

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A

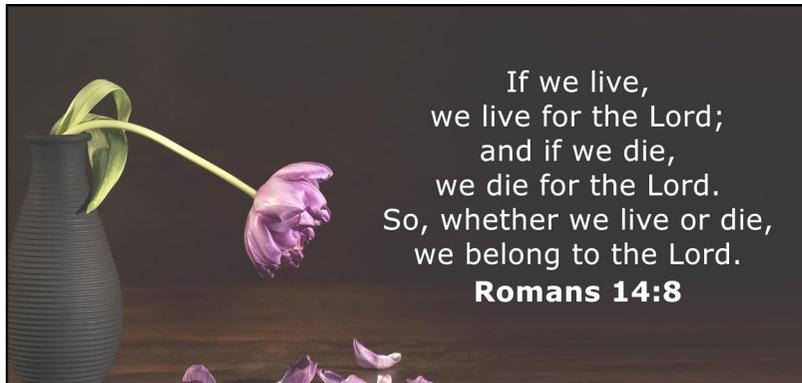
Second Reading Romans 14: 7–9

Having followed St Paul's arguments in his letter to the Romans for many weeks, we are now nearing its end. Today Paul answers those Jewish Christians who have been offended by Gentile converts – those who seemingly disregard the Sabbath and eat non-kosher foods.

Furthermore, Roman society considered it ill-mannered to pass judgement on the behaviour of another man's servant (see 14: 4): only their master could do that. Given that our master is the Lord, Paul says, he is therefore the only one who can pass judgement on us, and on everything we do. Our whole life and death belong to him. We should not judge others.

Over and above the verses we pray today, Paul advises flexibility. Some beliefs are of course non-negotiable – Jesus is Lord; we belong to him – but beyond that he also appeals to unity: 'let us adopt any custom that leads to peace and our mutual improvement' (14: 20).

We ourselves may recall Paul's words if ever we witness arguments about different liturgical practices in church.



Gospel Matthew 18: 21–35

We continue Matthew's 'Sermon on the Church', with a passage that starts with Peter's question to Jesus on forgiveness.

Lord, how often must I forgive my brother...?

When Peter asked this, he would have thought that to forgive someone as many as seven times was generous; seven was seen as a symbol of completeness. Indeed, Rabbis of the time taught that to forgive three times was sufficient. Biblical proof for this was taken from the opening chapters of the book of the Prophet Amos in the Old Testament.

'Seventy seven times seven.'

Jesus replies to Peter, also using the symbolism of numbers: he indicates that forgiveness must be without limit. He multiplies Peter's seven, a symbol of completeness, by ten, a number seen as a symbol of infinity.

The real meaning of forgiveness.

Jesus teaches the people that their attitude towards forgiveness is at fault, using a parable that forms one of the sternest and most challenging passages in the Gospels. The parable of the unforgiving debtor has been referred to as a dramatisation of the fifth beatitude: **Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them** (Matthew 5: 7).

The debt that could never be repaid.

One of the most important points in the story is the significant contrast between the two debts. The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents, a talent being the equivalent of 15 years wages. This huge debt was more than the total budget of an ordinary province. The total revenue of the province which contained Idumaea, Judaea and Samaria was only 600 talents, whereas the total revenue of a wealthy province like Galilee was only 300 talents. This first servant was himself owed 100 denarii, a denarius being a day's wage; a fraction of the debt which had caused him to beg for mercy.

'Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'

The king was an Oriental despot. To take a man's family in lieu of his debt was common practice, especially among the pagans. Tyrants, particularly in the Orient, made use of torture to extract confessions or to force the victim's family into paying the debt.

Regardless of this, we see that the king, in his pity for the servant cancels the entire debt and expects the forgiven one to do the same.