

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

EASTER SUNDAY, YEAR B

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 5: 6–8

Corinth was a bustling, wealthy industrial and shipbuilding centre. It had a cosmopolitan population coming from all parts of the Roman Empire. Even in a world very tolerant of sexual excesses, it had a reputation for debauchery. 'Living like a Corinthian' was a euphemism for living a dissolute life.

The beginning of chapter 5 is concerned with news of an incestuous relationship between a man and his stepmother – and the lack of disapproval from the rest of the community at such a wicked deed.

Jewish custom at that time was to destroy all leaven or yeast (Exodus 12: 15–18) for the Paschal festival, since as only unleavened bread was allowed.



Paul then equates the old yeast with the sins of the incestuous man. Even a small amount of yeast can affect a whole batch of bread, or in this case a whole community, as in Corinth. It is to be discarded.

Paul urges repentance – that is, turning away from wicked ways and turning towards God. To repent is to reject past behaviour; to experience a change of heart and mind.

The unleavened bread made with a new dough then comes to represent the virtuous, sincere and truthful Christian.

It is to be noted that whereas in the Gospels the image of yeast is used as a symbol of dynamism and a contributory factor to the coming of the Kingdom (Luke 13: 20–22), Paul here uses it as an example of the corrupting influence of evil.

Gospel John 20: 1–9

No evangelist describes the actual resurrection, yet it is at the core of our Christian faith. There are slight differences between the accounts of the different gospel writers but John gives the fullest description of events around the resurrection; he has a keen eye for detail.

It was very early in the morning and still dark

The time of day is significant. Throughout John's gospel we find this contrast between light and darkness. The gloom echoes the way Mary feels at the death of her friend Jesus. It could also reflect her lack of understanding of the events which have taken place.

'They have taken the Lord'

Mary assumes that the body has been stolen. Grave robbing was a common crime at the time. Rome had issued an imperial edict against it. Finding an empty tomb was an important factor to prove the resurrection of Jesus to sceptic Jews who would easily dismiss accounts of appearances to the disciples as collective hysteria.

'We don't know ...'

Although only Mary Magdala is mentioned by name here, she was not alone at the tomb. Indeed the other evangelists mention several women by name. (Mary, the mother of James, Salome, Joanna)

Mary is a key witness at the death and resurrection of the Lord. John, always respectful of women – see the account of the Samaritan woman at the well or Martha, Lazarus' sister – gives her a prominent part. The testimony of a woman could easily have been dismissed. However, the testimony of two men was needed in a Jewish court of law to verify an event.

Peter and the 'beloved' disciple

Tradition once maintained that the anonymous 'Beloved Disciple' of St John's Gospel was John, son of Zebedee. However, most scholars now agree that he was in fact more than simply a historical person in the life of Jesus. Instead, he may be seen as symbolising the role that every faithful disciple, including ourselves, can play in the life of the Church. Here he reacts slightly differently from the impulsive Peter who goes straight into the tomb: it is the Beloved Disciple who actually gets there first, and who first believes in the resurrection of Jesus.

Peter bent down into the tomb

Despite the way in which artists over the centuries have depicted the empty tomb, archaeological research shows that, at the time, a 3-foot tall entrance led into cave-like tombs.

The linen cloths

John gives a very specific account of the position and state of the linen cloths. The carefully folded linens attest to the fact that the body has not been stolen or spirited away.