



PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

In 2019, Pope Francis designated this Sunday as the Sunday of the Word of God. It aims to help us ‘appreciate the inexhaustible riches contained in that constant dialogue between the Lord and his people’ and ‘experience anew how the risen Lord opens up for us the treasury of his word and enables us to proclaim its unfathomable riches’.

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 1: 10–13

Our reading of 1 Corinthians began last week and continues until the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time. Paul gives a vivid picture of Corinth as a bustling first-century city, which has parallels with many large modern towns we may know. This was a wealthy industrial shipbuilding centre, whose cosmopolitan population came from all parts of the Roman Empire. It was famous for its architecture and the Arts, and a noted centre for sport, hosting the Isthmian games every other year. Christians were a very small minority here, numbered in tens rather than hundreds, though there is evidence of a lack of unity among them.

- **Chloe**, about whom little is known, was probably a woman of some social rank: it may be that people met in her house to worship. Members of her household travelled to Ephesus, where Paul was residing at the time, to inform him of ‘differences’ between the new Christians; hence his letter to the community here, who seem to have divided into four factions.
- Those **for Apollos**: an Alexandrian Jew and follower of John the Baptist, who preached once Paul had left Corinth. He was known to be an excellent orator; had been baptised by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18: 24–26); and was with Paul in Ephesus at the time of writing.
- Those **for Cephas**: the Aramaic form of the Latin name Peter. He was perhaps advocating a traditionally Jewish law-keeping Christianity, as Paul indicates in Galatians 2: 11–14.
- Those **for Christ**: this group may have been mystics who connected directly with Christ, without recourse to the apostles.
- Those **for Paul**. Using a series of questions (to which he expects a negative answer), Paul reminds them that a unity of ‘belief and practice’ comes not from any given leader, but from their baptism in the name of Jesus, which connects them all to his death and resurrection. Paul has no need of great oratory (1 Cor 2: 1–5); he speaks plainly announcing the Good News, in order not to detract from Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross.

Gospel Matthew 4: 12–23: ‘Follow me!’

This episode in Matthew’s Gospel occurs just after Jesus’s temptations in the wilderness. It marks the beginning of his public ministry.

Jesus goes to settle in Capernaum

Capernaum was a thriving, predominantly Jewish, town on the banks of the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was larger than Nazareth. Theologians offer different reasons why Jesus left his own town of Nazareth in favour of Capernaum: he may have wanted to reach a wider audience, or felt it was a safer place to start his ministry. Matthew uses the Greek verb meaning ‘to move as a result of imminent danger’ to indicate Jesus moving here. John the Baptist has just been sent to prison.

Land of Zebulun and Naphtali

This is the land of the first two tribes of Israel to be conquered by the Assyrians 700 years previously. This reference enables Matthew to introduce his quotation from Isaiah 9: 2 (see today’s First Reading).

The Prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled

Throughout his Gospel, Matthew is at pains to show that Jesus’s ministry stands in line with God’s purpose as stated in the Old Testament. There are no fewer than fourteen instances where he shows how what is happening to Jesus is fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy.

The Kingdom of Heaven

This is a specifically Matthean phrase. The word ‘Kingdom’ does not refer to a geographical area but to the exercise of a particular power. It is synonymous with the word ‘reign’.

Jesus calls four fishermen

Jesus calls people where they are, as they are. In this case, the ones he chooses are at work; they have no formal education. He does not give them any indication of what they *will* have to do.

Being a fisherman in Jesus’s time was not easy. Their social ranking was low. They were not self-employed but worked for masters or for toll collectors who exerted control over fish quotas and licensing. Following Jesus meant breaking with their masters and their Roman rulers in favour of the Kingdom of God.

Fishers of men

The whole society around the Sea of Galilee revolved around fishing and boats; people were very familiar with fishing-related metaphors. Gathering fish in this instance is done with nets, rather than with line, hook and bait.