

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

Psalm 144 (145) vv. 1–2, 8–11, 13–14

Some think that this psalm was once the last in the book, with five other psalms to the glory of God added later on.

Its structure is unusual. The first word of each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from the first to the last. This device was used to help memorise the text, for private or public recitation. It also expresses total fullness, rather like an 'A to Z' of praise. Texts like these, called acrostics, were the work of highly skilled artists.

The psalm begins in the first person with the psalmist addressing God, but later on it switches to speaking *about* God, possibly to the congregation.

The author blesses God's name (vs. 1). Names are important in ancient times: they reflect the nature and character of a person, their very essence. Even in the New Testament, name changes occur at important moments in people's lives (Saul to Paul, and Simon to Peter, for example).

The psalmist praises a God whose attributes he is keen to summarise and extol. In this he echoes the self-description which the Lord gave to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34: 6): 'a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness'.

Gospel Matthew 11: 25–30

The context of Matthew 11 is not one of success. John the Baptist is asking himself questions about who Jesus is (11: 3). People reproach Jesus for eating and drinking too much and consorting with tax collectors (11: 19). The towns where Jesus worked most of his miracles have gone back to their old ways and refuse to repent (11: 20–24).

It was '*at that time*' that Jesus chose to pray to his Father [next page]:

I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth

Matthew here uses a Jewish expression familiar to his listeners.

... for hiding these things from the learned and the clever

There has been much discussion about the identity of these people. They are generally thought to be those who reject Jesus, especially religious leaders, the Scribes and the Pharisees. The 'things' are probably the Kingdom of God and the suffering leading to the cross.

... revealing them to mere children

The 'children' are the common people, the ones new to the Christian faith, the poor in spirit and the merciful from the Beatitudes (5: 3–10). Understanding spiritual matters involves God's help. They have to be 'revealed' to us.

No one knows the Son except the Father

This is the first clear statement of the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son. Years later, St John's Gospel would pick up similar language (Jn 3: 35; Jn 17).

Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened

This invitation is found only in St Matthew's Gospel. It provides an introduction to the following chapter, where two stories (picking corn on the Sabbath and the cure of the man with a withered hand) show how many burdens the Pharisees and their legalism place on the people. The problem is not so much the Law in itself, but its over-zealous interpretation.

Shoulder my yoke

The yoke metaphor was common amongst rabbis for the difficult task of following the Law to the letter. In that context, the wooden harness placed on the neck and shoulders of oxen to pull the plough was a symbol of the oppression and subjugation of prisoners of war or slaves. It also represents the burden placed on the people's shoulders by the Pharisees (see also Matthew 23: 4).

My yoke is easy



By contrast, Jesus's yoke offers another image — one which couples two oxen under the same yoke. This might be either a young ox learning from an experienced one until it can manage alone, or an older animal being supported by a younger, fitter one. Jesus invites us to labour with him, sharing the burden with us, teaching us through practice a new way of understanding God's will.