

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A

Psalm 17 (18)

This week's responsorial psalm includes the first and the last verses of a much longer psalm of thanksgiving from a king, generally thought to be David. The same text also occurs with a few minor variations in the second book of Samuel, chapter 22. David sang it to the Lord when he 'had delivered him from all his enemies and from the hands of Saul' (2 Samuel 22: 1).

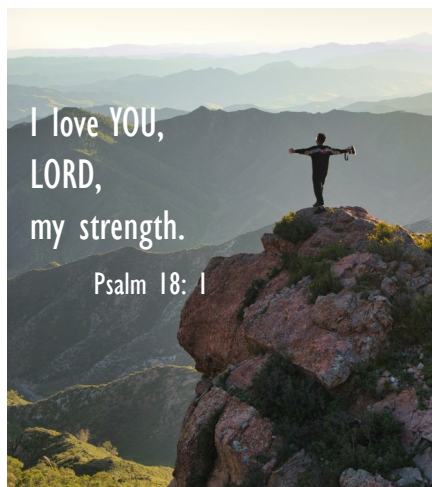
It is also possible to see a symbolic meaning, where the great victories given to the king are not historical ones, but represent the final end-of-time eschatological victory of 'his anointed'. This is the Messiah so anxiously awaited by the Jews, who will come, conquer evil and save us from our 'foes'. Today we recognise Jesus Christ, the anointed one, in the long awaited Messiah.

The Psalm begins with a very personal affirmation of the Psalmist's

love for the Lord. The Hebrew word for love used here is very tender, showing compassion. Its root is related to the word for 'womb' and is often used for the love of a mother for her children. It stresses the vulnerability of the one who prays, who relies on the strength and protection of their Lord.

In the last stanza, however, the word used for love is different. It is often translated

as *faithful love*, expressing a bond between two people. In the New Testament, it is used to represent the love between the Father and the Son. In turn, it is that same love which unites the Father and the Son to their followers.



This passage occurs after Jesus's discussion with the Sadducees about the Resurrection (Matthew 22: 23–33). It is the fourth account where Jesus clashes with the Pharisees and religious authorities, who are looking for a way of discrediting him and having him arrested.

'Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?'

At first sight the question appears innocuous. This is the sort of debate rabbis would often have between themselves. Pharisees sought to follow the Law to the letter, often taking it to absurd extremes. In the first five chapters of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch), there are 613 laws, 248 of them positive (i.e. 'you must do this') and 365 negative (i.e. 'you must not do that'). Not every law had the same importance for Pharisees: this depended on the subject matter. Knowing which was the greatest would therefore have been of particular interest.

Jesus's answer

Jesus uses two different sections of the Pentateuch and links them. Never before, in any rabbinical writings, had these two phrases been used together and given the same prominence. It is a very new approach.



Shema Yisrael,
Knesset Menorah,
Jerusalem

'You shall love the Lord your God ...'

These words come from Deuteronomy 6: 4–5 and are part of 'Shema Israel' (Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength.) This is the morning and evening prayer that every Jew says daily to this day: for more than two millennia it has defined the Jewish faith. The wording of the command on the lips of Jesus is equally personal: 'with all *your* heart, all *your* soul, all *your* mind'. It is all-encompassing, emphasising our monotheistic belief that there is only one God.

'You must love your neighbour as yourself'

From Leviticus 19: 18. In first-century Mediterranean culture, the word love does not mean so much sentimental affection as total commitment or attachment to a person or a group. At this time society was group-oriented: family, kin, village, region etc. These groups provided a person with a sense of who they were. Approval or disapproval of the group acted as an external yardstick by which to judge one's actions. So to love your neighbour is to be as attached to the people in your area as to your own family.

'On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets'

The Law and the Prophets constitute the whole of the Old Testament. Matthew had already mentioned this in his account of the Sermon on the Mount (7: 12). This is another example of Matthew showing that Jesus has come not to criticise the Law but to uphold and fulfil it, ensuring that it is understood and observed properly.