

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

Psalm 137 (138)

Psalm 137 (138) is an individual hymn of thanksgiving. A single voice praises God directly. In the first two stanzas, we find the pronoun 'you' six times.



The Hebrew word "Hesed", often translated by 'steadfast love', here appears as 'merciful love and faithfulness'. It indicates a love that knows no bounds. It is found many times in the Old Testament, particularly in the psalms, and is connected to the Covenant relationship between God and his people: 'I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God' (Exodus 6: 7).

We do not know the reasons for the psalmist giving thanks. Although he says 'on the day I called', the Hebrew word used could also mean 'whenever I called', so it may refer to a number of occasions. But what matters is that God was faithful and always answered the psalmist's call.

Jesus will have prayed this psalm many times, and phrases like '*And not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground apart from your Father*' (Matthew 10: 19) echo the meaning of verse 6: '*The Lord is high yet he looks on the lowly*'.

Gospel Luke 11: 1–4, 9–13

This week's passage includes Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, together with other reflections on prayer. (Matthew's version of the Our Father is more familiar to us: it is slightly longer than Luke's, with seven petitions rather than Luke's five).

Jesus was praying in a certain place

Luke often shows Jesus at prayer, with some instances exclusive to his Gospel: Jesus prays at his baptism (3: 21); on the night before calling the Twelve (6: 12); before he asks the disciples, 'Who do the crowds [you] say that I am?' (9: 18); and on the mountain before the Transfiguration (9: 28–29).

In today's passage, Jesus is praying himself when the disciples ask him to teach them to pray. (11: 1)

'Teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'

The disciples felt the need to have a distinctive prayer which would single them out as followers of Jesus. It is to be a communal prayer ('Teach us to pray'). Biblical scholars tend to think that this prayer is based on existing Jewish prayers. Luke is writing for Gentile Christians, who need encouragement to persevere in their knowledge of God. Jesus tells them not *what* to pray for but *how* to pray.

'Father, hallowed be your name ...'

By addressing God as Father, Jesus shows a close, intimate, personal relationship with God.

'Give us each day our daily bread'

Much has been written about the use and meaning of 'daily' (though the meaning of the original Greek is unclear). Mention of bread as the basic dietary staple shows concern for our physical needs. However, many also see in it an allusion to the Eucharist, thus sustaining our spiritual needs too.

'Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive ...'

Use of the present tense indicates a continual action. It does not refer to one incident; rather it is to be a lifestyle choice.

'Ask, seek, knock ...'

The next story concerns petitionary prayer and is not directly connected to the Lord's Prayer. No particular group is specifically mentioned, so there is a note of universality: anyone who asks will receive.

A scorpion

Palestinian scorpions are black, and could in no way be mistaken for an egg.

'If you then, who are evil, know how ...'

The 'you' here is intended to mean every person in general, not just the present audience. God as our Father will do even more than most loving parent would do. He will give the Holy Spirit 'to those who ask him'.