

**PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES**  
**TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B**

**Psalms 18 (19): 7–8, 11–13**

Psalms 18 (19) is composed of two parts, and consists of private prayers, rather than prayers for public assemblies. The first six verses speak of ‘the glory of God’ in the heavens, while today’s section is taken from the second part, which describes the beauty of ‘the law of the Lord’.

C. S. Lewis called it the ‘greatest poem in the Psalter, and one of the greatest lyrics in the world’ (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 1986).

It is one of several psalms that celebrate fulfilment of the law, and it also offers us an invitation to lead a life directed by God’s teaching. These psalms of the law are joyful psalms, for obedience to the law is a joyful response in love to a gift given in love.



The law is no burden, but rather a pleasure and privilege that gives us life. It is not to be seen as a legal document about moral law; more as an ‘instruction’, speaking of God’s will for us.

The law speaks directly to us, and through it, ‘God’ (as he is called in the opening verse of the psalm) comes to be known not just through the vast universe he has created, but more personally to us as ‘the Lord’ (as in today’s verses).

Several synonyms are used for the law: rule, decrees, precepts, and fear (which in the Old Testament means respect, trust and awe). The Law given to Israel on Sinai is not constricting but liberating, for it shows how Israel – and we ourselves – may live as God’s people.

**Gospel Mark 9: 38–43, 45, 47–48**

Jesus is moving from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. He has just told his disciples about his forthcoming Passion for the second time, yet again he is met with total misunderstanding. The disciples have been trying to cast out demons but have failed to do so. (Mark 9: 14–19) Casting out evil spirits is a central theme of Mark’s Gospel; in fact, it was Jesus’s first public act. (Mark 1: 21–28)

**‘We saw a man casting out devils in your name’**

• *Casting out devils*

In this pre-scientific age, the diseases people feared most were blindness, lameness and leprosy. It can be compared to the way people nowadays fear cancer or dementia. They believed that sins, demons, and evil spirits caused diseases, and demon possessions seem to be what today’s medical knowledge would group under the heading of mental illness or emotional disturbances.

• *In your name*

For the people of the time, using someone’s name was to tap into their power. It implied a relationship between the two people.

**‘You must not stop him ...’**

God works through all people, whether they follow him or not. This no doubt accounted for the rapid spread of Christianity: everyone is welcome.

**‘Anyone who is an obstacle ...’**

There follows a series of Aramaic sayings that ought not to be taken literally. This powerful language is fond of striking exaggerations to put a point across. It also indicates the strength of feeling of the speaker.

**Hands, foot, eyes**

These parts of our body are the instruments of our sinfulness, doing what our hearts and mind command them to do. On another level, they can be seen as representing the whole body, that is the early Christian community – seen also in St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 12).

**Being thrown into hell**

This passage is one of the major texts dealing with hell in Mark’s Gospel. The Greek word is Gehenna, based on the Hinnon valley, a rubbish dump outside Jerusalem where refuse was burnt constantly (see 2 Kings 23: 10). It was also said to be the place where child sacrifice took place. It is a physical, tangible reminder of eternal punishment.

**‘Their worm does not die, nor their fire go out.’**

This image refers to the decaying of the body. This description of hell is taken from a passage in Isaiah. (Isaiah 66:24)