

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

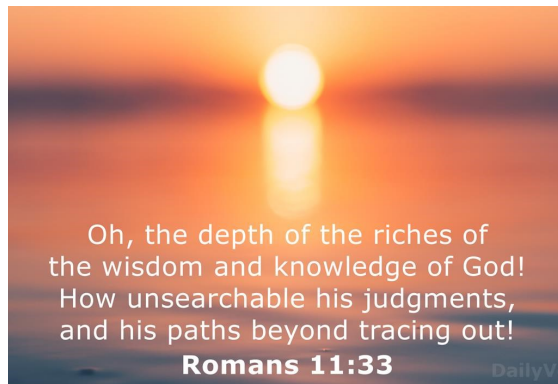
TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

Second Reading Romans 11: 33–36

From the Ninth Sunday to the Twenty-Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Church gives us St Paul's letter to the Romans to read and pray. (For a more general introduction, see the Prego Plus for Sunday 16 OTA.)

At the time of writing, the complexion of the Christian churches is changing from being almost exclusively made up of Jewish Christians to a predominantly Gentile membership.

Today's few verses conclude chapters 9–11, which deal with the place of the Jews in the plan of God. It can be seen as a final doxology – a statement of praise of God's mercy.



Paul seeks to appeal to both Jews and Gentiles. He uses vocabulary familiar to Gentile Greeks (*riches, wisdom, knowledge*) and by the use of quotations from the Old Testament, shows that these qualities belong to the God of Israel too. Thus both Greek and Hebrew cultures are represented.

In a skilful use of punctuation, Paul catches the interest of the reader. He uses exclamation marks to make statements about God, and in a series of questions to which no answer is expected, Paul shows that God's wisdom is very different from human wisdom.

These questions: *Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counsellor? Who could ever give him anything or lend him anything?* are free quotations from Isaiah 40: 13 and Job 5:7. They express the transcendent wisdom and self-sufficiency of God. He does not need advice or helpers, he is faithful and can be trusted.

God is the source (*all comes from him*); the means (*by him*); and the ultimate goal of all things (*for him*).

Gospel Matthew 16: 13–20 'Who do you say I am?'

This is the first part of a longer story which will be concluded next week. The question of Jesus's identity is at the centre of the Gospels. It seems to be particularly important for Matthew who begins his Gospel with a Genealogy of Jesus. People at that time defined themselves in relation to the group they belonged to; where they came from; the opinions others had of them. There was little psychological perception of the self.

Caesarea Philippi

This small town is situated about 25 miles North East of the Lake of Galilee, at the base of Mount Hermon in what is now the Golan Heights. The ancient town of Paneas (named after the Greek God of music, Pan) was given to Herod the Great in 20 BC by Caesar and rebuilt by Philip, Herod's son, in 4 BC, who renamed it after Caesar and himself.

Who do people say the Son of man is?

The term 'Son of Man', first used in the book of Daniel (7: 13), is thought to simply mean a human being. Jesus is given four answers:

John the Baptist: Jesus was continuing John's teaching: repentance and the coming of the Kingdom. Some of his own followers may have been John's disciples.

Elijah: The Jews believed that Elijah would return as he had been taken up to heaven in the whirlwind of a chariot of fire, drawn by horses of fire.

Jeremiah: Although Mark and Luke recount this episode, Jeremiah is only mentioned in Matthew's Gospel.

Prophets: Jesus's message echoed Old Testament prophetic tradition.

Who do you say I am?

'You' is in the plural form: Jesus is addressing all the disciples. Peter answers for them. His reply is variously translated as the Christ or the Messiah. The word means the 'anointed one'. A Messiah, who would establish God's reign and be a royal figure, had long been expected by the people.

You are Peter and on this rock I shall build my Church

'Petros' was not a personal name at the time. Previously, only God has been instrumental in changing names (Abram to Abraham and Jacob to Israel).

The gates of the underworld – I will give you the keys of the Kingdom

To control the gates of a place was to conquer it. Clearly Peter's authority is spiritual, not political.

Binding and Loosing

These were legal rabbinical terms, meaning to forbid and to permit. Matthew is addressing a mainly Jewish audience.