

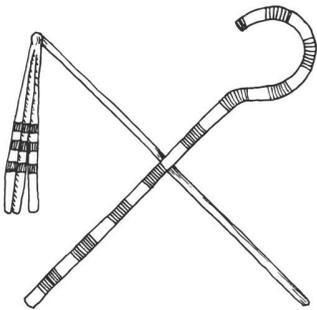
PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – YEAR A

The fourth Sunday of Lent is often referred to as *Laetare Sunday* ('Rejoice Sunday'). Its name derives from the opening words of the old Latin Introit for the Mass of the day: 'Laetare Jerusalem' ('Rejoice with Jerusalem': see Isaiah 66:10). We have now reached the mid-point of Lent, when traditional Lenten austerity is relaxed for a while on this Sunday, as we look forward towards Easter with great hope.

Psalm 22 (23)

This is a psalm of trust in two discrete sections, focusing on God as Shepherd and God as Host. The image of God as a shepherd runs throughout the Bible (as, for example, Isaiah 40: 11, Ezekiel 34: 15–31, Micah 7: 14). It is a familiar notion for people living in a rural, semi-nomadic setting.



The rod (crook) and the staff are everyday tools to protect the flock and ward off attackers.

Kings are also linked to the image of a shepherd guiding their flock. David son of Jesse, the young shepherd, was anointed king by Samuel. Jesus himself identified with this image too: 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10: 11).

The image of God as host was also powerful. In ancient times, people had a great sense of hospitality. Being someone's guest would ensure protection from your enemies. God is the perfect host.

It is worth noting the change of tone in the way the psalm is written. The psalmist first talks about the Lord, but then more intimately, addresses God directly: 'You are with me...; you have prepared...'

Early Christians commonly used this psalm during the sacraments of initiation: focusing on the water reviving my soul at baptism, the anointing with oil at confirmation, and the table prepared before me for the first Eucharist.

Gospel John 9: 1–41

Chapter 9 is often thought to be the most dramatic portion of John's Gospel. It is part of the section referred to by scholars as the 'Book of Signs' (John 1: 19 to 12: 50), which can be divided into seven 'episodes' (the wedding at Cana; the healing of the official's son; the curing of a lame man; the feeding of the 5,000; Jesus and Peter walking on water; the curing of the man born blind; and the resurrection of Lazarus). The story of the man born blind begins Episode 6: the Light of the World (sight and blindness). It is linked to the story of the good shepherd and the Jewish feast of Hanukkah. **'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'**

This is one of two miracles in which Jesus uses spittle (the other is in Mark 7: 33). In the ancient world this was quite common: the spittle of a distinguished person was thought to hold curative properties. Jesus took and used the familiar methods and customs of his time.

The pool of Siloam

This was the place where the conduit from the 'Virgin's Fountain' (the Gihon Spring) emerged into the city. As a result, the pool was given the name Siloam, meaning 'sent': reflecting how the water was 'sent' through the conduit into the city. The pool was one of the landmarks of Jerusalem; a result of one of the great engineering feats of the ancient world. In John's gospel Jesus often refers to himself as having been 'sent'; there are eleven occurrences of this in Chapters 7 and 8.

'You were born in utter sin'

This is the only healing in the Gospels in which the sufferer is said to have been afflicted from the time of his birth.

The Jews connected suffering with sin, and even the idea of pre-natal sin was not unknown. At the time of Jesus the Jews believed in the pre-existence of the soul, the idea coming from Plato and the Greeks. The thought of the sins of the parents being visited on their children is woven into the Old Testament: Exodus 20: 5 and 34: 7, Numbers 14: 18 and also Psalm 109: 14 and Isaiah 65:7. Jesus tells his disciples that neither the man nor his parents have sinned.

Physical and spiritual blindness

Although this man's physical healing was instantaneous, his spiritual progress was gradual.

The fact that he was anointed and washed is symbolic of baptism, and this story is sometimes used for Baptismal instruction.

The stages of belief that the blind man went through can be likened to the stages of catechumens in instruction as they advance to a deeper spiritual understanding and insight.

