

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

Second Reading Hebrews 12: 1–4

Hebrews is not really a letter in the conventional sense of the word. It is an exhortation, possibly a written sermon, with an ending that reads like a letter. It is not addressed to any particular church and does not seek to solve a specific problem or issue. Its audience is Jewish Christians, probably living in difficult times soon after the destruction of the Temple c.70 BC. They faced potential dangers from both the civil authorities and traditional Jews. With the destruction of the Temple, they have lost their bearings, and need reassurance.

Although Hebrews is always grouped with the letters of St Paul, theologians are now convinced that it was not written by him. Style, vocabulary, composition and other technical features all suggest a Greek-Jewish Christian, conversant with Hellenistic rhetoric and philosophy. Nevertheless, the inspired quality of the letter has always been accepted.

In today's verses, the author mentions the '*great cloud of witnesses*' who are there to support us. In the previous chapter (Ch. 11), he gives examples of these witnesses: the great figures in the books of Genesis and Exodus (such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah), who acted on their faith in God, and did his will. Then there those witnesses who relied on God's promises for the future, including those who crossed the Red Sea.

With this group of supporters who have gone before, it will be easier for us to run the '*race that is set before us*', especially if we keep our eyes on Jesus who is '*the founder and perfecter of our faith*'. This image of the race is also found in Paul's letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9: 24–27) and to the Philippians (Phil. 3: 14).



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Gospel Luke 12: 49–53



These few verses towards the end of Chapter 12 make for uncomfortable reading.

'I came to cast fire to the earth'

Fire is one of the four basic elements, together with water, soil, and air. It has many different meanings in the Bible, and can represent:

- *Judgement* as in Elijah's call against the priests of Baal (1Kings 18: 38–40)
- *Purification* as silver or gold are purified through fire (Zechariah 13:9)
- *The presence of God* as in the burning bush (Exodus 3: 2); and the tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2: 1–4)
- *A source of warmth and light* in the cold night (Luke 22: 55)
- *The sign of the last days* (2 Peter 3: 10).

'There is a baptism I must still receive'

Jesus here appears to be referring to his passion and death on the cross.

Both baptism and fire here recall John the Baptist's prediction: 'He [Christ] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16) with the difference here that Jesus is applying this to himself.

Not peace, but division

At the time of writing, Luke is facing the local situation where many divisions are already present. In a society where the individual defined themselves in terms of their place in the extended family, being a follower of Christ would indeed be a source of division ... so effectively leading to losing your place in society.

We are reminded of Simeon's prediction at the Presentation: this child 'is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is rejected' (Luke 2: 34).

Jesus challenges people: following him is not a bland choice. It shapes our values and priorities, and these changes may cause significant conflicts in our relationships within the family.

Going beyond the immediate family unit and looking at the extended Christian family, Jesus's statements have proved correct; divisions among Christians have given birth over the centuries to different Christian denominations.



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