

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD – YEAR A

#### Second Reading Philippians 2: 6–11

Philippi was an important town in Macedonia with a large population of Romans and local Greeks. It owes its name to Philip II of Macedon. St Paul established his first community here around 50 AD, when he visited during his second missionary journey. Names mentioned in the Letter suggest that Philippi was predominantly made up of Gentiles.

Paul wrote his letter from prison. Whether this was in Rome or Ephesus is not known, but he seems to have been under house arrest. The sudden changes in tone and the disjointed character of this letter have led some scholars to believe that his epistle was in fact a collection of three different letters.

Paul is aware of divisions within the community, and just before the verses we read today, he urges them to show humility and put the interests of others before their own. To encourage them, Paul quotes what is probably an early Christian hymn, which has become one of the most well known passages in his letters.



Christ Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a servant

It consists of two stanzas (verses 6–8 and 9–11), the first showing the mindset of Jesus and what he did for humanity (he *'emptied himself'* and *'humbled himself'*); and the second what God did for Jesus (God *has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name*). Being humble was not seen as a virtue in Paul's time. His society accorded great importance to social and professional status.



## Gospel Matthew 26: 14 – 27: 66

All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus's death, and each evangelist highlights particular scenes that are consistent with his presentation of Jesus's life and public ministry. For St Matthew, Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures, while being at the same time the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and also the Messiah, the Son of God.

Given the length of Matthew's account of the Lord's Passion, it is not possible here to comment on every aspect of the story. Below are a few examples illustrating how Matthew shows that Jesus is the fulfilment of the ancient scriptures.

#### The Passover meal

The disciples are distressed when Jesus says that one of them will betray him. *'The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed ...'*

#### Leaving for the Mount of Olives

Jesus tells his disciples that they will all lose faith in him. *'For it is written: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered".'* (Zechariah 13: 7)

#### The betrayal

There is much speculation as to Judas's motives in betraying Jesus, and even the necessity of the betrayal. Those who came to arrest Jesus would almost certainly have been familiar with who he was. Jesus says to him, *'Friend, do what you came to do'*. (Matthew 26: 50)

When Judas told the armed mob that he would identify Jesus with a kiss, the word he used was the Greek *Philein*, the normal word for a kiss. But when Matthew tells us that Judas actually kisses Jesus, the word used is *Kataphilein*, which means to kiss fervently and repeatedly.

In Judas's great remorse and sorrow he returns to the area of the Temple called *'naos'*. He would have had to go through a series of courts to reach the Court of the Priests, which he himself would not be allowed to enter. The High Priest there would not accept the money, thus fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah (11: 13–14): *'But the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter" – the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter.'* St Matthew, however, attributes this quotation to Jeremiah.

#### The arrest

One of Jesus's followers tries to prevent his arrest by striking the High Priest's servant with a sword. Jesus opposes this action. *'But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?'* (Matthew 26: 54)