

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
YEAR A

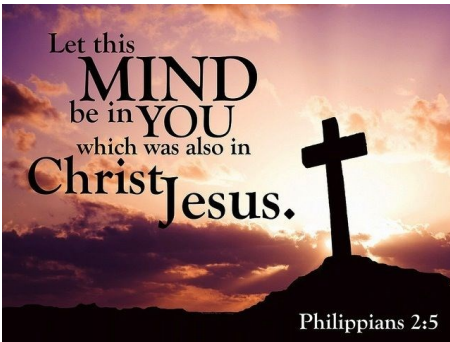
### Philippians 2: 1–5

Our reading of St Paul's second letter to the Philippians began last Sunday and continues for the next two weeks.

Philippi was an important town in Macedonia with a large population of Romans and local Greeks. It owes its name to Philip II of Macedon. St Paul established his first community here around 50 AD, when he visited during his second missionary journey. From the names of the people mentioned in this Letter, it would seem that Philippi was predominantly made up of Gentiles. The sudden changes in tone and the disjointed character of the writing suggest that this may have in fact been a collection of three different letters.

Paul wrote his letter from prison. Whether this was in Rome or Ephesus is not known, but he seems to have been under house arrest.

He clearly had great affection for this young Church who welcomed him from the outset, and gave him support and encouragement. His tone is familiar, full of confidence, almost as one would write to members of one's family. Nevertheless, Paul has been made aware of dissensions and problems among the Philippian Christians.



Appealing to the love they may have for him, he encourages this community to show unity and humility ('to be self-effacing'), and always to put others first. These qualities characterise life 'in Christ'. Humility in the Old Testament was seen as the appropriate stance of a person before God, but in the Greco-Roman world, self-effacement was

despised and considered a sign of weakness. Paul here makes it a virtue.

Christ's example of humility and selfless love must be at the forefront of our minds at all times.

### Gospel Matthew 21: 28–32

As Jesus draws near to the end of his public ministry in Jerusalem, there is increasing tension with the religious authorities. This is the background to our Gospel readings for the next few weeks.

#### Which of the two did the Father's will?

Today's passage is the first of three parables told in succession by Jesus to the religious leaders who were challenging his authority at the time. It can be seen as a narrative example of Jesus's earlier saying (Matthew 7: 21): *It is not those who say to me: 'Lord, Lord', who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven.*

Today's parable highlights not just two sons, but two familiar classes of people, neither of whom is perfect: the tax collector and the prostitutes on the one hand; the chief priests and the elders on the other. One group, however, manages to do the better thing. Jesus, in turn, challenges his listeners to identify which of the two did the Father's will.

#### The reluctant son who changed his mind.

The first son flatly refused to do his father's will, but later, on reflection, obeyed his father by carrying out his wishes to work in the vineyard. For Matthew, the vineyard is often an image representing Israel, so 'working in the vineyard' can be equated to preparing for the coming of the Kingdom.

Jesus compares this son to the 'tax collectors and prostitutes' of the time. They represent the class of people who at one point in their lives make no pretence of obeying God's will, but later are able to accept the teachings of Jesus. They have a change of heart and amend their way of life.

#### The son who was unable to put his words into action.

The second son immediately said that he would do what the Father asked of him and then, for unknown reasons, decided against it. Jesus is clearly comparing this son to the chief priests and the elders. These Jewish leaders and their ancestors had a long tradition of following God's law to the letter. However they refused to accept John the Baptist's '*pattern of true righteousness*' – i.e. doing God's will – and to hear the teachings of Jesus which disturbed their way of life. Instead, they seek to question his authority (Matthew 21: 23).

