *skandalo* (from which we derive the word 'scandal'), meant any large block or rock which blocked someone's way. It also had moral overtones. Maybe it is also used here ironically as Jesus has just called Peter his rock.

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine ...

The sayings which follow are reminiscent of the great Jewish prayer, the Shema (Deuteronomy 6: 5): '*You shall love the Lord with all your heart: the seat of drives and impulses, hence the need for renouncement or self-denial; all your soul: your life, which you might have to lose through martyrdom; all your strength: your property and wealth, the whole world.*

Take up your cross

This is not an allusion to Jesus's crucifixion. Dying on the cross was a common Roman punishment and the cross had come to mean suffering or agony.

He will reward each according to his behaviour

This appears to be a reference to Psalm 62: 12 'You repay us all according to our deeds'.