

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – YEAR A

Second Reading 1 Peter 2: 4–9

For the past five weeks, we have been reading and praying this first letter of Peter. It was written to Gentile Christians living in different parts of Asia Minor to console and strengthen them as they faced opposition and trials in a hostile cultural environment. Their difficulties came both from the resistance of traditional Jews, and from civil pressures from a government that had come to tolerate the Jewish people, but could not cope with a new religious group. Opinion as to the authorship of the letter is divided. It was written either after Peter's death, by someone using his name in homage to the great apostle (common practice at the time) or by Sylvanus (see 1 Peter 5: 12), a companion of Paul who acted as his secretary. Come what may, the Church recognises in this letter a document of inspired writing celebrating our Christian heritage.

The main topic throughout the letter is the nature of Christian life and the best way for Christians to behave amidst persecution and abuse from pagan neighbours.



In this week's passage, the main image is that of stones. At the time, it may have brought to mind the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the large stones of the pillars lying on the ground. For us, too, there is an immediate association: the Church is not just a stone building. It is a spiritual space, a *'spiritual house'*, with Jesus Christ as its base or *'keystone'*. Each Christian is a *'living stone'* brought to life by their baptism. The stone imagery is all

inclusive: rocks come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, colours, strengths or brittleness, so they represent all of us.

The emphasis on *one race, priesthood and nation* unifies the different groups of Gentiles to whom this letter is addressed. Their allegiance to the Lord transcends their disparity.

The unbelievers who stumble over the stones and remain in darkness, are probably the Jews who have not accepted Christ. The community of early Christians which this letter is seeking to comfort have been *'called to his wonderful light'*.

Gospel John 14: 1–12 ('I am the way, the truth, the life')

This passage belongs to the farewell discourses of Jesus.

The ancient world paid great attention to people's final words. They stress the most important things we should remember about the one who is near death, and they also look to the future. In the Old Testament, we find them when Jacob blesses his sons (Genesis 49); before the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 32); and in King David's farewell to his son Solomon (1 Kings 2).

Do not let your hearts be troubled, trust in God

Jesus is reassuring the disciples. The way to reduce worry is to trust in God and have faith. John is writing for first-century Christians who were often persecuted.

Many rooms in my Father's house

The 'Father's house' is often understood by scholars as a synonym for heaven, though others focus on the more generic meaning of house – i.e. not a building, but a group of people belonging to an extended family. They see it as a symbol of the intimate relationship between God the Father and Jesus, in which we can all have a share. Whoever is with God is in his 'house', and there is room for all.

The Last Supper takes place on the night before Passover and the language is reminiscent of Moses addressing the tribes of Israel in the land of Moab, beyond the Jordan (Deuteronomy 1: 29, 33).

I am the way, the truth and the life

The previous 'I am' statements in John's Gospel (4: 26; 6: 20) show clear parallels with the Old Testament revelation formulas (Exodus 3: 6, 14 and 20: 2). Here, Jesus elaborates and gives a fuller explanation of who he is.

The Way

This can be seen as an actual road or path, but also as a means of getting somewhere. If Jesus is the Way, 'knowing the way' is to know Jesus and through him to know the Father. There are no intermediaries.

It is also possible that the Way is used in opposition to the Law, which the Jews believed to be the only way to God.

Philip: 'Let us see the Father'

Jews believed that one could not see the face of God and live (Exodus 33: 18–23), so Philip's request is truly amazing. So too is Jesus's answer, which also refers to John's prologue: Jesus is the Word of God, made flesh, and dwelling amongst us. Jesus is not only talking to Philip but also to all the disciples; to us.

It is difficult in an English translation to make a difference between 'you' meaning one person and 'you' meaning a group of people. The different forms of 'you' are interwoven throughout his reply.



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