

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

First Reading Exodus 19: 2–6

The Book of Exodus is central to the understanding of the history and religion of the Israelite people. It can be seen as a religious epic: it has sound historical facts, but these are often embellished with an ‘epic tone’. The result is to assert the greatness of God and to focus on the people of Israel.

The book as it has come to us today was probably written in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, but the actual Exodus of the Israelites from the tyranny of the Pharaohs in Egypt and their subsequent crossing of the desert dates from c. 1280 BC.

Today’s passage follows on from the flight from Egypt (Chapters 1–15) and the crossing of the desert (16–18). The Israelites are now encamped at the



foot of the ‘Mountain of God,’ traditionally held to be Jabal Mūsá (‘Mountain of Moses’) or Mount Sinai at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula. Nearly 8,000 feet high, it would take roughly an hour and a half for Moses to climb it. Sinai is a pivotal place in the history of the Jews. It is where Moses encounters God and

acts as a messenger to the people; where the Ten Commandments are given (Ch. 20); and where the Covenant is formulated (Ch. 20–23).

God is not addressing every person on earth, but a specific group of people: the ‘House of Jacob’, the people of Israel with whom he already has a relationship. He reminds them of what he did for them, both literally – the flight from Egypt; and metaphorically – supporting them and carrying them on eagle’s wings.

The people must decide whether to obey God and his commandments (described in the next chapter), thereby becoming a nation, God’s own people. Indeed, they will be a ‘holy nation’: a nation set apart for a particular purpose. In telling them that all the earth is his, God reminds them that his rule extends beyond people to the whole of creation.

Gospel Matthew 9: 36–10: 8

This week’s passage introduces the central section of St Matthew’s Gospel. After many healing miracles, Jesus now commissions his disciples to do as he did – that is to proclaim the Word of God and heal the spiritually and physically sick.

He had compassion for them

The Greek word used here indicates a sensation felt in the pit of one’s stomach, in one’s guts, believed to be the seat of the emotions. It is a very strong word.

They were like sheep without a shepherd

The image of the leader as a shepherd is found several times in the Old Testament (see Numbers 27: 17, 1 Kings 22: 17, Ezekiel 34: 5). It refers to both political and religious leadership.

The harvest is plentiful

Matthew also uses this image for describing the Final Judgement (Matthew 13: 30 and 13: 39). Here the problem of the absence of labourers is turned into an opportunity. Jesus summons his disciples.

He gave them authority over unclean spirits

Unclean spirits were blamed for mental and physical diseases. Having authority over them enables the disciples to perform healings.

The names of the twelve Apostles

This is the first time that Matthew calls them apostles. The term in Greek means being sent out. There are twelve of them, a reminder of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The assumption is that they have been called earlier, although Matthew only describes the call of four of them (4: 18–22).

Apart from a few minor changes, they are the same people whom Mark (3: 16–19) and Luke (6: 14–16) mention in their Gospels.

They are very different people: Jews and Greeks; Matthew, a tax collector who fraternised with Rome; wealthy fishermen (James and John have their own business); and poor fishermen (Simon and Andrew); an ultra-nationalist revolutionary (Simon the Zealot); and Judas Iscariot, whose surname is thought to be a corruption of an Aramaic word meaning liar or deceiver. There are two pairs of brothers.

This disparate group transcends the tensions found in Israelite society of the time. All are welcome, even political enemies.

‘Go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.’

In the first instance they, like Jesus, are to stay in the region. It is only after the Resurrection that Jesus will send them out to all nations.