

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

Psalm 125 (126)

Today's psalm is one of the 15 'Psalms of Ascent' (Psalms 119–133, or 120–134 in Hebrew numbering). They are associated with going up to Jerusalem on the great Jewish festivals, and all have a confidence in the Lord's help and protection. We can imagine them sung as songs of joy by groups of pilgrims making this special journey.

These 15 psalms are also sometimes known as the Gradual Psalms, from the Latin word *gradus* (step), which probably suggests the 15 steps leading up to the inner sanctuary of the temple in Jerusalem. The rhythm of the verses, with repeated lines across stanzas (such as 'deliver us from bondage'), may even accentuate the feeling of walking uphill or climbing steps.

Reading the psalm aloud enables us to sense the pattern of the stanzas. They work in pairs: three strong accents in the first line, and two in the second. This is particularly evident in the last stanza:

'They go out/ they go out/ full of tears.

Carrying seeds / for the sowing.'

The first part of today's psalm is full of joy and carefree laughter. It celebrates the release of the Jewish people by King Cyrus of Persia from their exile in Babylon.

After 70 years of captivity, this must truly have 'seemed like a dream'; a 'marvel' worked by the Lord.

Stanza 3, however, is more sober and realistic, where the psalmist prays for continuing deliverance from bondage. Many Jews were still in Babylon, or scattered around the Mediterranean, and their exile would not truly end until all have been reunited. Even so, the people of God can still look forward to the singing at the time of reaping: joy will still come, even if at first life is difficult.

As Christians we can find strong images of the Resurrection and eternal life in this psalm. Stanza 4 may even remind us of Jesus's own words in John 12: 24: 'Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.'



Gospel Mark 10: 46–52

Two stories about curing a blind person act as 'book ends' to the section in Mark's Gospel concerning discipleship: the cure of a blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8: 22–26); and the healing of Bartimaeus, which we read today. Jewish people expected the Messiah to heal blindness as promised by Isaiah (Isaiah 29: 18 and 35: 5). In between, Jesus tells his disciples about his forthcoming Passion three times (Mark 8: 31, 9: 31, 10: 33), but each time he is met with incomprehension. It is possible to see a parallel between the physical blindness of Bartimaeus and the blind person in Bethsaida with the spiritual blindness of the disciples.

Today's story ends this section, and is a prelude to Jesus's Messianic entry into Jerusalem.

Jericho

A Judean city about 18 miles north east of Jerusalem, in the Jordan valley, some 750 feet below sea level.

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting at the side of the road

Being blind, a common illness at the time of Jesus, excluded a person from 'normal' society. His position at the side of the road reflects his position in society.

He began to shout: 'Son of David ...'

In Mark's Gospel, crying out usually occurs in connection with a recognition of Jesus's true identity. It is the first time that a 'sane' person acknowledges who Jesus is. Being Son of David made Jesus heir to the promise made to David (2 Samuel 7: 12–16) to reign over Israel for ever. During Roman occupation, this was a politically dangerous statement to make, and might account for the crowd trying to silence him.

Bartimaeus's cloak

This was probably his only possession, used to collect the few coins people were giving him.

'What do you want me to do for you?'

This is the same question that Jesus asked James and John (see last week's Gospel). There is a clear contrast between the disciples seeking positions of honour and the humble request of the beggar.

Your faith has saved you

In Bartimaeus's willingness to brave social disapproval, Jesus recognises the depth of the beggar's faith. With hindsight, we know that the road he takes leads to Jerusalem and the cross.