

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT – YEAR C



LOVE

On the last Sunday of Advent the fourth candle is lit. In many Church traditions this candle represents love, when we ponder the self-giving love of Christ himself. (Many wreaths also include a fifth white 'Christ' candle in the middle, which will be lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day itself.)

Psalm 79 (80)

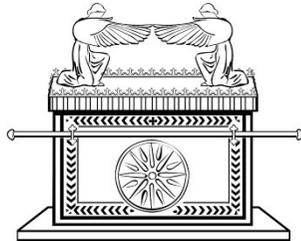
God of hosts [a royal title], bring us back ...

This psalm is a communal lament, a plea for help in a time of national disaster, though we do not know the nature of the disaster itself. The response to the psalm occurs three times in the main body of the text, showing a real desperation in the mind of the psalmist. Through him, the whole people appeal to God. The Hebrew word *'shub'*, translated here as *'bring us back'*, literally means 'make us turn' or 'turn us and our lives round'.

The theme of the psalm—the cry for God to intervene on behalf of the people—is borne out by the many requests made of him throughout the psalm.

O shepherd of Israel ... your cherubim throne

Here, God's title is shepherd/king. The Lord was thought to be invisibly sitting upon the 'cherubim throne': the ark of the covenant, decorated with mythical creatures half human and half animal (1 Samuel 4: 4).



Visit this vine ...

Vines were highly prized and one of the plants requiring the greatest attention and care. Israel is represented as God's vine here and in several other places in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 5: 1–7; Hosea 14: 5–7). The love of the winegrower for his vine is an image of God's love for us.

May your hand be on the man you have chosen...

'The man you have chosen'... is the term by which God's people identified themselves as God's possession.

And we shall never forsake you again

Israel confesses and repents.

Gospel Luke 1: 39–44

The Visitation

Following Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel, who announces not only that she is to conceive and bear a son, but that her kinswoman Elizabeth is also expecting a child, despite her great age, Mary sets off to meet Elizabeth.

Mary set out *at that time and went as quickly as she could*

St Luke does not give any reasons for Mary's journey. Was it because she wanted to congratulate her cousin, because she was afraid of the local social stigma of being pregnant before she was married, or perhaps because she was frightened and was seeking comfort from an old friend? Every reader will have their own answers.

Luke, however, gives us a sense of the immediacy of her decision.

A town in the hill country of Judah

Everything in Luke's account contributes to making this important encounter low key. No powerful local dignitaries are mentioned and the location is a nameless town in the countryside. In a reversal of the normal social order of the time, it is two pregnant women who occupy centre stage.

Elizabeth and Mary

There are many instances of older or barren women who conceive against all expectations in the Old Testament: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis, and Hannah in the first book of Samuel.

Mary, on the other hand, is a young girl; scholars think she was a young teenager, probably less than 15 years old.

Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit

In Luke's Gospel this expression carries the same meaning as in the Old Testament: the person is empowered by God to perform a special task.

A visit from the mother of my Lord

This is the first time Jesus is called 'Lord'. Before this, the term 'Lord' had been connected to God; but from now on 'the Lord' will refer to Jesus Christ. We are reminded of Thomas's cry in St John's Gospel 'My Lord and My God!' (John 20: 28)

Fulfilled promises

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is the old order meeting the new one.

Elizabeth is to give birth to John, a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, while Mary is to give birth to Jesus, God made man. Jesus is the fulfilment of all the promises made by God in the Old Testament.



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