

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR B

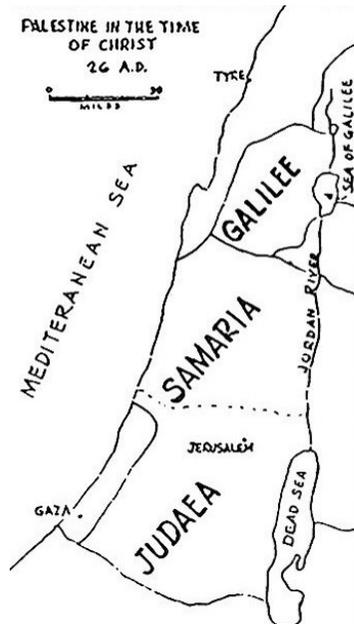
First Reading Acts 9: 26–31

The beginning of Chapter 9, prior to these verses, relates the conversion of St Paul (Saul of Tarsus). There are three such accounts in the Acts of the Apostles: the present one, related in the third person ('He ...'), and two later ones (Acts 22: 1–21 and 26: 1–23), in Paul's own words ('I...'). Today's passage concerns Paul's first visit to Jerusalem.

Paul was originally named Saul by his parents, but since his father was a Roman citizen, he also had the Latin name Paul. (Having two names was common in those days.) While he lived among Jews, Saul was the more appropriate name. After his conversion, however, when taking the Good News to the Gentiles, Paul was a more familiar name to them.

In the conflict with the disciples, *Barnabas*, who would eventually become Paul's lifelong friend, acts as mediator between the former persecutor and the others.

The *Hellenists* seem to have been Jews who could only speak Greek. In contrast, the Hebrews could speak Greek and another Semitic language.



In view of the threats to his life, Saul's friends resolve to send him to his birth place, Tarsus, nearly 600 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Verse 31 is an encouraging 'summary verse' recalling a verse from the beginning of Acts. The building up of the church in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria, and the consolation of the Holy Spirit, echo words spoken earlier by Jesus to the disciples: '... When the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria ...' (Acts 1: 8.)

Verse 31 also separates the first part of this chapter, which has focused on Paul, from that following, where Peter is at the heart of the story.

Gospel John 15: 1–8

Chapter 15 of John's Gospel is part of 'The farewell discourses' (Ch 14–16), and takes place just after the Last Supper. Jesus is reassuring his disciples as he prepares them to live without his physical presence. The chapter can be divided into three parts:

* Vv. 1–8 (today's reading): The relationship of the believer to Christ, with its central commandment: 'Remain in me'.

* Vv. 9–17 (next week's reading): The relationship of believers with one another. Its central commandment is 'Love one another as I have loved you'.

* Vv. 18–27: The relationship of believers to the hostile world.

'I am the true vine'

Another of the 'I am' sayings of Jesus. Every time he uses them we discover another aspect of who he is. The Jews were familiar with the Old Testament idea of the vineyard as representing the people of Israel (e.g. Isaiah 5: 1–7; Jeremiah 2: 21; Ezekiel 15). They also knew much about vine growing, which required constant care and was very labour intensive. It was an important export for their economy. God the Father is the vine dresser, but what is new here is that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches.

Jesus is the *true* vine in contrast to some 'false' vines, to which we ourselves might be attached: a job, a hobby, a team etc.

Bearing much fruit

The fruit to be borne is not specified. In the context of the surrounding chapters of the Gospel, we see that the fruit is love, joy and compassion, but each one of us can decide which fruit is needed in our own lives.

For a disciple, *bearing fruit*, which carries the seeds enabling the plant to reproduce, can mean making more disciples. John is writing for a Christian community and is encouraging them to grow in numbers.

Pruning the branches

The Greek word translated here by *pruning* can also mean to cleanse, to purify. As *every* branch will be pruned, all of us can expect to experience this cleansing.

'Remain in me'

This phrase appears eight times in these few verses. It is the crux of Jesus's message. We cannot do anything on our own. It has often been translated as 'abide with me' or 'live in me'.