

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C

First Reading Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 27: 4–7

The Book of Ecclesiasticus is also known by the name of its author, Jeshua ben Sira (or Sirach). It appears in Roman Catholic Bibles, but is found only in the Apocrypha of Protestant Bibles. It was written in Hebrew, by Jeshua, a teacher of the Jewish faith born in Jerusalem around 180 BC, and translated into Greek by his (unnamed) grandson soon afterwards.

The book was given the name Ecclesiasticus when it was translated into Latin: this means 'the Church's book', perhaps to emphasise that it was not recognised by the Jewish authorities. It consists of a number of wise sayings, rather like the Book of Proverbs, 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.



Today's passage encourages its readers to go beyond outward appearances in order to form an opinion about someone.

Scholars have seen links between some of the common sense observations and homely images of the Book of Sirach with parts of the New Testament. There is an

example in today's passage, where the reference to the quality of the fruit growing in the orchard recalls the phrase in today's Gospel: 'every tree can be told by its own fruit' (cf also Matthew 7: 16–20, and Matthew 12: 33).

The rubbish left over in the sieve refers to the way grain was handled at the time: after it had been threshed, it was sieved. What was left was straw, impurities and dung. In the same way, a kiln would show up weakness in the potter's work.

Gospel Luke 6: 39–45

In Luke's Gospel, this week's passage follows on directly from last week. This is the third week when Luke relates Jesus's discourse on how to relate with others, part of the so-called 'Sermon on the Plain'. To do this, Jesus uses three short parables with images familiar to people of the time.

Can one blind man guide another?

The blindness here is as much spiritual as physical. The blind man is the one who ignores the teaching of the previous two weeks, which emphasise changing your attitude towards the poor, loving your enemies, sharing your goods. It is an appeal to lucidity and humility.



The splinter in someone's eyes and the plank in yours

These rather extreme images are typical in Semitic culture when a point needs to be made. Jesus here uses his own knowledge of the world of carpentry.

The warning is not to apply the last fortnight's teaching as relating to others rather than to yourself. It's easier to point and condemn than to effect



changes in your own behaviour. The resulting lack of humility can lead to an inability to see reality as it really is.

No sound tree produces rotten fruit

In Scripture, the tree is a common image for a wise person (as we saw in Palm 1, two weeks ago – see also this week's psalm reflection). It can also represent the people as a whole (Isaiah 5: 3).

The acts of a person reveal their character. The fruit here is what happens when the Sermon on the Plain is put into practice.

A person's words flow out of what fills their heart

The last sentence echoes the words of the First Reading (Ecclesiasticus 27: 4–7): 'Do not praise a person before they have spoken, since this is their test'.