

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

Psalm 66 (67)

This portion of psalmody chosen as this week's psalm of praise and thanksgiving is very short; just seven verses. The two-line response *'Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you'* is repeated every two verses in the original version.

The first verse is an adaptation of the blessing given to Moses for Aaron the priest and the people of Israel: *'May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine on you and be gracious to you'* (Numbers 6: 24–25). However, the difference here is that the blessing is extended to all nations.

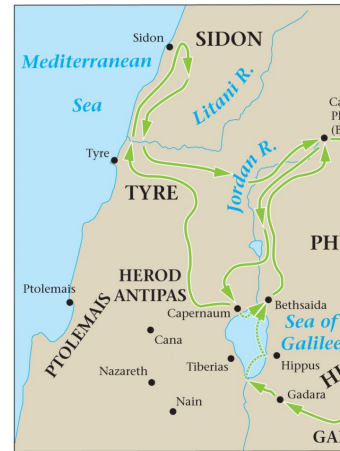
Biblical scholars differ in their interpretation of this psalm. Most think that it was written in thanksgiving for a good harvest, perhaps on the occasion of the feast of Tabernacles. Indeed verse 6, which is omitted from today's psalm, reads: *'The earth has yielded its fruit, for God, our God, has blessed us'*. However, others believe that it is a prayer asking for a good harvest still to come.

Christians see in Jesus the incarnate face of God *'shedding its light on us'*. As the Good Shepherd, Christ *'guides the nations of the earth'*.



Gospel Matthew 15: 21–28

After a discussion with his disciples on ritual cleanliness and uncleanness, Jesus goes with them towards Tyre and Sidon.



The region of Tyre and Sidon

These were two Phoenician towns in present-day Southern Lebanon. Tyre was 40 miles North West of Capernaum, Sidon 60 miles in the same direction, and the towns were 26 miles apart. It is Gentile – that is non Jewish – territory, where people worshipped Phoenician gods.

A Canaanite woman from that district

Canaanites were ancient enemies of the Jews. A thousand years before, they were living on the Promised Land where Joshua led the Hebrews. God had ordered the Israelites to destroy them (Deuteronomy 20: 17).

The woman needs to overcome ethnic, cultural, political, gender and religious prejudices.

'Son of David, have pity on me'

Although a pagan foreigner, she is able to use Jewish vocabulary in addressing Jesus.

'My daughter is tormented by a devil'

Lack of medical knowledge led people to attribute mental illness to demons or evil spirits.

The woman was kneeling at his feet

This is a significant detail: it is the position someone would adopt in front of a King, and supports her calling Jesus 'Son of David'. People kneeling or bowing low in Matthew's Gospel are also linked with healings (8: 2– the cure of a leper, or 9: 18 – the official's daughter brought back to life).

'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house dogs.'

In the context of the time, this exchange between Jesus and the woman is not perhaps as shocking as it seems to us. It is typical of the kind of wit admired in the Near East, where the ability to match riddle with riddle and insult with insult was greatly admired.

It can be seen as peasant good humour banter rather than theological debate. Moreover, being compared to a house dog may not be as pejorative as it would be nowadays. In the strict family hierarchy, dogs were part of the food distribution and feeding them was a way of ensuring their loyalty and faithfulness.

'You have great faith'

This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that someone's faith is called great. Earlier on, Jesus was regretting Peter's 'little faith' (14: 31)