

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER ('DIVINE MERCY SUNDAY') YEAR C



The Sunday after Easter has been kept as the Feast of Divine Mercy by the Roman Catholic Church and some other churches since 2000. On this day we are called to reflect more personally on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the blessings they have received from it. The focus is on God's compassion, reminding us that the risen Lord offers us love that pardons, reconciles, and reopens our own hearts to love.

#### Psalm 117 (118)

This psalm was first used for the Liturgy of Thanksgiving during the week-long Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*). At this time, small booths or tents (*sukkot*) made of branches recalled the lightly-built dwellings occupied by the people during their 40-year crossing of the desert, following the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. It is a very joyful festival lasting seven days; the people would dance around the altar waving branches, rejoicing that 'the Lord's right hand has triumphed'. Now they would not die, but live to 'recount his deeds'.

The psalm is constructed as a form of dialogue where different groups praise the Lord in turn: the sons of Israel (the people in general); the sons of Aaron (the priests); and those who fear the Lord (perhaps those who believe in God, but are not Jews). God's love has no end.

Jesus would have sung this psalm every year of his life on earth, for it is one of the psalms sung at the end of the Passover meal.

Matthew, Mark and Luke saw Jesus in the stone rejected by the builders (Matthew 21: 42): the one who would become the cornerstone of the Christian church.

## Gospel John 20: 19–31

### The doors were closed for fear of the Jews

The disciples probably met in the upper room where they had eaten the Last Supper with Jesus. Knowing that the Jews would be hostile to them as followers of Jesus, they feared that they, too, would be arrested and put to death.

### 'Peace be with you'

Jesus gives this normal middle eastern greeting now and eight days later, as he shows his disciples the crucifixion wounds. This familiar greeting conveys more than peace, but rather means 'May God give you every good thing'.

### 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you'

With these words Jesus commissioned the disciples to continue his ministry.

As Jesus returns to his Father, he needs the Church to take his message to the people. The Church is the 'Body of Christ'. (Ephesians 1: 23; 1 Corinthians 12: 12) The Church in turn cannot function without Jesus, who is the power and the authority behind the message that it must take out into the world.

As Jesus went out in perfect love and obedience to his Father, so must his disciples, the Church, take God's message out in perfect love and obedience to God.

### After saying this he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

The disciples receive the Holy Spirit at this appearance of the Risen Jesus. St John's description of Jesus's actions is reminiscent of the story of creation, as God breathed life into the nostrils of the man he had formed (Genesis 2: 7), and of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones when he hears God say 'Come ... O breath, and breathe upon these dead; let them live'. (Ezekiel 37: 9)

### 'For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven, for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.'

Some scholars think that this may be a reference to the baptism of repentance which John the Baptist dispensed, a traditional sign of cleansing. Others think that these words outline the Church's duty to proclaim God's forgiveness to those who repent.

### 'Unless I see the holes in his hands ... I refuse to believe.'

Thomas, who doubted Jesus's resurrection, is with the disciples when Jesus appears to them a second time. Jesus now offers Thomas the proof he needs to believe what the other disciples have told him.

### 'My Lord and my God'!

Thomas represents those who are totally honest in their doubt or disbelief. On seeing Jesus, we are not told if he actually touched Jesus's wounds, but only that he is now able to make his simple and uncompromising declaration of faith.