

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR C



Gospel Luke 13: 1–9

'Repent or perish': The parable of the fig tree

First Reading Exodus 3: 1–8, 13–15

The Book of Exodus is the second of the group of five books of the Old Testament called the Pentateuch, which form the Jewish Torah. Exodus means 'going forth' and refers to the main event in the book: the flight of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land.

Moses's life parallels that of the Jewish people. He was rejected by the Hebrews, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter as a baby, then banished from Egypt. Now he is reduced to tend a flock of animals in Midian. He has no home to call his own.

Moses's life can be seen as a model for subsequent prophets and for Jesus. He shares people's plight, but through his actions and his words, people develop a close relationship with God.

Horeb, the mountain of God

The same place is also called Sinai and is variously thought to be in the South or in the North-East of the Sinai peninsula. It was probably a sacred place.

A flame of fire coming out of the midst of a bush

Fire, symbolising passion, purity, light, or mystery is often used as an indication of God's presence (e.g. Genesis 5: 17).

Take your sandals off your feet

This is an action which acknowledges being in a holy place. To this day, it is still the practice of Muslims entering a mosque, but it is also what many people do on coming home. Moses is finding his true home.

Moses hid his face

People believed that one could not look at God and live (see Ex. 33: 20).

A land flowing with milk and honey

The milk would be provided by ewes and goats; the honey was in fact grape juice reduced to a sweet fermented syrup. Both of these would seem like Paradise for semi-nomadic groups.



'I Am who I Am'

Much has been said about the origins of this expression, written originally as the four-letter Hebrew Tetragrammaton YHWH, thus making it impossible to pronounce. Later, vowels were added to make the word 'Yahweh', but mindful of the holiness of the word, many translations of the Bible prefer to use the expression 'the Lord'.

Representation of the Tetragrammaton in the church of St Ignazio in the Olivella, Palermo

Jesus is addressing a large crowd and his disciples, including Peter. The passage focuses on the unpredictability of when and how our lives will end, and the need to be prepared through repentance of our sins. The first verses of this chapter occur only in Luke's Gospel.

The Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

There are no historical records of this event, though some think it may refer to an episode recorded by Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian. Galileans were leading a rebellion against Rome, protesting about Temple funds being used to pay for an aqueduct for the town. Pilate ordered his men to attend the Temple in disguise, and at a given signal, they attacked the Jews inside. Others suggest it might refer to the massacre of Samaritans climbing their holy mountain, Mount Gerizim, in 35 AD. Pilate was recalled to Rome to explain his actions. At all events, the episode is in keeping with the character of Pilate as we know it.

Those eighteen on whom the Tower of Siloam fell.

Nothing is known about this event, but clearly it was familiar to Jesus's listeners. Jesus probably refers to one of the towers on the South-East corner of Jerusalem guarding an aqueduct bringing water to the pool of Siloam.

Were they worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

Current belief saw a relationship of cause and effect between sin and punishment, where pain and premature death were seen as signs of God's displeasure. Jesus is keen to refute that idea. Whatever the cause of death, the people did not die because they were sinners; nor do their deaths indicate that.

The parable of the barren fig tree

This parable is designed to give people hope. It is possible to see the landowner as symbolising God; the fig tree as the Jewish people; and the gardener as Jesus.



The fig tree: A common plant in this area. In the Old Testament, it is often seen as a symbol of safety and security (1 Kings 4: 25) or of the people of Israel (Hosea 9: 10, Micah 7: 1).

'Dig round it and manure it': A reprieve for the tree is negotiated. We can see in this a symbol of God's mercy and the fact that we will have help when we endeavour to bear fruit.

Some theologians also see in this parable an example of a favourite idea of Luke in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, that of Christ delaying his return (also called the *Parousia*) in order to give more time for the Gospel to be preached and for people to repent.