

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR B

Second Reading Ephesians: 4–10

Ephesus, home of the Ephesians, was a large seaport on the Western coast of Asia Minor, where the apostle Paul spent three years. He used this town as his base during his third missionary journey.

This letter has been the focus of much debate since the eighteenth century, but nowadays its language, style and doctrinal content lead most Pauline scholars to believe that it cannot be attributed to Paul. It was more likely written after his death by one of his disciples, in an attempt to preserve Paul's own thought and theology to help sustain the new Christians.

Verses 4 to 7 form one long sentence in the Greek text. Three verbs start with the prefix *syn*—as in our words ‘synergy’ or ‘synonym’ — which are translated using the preposition *WITH*: *life WITH Christ, raised up WITH him, gave a place WITH him*. The intended effect is to highlight the intimate link which exists between Christians and Jesus Christ.

Salvation is now no longer seen as an event that will occur at some point in the future in this letter, but is a very present reality: indeed, it is occurring now, or possibly has already occurred. Sentences such as ‘*You have been saved*’, repeated twice, show this clearly.



The use of the passive voice is also important, emphasising that our salvation does not come from anything that we have been actively doing ourselves, but rather from the mercy and the unmerited love of Christ for us: ‘*it is through grace that we have been saved*’.

Gospel John 3: 14–21

Nicodemus meets Jesus

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a teacher, is mentioned only in St John’s Gospel. He appears three times, and always at night.

The fact that Nicodemus visits Jesus under cover of darkness could be indicative of the heavy opposition encountered by Jesus in Jerusalem at the time. This is the only recorded meeting of Nicodemus and Jesus.

Their conversation so far has been ambiguous and there has been some misunderstanding.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert

From verse 11 onwards, the conversation changes from dialogue to monologue, as Jesus addresses not only Nicodemus but the ‘world’.

Jesus is alluding to the Old Testament story told in the book of Numbers (21: 4–9).

The Son of Man must be lifted up

John relates the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as a parable of Jesus’s life and a prediction of his death.

The Greek verb to lift up is *hupsoun*, and it is used of Jesus in the scriptures in two senses. It can mean a literal or physical lifting, or an exaltation—a being raised up or glorified.

In John 8: 28 and 12: 32 it is used of Jesus being physically lifted up on the cross.

In Acts 2: 33, 5: 31 and Philippians 2: 9 it is used in reference to Jesus’s ascension into glory.

Yes God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son ...

These words have been called ‘everybody’s text’, being the very essence of the Gospel. Very important to St John’s theology is the conviction that God’s love is the dynamic principle for salvation.

John prepares Christ’s Passion and death by outlining God’s divine plan of salvation for the world, whereas the writers of the synoptic gospels prepare us for Jesus’s death in a different way, speaking of what will happen in Jerusalem.

Whoever refuses to believe

Here we are faced with a seeming paradox. However, Jesus points out that there are those who condemn themselves by ‘refusing to believe’, and who have ‘shown their preference’ for a life without God. It is on those grounds only that ‘*sentence is pronounced*’.

The opposition between light and darkness echoes John’s theme in the Prologue to his Gospel (1: 4–5).