

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A

Psalm 130 (131)

The theme of this gentle psalm is humility, together with complete trust in God. It is one of the fifteen 'Psalms of Ascent' (nos. 119–133 in the Vulgate numbering; 120–134 in Hebrew numbering). Also known as the Pilgrim Psalms, the idea of 'ascent' likely relates to pilgrimage up to Jerusalem. Where possible, Israelites tried to follow the instructions of the Torah to make a pilgrimage to the Temple three times a year: on the feasts of Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost); and Sukkot (Tabernacles).

The clear imagery characteristic of these fifteen psalms makes them favourites for prayer. They suggest simplicity, showing real affection for the Lord and for Jerusalem. There is a recurring theme of confidence in the Lord's protection and help.

The response to today's psalm, 'Keep my soul in peace before you, O Lord' is a request, a prayer of entreaty for the peace that only God can give.

The three verses offer a beautiful model for prayer. The psalmist approaches God in all humility, aware of his limitations and his inability to comprehend the mysterious nature of God. In the second verse, he moves on to compare the soul to a weaned child. No longer in need of its mother's milk, the child has now



been weaned onto solid food, but is content to rest on the mother's breast, demanding nothing, just enjoying the loving contact in silence and in peace. The third verse ends the time of prayer on a note of hope, encompassing all people, in the present day and into eternity.

Gospel Matthew 23: 1–12

Today's passage concludes the group of 'conflict stories' which we have been reading over past few Sundays. Matthew is writing for the new Christian Palestinian church after the fall of Jerusalem (c. 70 AD), and here he introduces the discourse concerned with the end of the world.

The Scribes and the Pharisees

These are two different groups. The Pharisees were a devout group of Jews who prided themselves on observing the Law to the letter. In Matthew's time they constituted the dominant Jewish group, though inevitably not all Pharisees will have been guilty of the hypocrisy or vanity described in this passage.

The Scribes, whose work was associated with the Temple, belonged to a learned administrative class. As the name implies, they spent much time copying the sacred texts, and reading and explaining them to the people. Many Scribes were also Pharisees.

Heavy burdens

These are all the detailed requirements of fulfilling the 613 Laws. The Scribes and Pharisees placed a great deal of stress on ordinary Jews, who were to try and comply with such a legalistic reading of the Law.

Jesus's way of interpreting the Torah is totally different. His yoke is easy, and his burden light (Matthew 1: 30). He sees Scripture through the prism of love, compassion, mercy and justice.



Broader phylacteries and longer tassels

Phylacteries (*Tefillin*) were small receptacles containing verses of Scripture bound to the forehead and left arm of the Jewish man during prayer. Jesus is here rebuking the formal practice of certain Pharisees who were deliberately ostentatious in displaying these parts of their dress. This image (1892) by the Polish artist Jan Styka shows a nineteenth-century Rabbi wearing a phylactery on the forehead.

Place of honour and greetings

These are other examples of vain behaviour. Courtesy in Matthew's time demanded that the length of a person's

salutation should be in proportion to their individual dignity. This was a status symbol. The problem highlighted here is not so much the actions in themselves, as the motivation behind them: i.e. to impress others.

Titles and status reversal

'Rabbi', 'Master', 'Father' and 'Teacher' are only titles. Their use risks masking the true source of their authority, God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. (Despite Jesus's injunction, the title 'Father' nevertheless crept back into the Church through the monastic movement.)