

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A

Psalm 102 (103)

This psalm is a song of thanksgiving for God's love and forgiveness for us all. It helps to negate the old division sometimes made between the Old and the New Testaments: the first supposedly being centred on fear; the second on love.

As is usual in this type of psalm, the author starts with an introduction of thanks to the Lord and then gives reasons for his gratitude. For this he uses a series of verbs in close succession: *forgives, heals, redeems, crowns*.

When the psalmist addresses his 'soul', he means his 'inner being': what keeps him alive.

At first the psalmist speaks in his own name (*My soul*), then addresses the rest of the people present who pray with him (*he crowns you with love and compassion*). Through him, the whole people of Israel give thanks.

God's greatest expression of his love for us all is his mercy and forgiveness despite our faults (*he forgives all our guilt*).

The psalmist goes beyond thanksgiving for the blessings he has personally received and also includes the whole of creation '*as far as the east is from the west*'.

God loves all who '*fear him*'. The Hebrew word translated here by '*fear*' does not have the modern implication of anxiety, apprehension, and alarm at possible punishment. Rather it denotes awe, reverent respect, honour and obedience to the Lord's will.



The phrase '*The Lord is compassion and love*', often repeated throughout the Psalter, and today forming the response to the psalm, echoes the words of the Lord on Mount Sinai in the presence of Moses (Exodus 34:6). It describes the psalmist's understanding of the nature of God.

Gospel Matthew 18: 21–35

We continue Matthew's 'Sermon on the Church', with a passage that starts with Peter's question to Jesus on forgiveness.

'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother...?'

When Peter asked this, he would have thought that to forgive someone as many as seven times was generous; seven was seen as a symbol of completeness. Indeed, Rabbis of the time taught that to forgive three times was sufficient. Biblical proof for this was taken from the opening chapters of the book of the Prophet Amos in the Old Testament.

'Seventy seven times seven.'

Jesus replies to Peter, also using the symbolism of numbers: he indicates that forgiveness must be without limit. He multiplies Peter's seven, a symbol of completeness, by ten, a number seen as a symbol of infinity.

The real meaning of forgiveness.

Jesus teaches the people that their attitude towards forgiveness is at fault, using a parable that forms one of the sternest and most challenging passages in the Gospels. The parable of the unforgiving debtor has been referred to as a dramatisation of the fifth beatitude: ***Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them*** (Matthew 5: 7).

The debt that could never be repaid.

One of the most important points in the story is the significant contrast between the two debts. The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents, a talent being the equivalent of 15 years wages. This huge debt was more than the total budget of an ordinary province. The total revenue of the province which contained Idumaea, Judaea and Samaria was only 600 talents, whereas the total revenue of a wealthy province like Galilee was only 300 talents. This first servant was himself owed 100 denarii, a denarius being a day's wage; a fraction of the debt which had caused him to beg for mercy.

'Were you not bound, then, to have pity on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?'

The king was an Oriental despot. To take a man's family in lieu of his debt was common practice, especially among the pagans. Tyrants, particularly in the Orient, made use of torture to extract confessions or to force the victim's family into paying the debt.

Regardless of this, we see that the king, in his pity for the servant cancels the entire debt and expects the forgiven one to do the same.