

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

#### First Reading: Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 15: 15-20

The Book of Sirach takes its name from its author, Jeshua ben Sira, and is also known as the Book of Ecclesiasticus. It appears in the main sequence of texts in the Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church, though the Protestant tradition places it within the Apocrypha. The text was written in Hebrew by Jeshua, a teacher of the Jewish faith born in Jerusalem c. 180 BC, and translated into Greek by his (unnamed) grandson soon afterwards.

Sirach was given the name Ecclesiasticus ('the Church's book') when it was translated into Latin, since it was so often used in Christian teaching. It is part of the 'Wisdom tradition' in Scripture and consists of a number of wise sayings, rather like the Book of Proverbs. These are mostly in defence of Judaism, its cult, language and culture. The Greek influence was very strong at that time; some Jews had started to speak Greek in their everyday dealings with others. It was a popular book for early Christians who used it as a guide for the moral and religious training of catechumens.

The Greeks believed that people were pawns in the hands of fickle gods, but Sirach is keen to show that God is loving and caring, giving us free will to choose to do good or evil. The commandments are there to provide us with guidelines. Exercising their free will, each individual can choose life (here represented by water) by obeying the Law, or death (here represented by fire) by refusing to do so.

Our all-knowing and almighty, God, out of love for us, nevertheless leaves us free to make our own choices. Contemporary Christians are faced with the



same challenges as the Jews of the time of Sirach. Do we choose life and the values of Christ, or death and secularism?

**Choose life,  
choose Christ!**

## Gospel Matthew 5: 17–37

Matthew continues his first discourse known as 'The Sermon on the Mount'.

### The Law of Moses

This Law was sacred for the Jews. It constituted a summary of all wisdom. It is found in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, also called the Torah. In the time of Jesus, the Scribes and the Pharisees sought to provide detailed explanations of the Law and saw keeping to its every detail as being the only way to perfection.

In this passage, Matthew shows Jesus's position towards the Law in general. He chooses four laws central to rabbinic teaching and outlines how over the years they have been watered down. He then goes to the heart of the Law and focuses on the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

The true disciple will have to go beyond the Law as adapted by the scribes to enter 'the kingdom of heaven'. Having a legalistic attitude – that is, one which equates righteousness, or doing the will of God, with external compliance to a code of conduct – is not enough.

### Murder and Anger

Jesus links murder and anger. One is often the cause of the other. He puts fraternal relations before ritual obligations. It is up to us to seek reconciliation. We must put love – of God, of others, of ourselves – above all things.

### Adultery and divorce

Here again, Jesus goes beyond the contemporary scribal interpretations of divorce and adultery. He is fond of using Aramaic hyperbole, that is, overstating an issue to make a point. The invitation to self-mutilation is not to be taken literally as this practice was forbidden to Jews, a rule which Jesus will have been very aware of.

He is encouraging his disciples to take sexual morality in thoughts and acts very seriously. They should take decisive action to behave with love.

### Oaths

An oath invokes God to attest the truth of one's word, or a promise that one would keep to one's pledge. They were used very frequently in everyday speech. But oaths are not necessary if the disciples are acting out of love; the word of a truthful person is sufficient.