

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

#### Second Reading 1 Thessalonians 4: 13–15



Paul's letter to the inhabitants of Thessalonica, the Thessalonians, is one of the oldest texts in the New Testament. Scholars think it was written around AD 30–50: after the Resurrection, but well before the main gospels.

Thessalonica was a major sea port, east of Greece, with a diverse and prosperous population. Archaeological digs have found not only the remains of a synagogue, but also Egyptian and Roman sanctuaries.

According to Luke, writing in the Acts of the Apostles (17: 1–9), Paul visited Thessalonica during his second missionary journey with Sylvanus. He stayed here several weeks, but was forced to leave because of unrest.

Paul's letter was written from Athens to strengthen the new Christians, mostly former Gentiles (i.e. non Jews). He sent Timothy, his 'co-worker for God' (3: 2), to comfort those suffering from persecution. On his return to Athens, Timothy reassures Paul that the Thessalonian Christians are able to stand firm in their faith and love of the Lord.

In today's verses, Paul seeks again to reassure his audience, emphasising that the Thessalonians need to realise this ('We want you to be quite certain'). Although we can be quite sure that those Christians who are alive at the end of time will be with God, those who have already died will not be forgotten either.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that this is implied in their belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Consequently, there is no need to be totally grief-stricken like 'the other people' (i.e. non believers). As Christians, we have hope. There will be no difference at the end of time whether you are alive or dead at that time. *Everyone* who believes will be brought to God.



## Gospel Matthew 25: 1–13

### The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins

During the last three weeks of Year A, we focus on three parables from St Matthew's Gospel. Each one provides an image of the end of time, reminding us that Christ will come again, even though we do not know the day or the time. In today's parable Jesus speaks of a wedding feast, which in the scriptures often represents eternal salvation.

#### Palestinian matrimonial customs

In the time of Jesus, weddings took place long after the betrothal. On the wedding day itself, once a suitable agreement had been reached regarding the dowry, the best man would send for the groom to come and fetch his bride from her father's house, and take her to his own. This constituted the ceremony of marriage. The whole village turned out to wish them well and to accompany them on their way. Rabbis agreed that a man might even abandon his study of the Law to share in the joy of a wedding feast. No one was allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp, and so the party made the long journey by torchlight. They went on their way singing and dancing. When a couple married they did not go away on honeymoon, but stayed at home for a week-long celebration.

#### 'Stay awake!'

The best man (some say the groom) would go to the bride's house to discuss the dowry with her father. The negotiations could be a long and intricate process, and no one knew for sure when the groom would be coming for his bride. It could be some time after sunset, or even on another day. The groom in Matthew's account has been delayed and all ten virgins have fallen asleep; the foolish and the wise. They were the bridesmaids and had an important role to play. Some scholars see the command to 'stay awake' as an addition to Matthew's traditional material, and that their importance lies rather in the need to be prepared.

Despite falling asleep, the wise virgins were adequately prepared for the privileged task they had agreed to carry out. If they had given some of their oil to the five who were unprepared, none of them might have made the journey in time for the celebrations.

#### The Jews were unprepared

This parable has a local meaning but also a wider universal one. It was directed towards the Jews: the chosen people. Though their whole history was to have been a preparation for the coming of the Son of God, in the final event they were unprepared for his arrival.