

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

First Reading Wisdom 11: 22– 2: 2

For a general introduction to the book of Wisdom, please refer to the Prego Plus for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C).

The passage we read and pray this week attempts once again to remind the Jews that the whole world, including nature and people, were created by God and so was intrinsically good.

This is a very different world view from Greek beliefs of the time, where many of the gods worshipped were often cruel or unjust. It was a time of a crisis of faith for many Jews as they were exposed to different philosophical systems and a cosmopolitan and sceptical, individualistic mentality.

Our verses come at the end of a section where the author reminds the audience of the way God saved Israel by taking them out of Egypt and punishing the Egyptians. God stood by his people at all times.

God is portrayed as looking at his creation from a great distance with mercy and love. It is because he loves his people that he is able to show patience and forgive the sinner. He knows we can change, as it was he who created us. He knows us intimately.



Far from the fatalistic world view of Greek culture, Jews, who believe they are created and loved by God, can have hope and repent.

'The whole world is like a grain of dust that tips the scales'

Gospel Luke 19: 1–10

The story of Zacchaeus is found only in Luke's Gospel.

The town of Jericho

The story takes place in Jericho, a busy town 30 km east of Jerusalem. It is a custom station for goods coming into the area. Travellers going to Jerusalem pass through Jericho to avoid crossing Samaria, an area known to be unsafe.

We find Jesus on the road by a sycamore tree, a tree with a short trunk and wide lateral branches, easy to climb.

Zacchaeus, the tax collector

Zacchaeus is a tax collector for the Romans, a traitor in the eyes of the Jews. Tax collectors were known for extorting more money than required and keeping the difference. He is a short man clearly used to thinking in terms of numbers: *'half my possessions'*, *'four times as much'*.

Time of the story

There is a sense of urgency about this story; it is to take place *today* – not next week, but today. Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem and his Passion. Luke uses the word 'today' several times in his Gospel at important moments of Jesus's life: notably his birth, his baptism, in the synagogue in Capernaum, at the healing of the paralysed man, twice here, and finally on the cross. This shows how significant the word is.

Theme of the story

The theme of this story is repentance, that is, becoming aware that we have turned away from God and decided to live differently, in accordance with God's will. Here Luke shows us that repentance is achieved not by being preached at, but by being loved and accepted without any preconditions. Experiencing this love brings about in Zacchaeus a change of heart, a new self-understanding.

Zacchaeus, Son of Abraham

Although a Jew by birth – his name means "the righteous one" – Zacchaeus and people like him were considered unclean and impure; rabbis of that time no longer regarded them as descendants of Abraham unless they repented and made restitution.

After meeting with Jesus, not only is Zacchaeus a descendent of Abraham, but because of his faith and righteousness, he can also once again be a spiritual Son of Abraham.

