

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

Second Reading 2 Timothy 4: 6–8, 16–18

We have been reading and praying the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy for the past three weeks. (For more details on the letter as a whole, see the Prego Plus for the 27th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C.)

Today we have reached the end of the letter. The writer is in prison, facing death, and these verses are very much his parting words. He reflects on his life as a disciple of Christ. It has not been easy, and he has often encountered suffering, or felt abandoned by his friends. No-one came to his first hearing to defend or support him; neither did they bring food or other comfort when he was in prison (and at a time when there was no prison system, supplying the basic needs of captives had to be done by friends and family).

In reflecting on his ministry, the writer employs the perfect tense, best used to indicate a completed action: *he has fought, has run, has kept the faith*. A series of images are also used to describe his situation:

Life poured away as a libation: this is an image of sacrifice. Liquid – wine, oil, or in this case, blood – was poured out during a sacrificial rite.

I have run the race: interestingly this image focuses not on winning the race but on running it, and so provides a model for discipleship.



The crown of righteousness: an image belonging to an athletic contest where a crown of laurel leaves was given to the winner at the finishing line. Rather like those who today take part in a marathon, the runner is sure to be given a medal on the finishing line.

The writer here sets himself as an example for Timothy, but he is clear that whatever he has done could not have been accomplished without the support of the Lord: *'The Lord stood by me and gave me power'*.

The writer has absolute trust in the Lord's support against all odds, quoting a line from Psalm 21 (22), v. 21: *I was rescued from the lion's mouth*.

Gospel Luke 18: 9–14

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

This passage continues last week's teaching on prayer. It is the last of the parables that are only to be found in Luke's Gospel.

Luke, of all the evangelists, most shows Jesus as a prayerful person, and here we especially see Jesus praying at the most important moments of his life. So it is little wonder that the disciples, inspired by his example, ask Jesus, 'Lord, teach us how to pray' (Luke 11: 1). Having initially described his audience as people *who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt*, Jesus goes on to speak of two types of people and their way of praying. His listeners will easily recognise themselves in the examples given.

The Pharisee: 'I am not like other men'

The Pharisees were good people who, as their name implied in Hebrew, liked to keep themselves apart from society (from the Hebrew: *pārûsh*, meaning 'set apart'). In the parable, the Pharisee is a strict Jew who follows God's law in all its details. But he is self-righteous and considers himself better than *other men*. This particular



Image: Jesus MAF

Pharisee not only keeps the Mosaic Law but exceeds it. The law prescribed just one fast day a year, on the Day of Atonement, and it was only necessary to tithe on the profit made from farm produce, not on everything. However, this man uses his prayer to praise himself and to condemn his neighbour.

The Tax Collector: 'God, be merciful to me a sinner'

By contrast, the tax collector is aware that his way of life is not all it should be and acknowledges his sinfulness before God. Tax collectors at the time were social outcasts, known as *robbers for Rome*, and the tax collector approaches his prayer with humility, expressed by his body language. He begins his prayer with the opening verse of psalm 51 (52), which King David composed after his adultery.

The tax collector asks for forgiveness and condemns no one. Jesus would have shocked his audience by picturing the Pharisee as the villain, and the tax collector as the hero.

'I tell you, this man went down to his house justified'

The tax collector is the one who has understood Jesus's teaching on prayer (Luke 11:1).