

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR A

Second Reading 2 Timothy 1: 8–10

The letters to Timothy and to Titus are called ‘pastoral letters’. Though they are the only ones addressed to an individual in charge of a local church, they are clearly meant for the whole community.

Today’s letter is most likely written by a disciple of Paul, using his style. However, uncertainty about the authorship should not ‘obscure the power of this letter read simply as it is presented. It is an eloquently passionate appeal of the greatest Christian apostle that his work continue beyond his death through generations of disciples’. (Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*).

Timothy was one of Paul’s most trusted companions. He was often sent on delicate missions. The son of a Greek father and a Jewish Christian mother, Timothy was a native of Lystra in central Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), and Paul took him as an associate when he passed through Lystra on his second missionary journey.

Being a witness to the Good News involves hardship, and the reader is invited to bear this hardship as Paul has done. These verses reflect one of the central tenets of Paul’s teaching: God’s salvation is a free gift. Jesus abolished death, both physical and spiritual.

Gospel Matthew 17: 1–9 (The Transfiguration)

The account of this remarkable event is read on the Second Sunday of Lent in the Roman Catholic Church, and on the Sunday before Lent in other traditions. It is also recalled at the Feast of the Transfiguration on 6 August. It takes place immediately after Jesus tells his disciples that his ministry will end in rejection and death. The ‘mountain’ is a significant location for Matthew, and a place where Jesus would often go to pray.

Up a high mountain by themselves



It was traditionally held from the time of Origen (3rd c. AD) that the Transfiguration took place on Mount Tabor (1886 feet high), though other traditions favour Mount Hermon (pictured), 14 miles from Caesarea Philippi (9,400 ft high and 11,000 ft above the level of the Jordan Valley). Hermon is so high that it can be seen from the Dead Sea at the other end of Palestine, more than 100 miles away.

The meaning of the ‘high mountain’ is nevertheless theological rather than geographical. We are reminded of God’s revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24: 12–18) and also to Elijah (1 Kings 19: 8–18) where Mount Horeb (or Sinai) is referred to as the mountain of God. Most of all this is a place of prayer where God reveals himself.

There appeared to them Moses and Elijah

Moses, the great law-giver of the people of Israel, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, represent the totality of the Old Testament. Their presence indicates that the purpose of the Law and the Prophets, in preparing for Christ, is now being fulfilled. According to biblical tradition, both men were taken up into heaven.

‘Lord, it is good that we are here ... I will make three tents’

When Peter spoke of the tents he wanted to make, he was alluding to the annual Jewish feast of Succoth. Originally this was an agricultural feast that commemorated the Israelites making little huts in order to spend the night in the fields during harvest. It was one of their most joyous feasts. Peter was comparing the joy he was experiencing on the mountain with the most joyful scene he could imagine.

A bright cloud overshadowed them

The cloud or ‘Shekinah’ is familiar to believing Jews as nothing less than the saving presence of God. A pillar of cloud led the Jews out of Egypt (Exodus 13: 21–2), and it was in a cloud that God gave the tablets of the Law to Moses (Exodus 34: 5). Throughout Israel’s history, there is mention of the cloud as a sign of the mysterious glory of God.

A voice from the cloud

Like the Israelites of old, the disciples are terrified as they see and hear these manifestations of the presence of God. They hear Jesus once again identified as God’s beloved Son, as at the time of his Baptism. This time, however, they are told to ‘listen to him’, a reference to Deuteronomy 18: 15.