

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

#### Psalm 17 (18)

This week's responsorial psalm includes the first and the last verses of a much longer psalm of thanksgiving from a king, generally thought to be David.

The same text also occurs, with a few minor variations, in the Second Book of Samuel, Ch. 22. David sang it to the Lord when he 'had delivered him from all his enemies and from the hands of Saul' (2 Samuel 22: 1).

It is also possible to see a symbolic meaning in this psalm. Here the great victories given to the king are not historical ones, but represent the final end-of-time eschatological victory of 'his anointed', the Messiah so anxiously awaited by the Jews. The Messiah will come, conquer evil and save us from our 'foes'. Today, of course, we recognise Jesus Christ in this Messiah.

The psalm begins with a very personal affirmation of the psalmist's love for the Lord. The word used here in Hebrew is a very tender one, showing compassion. Its root is related to the word for 'womb' and is often used for the love of a mother for her children. It stresses the vulnerability of the person praying, who relies on the strength and protection of their Lord.

In the last stanza, however, the word used for love is different. It is a word often translated as *faithful love*; it expresses a bond between two people. In the New Testament, it is used to represent the love between the Father and the Son. In turn, it is that same love which unites Father and Son to their followers.



## Gospel Mark 12: 28–34

In the lead-up to this event, the Sadducees had questioned Jesus on Jewish law in order to test him, whereas the scribe approached Jesus in good will. The scribes and Sadducees differed greatly in their beliefs.

#### **Which is the first of all the commandments?**

It was a scribe's job to interpret the law, and the vital question he posed was one often debated among scholars of the day. There were no fewer than 613 commandments in the Torah, and it was common for scribes to attempt to combine them into one overriding command that would summarise them all. Others thought this approach was dangerous, and that each small detail of the law was equally binding.

#### **The Lord our God is the one Lord, you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.**

Jesus responded by quoting from the *Shema*, for in this way his listeners would know that he did not come to reject Judaism, but rather to fulfil it. The *Shema* is the central prayer of the Jews, consisting of three biblical passages: Deuteronomy 6: 4–9, 11: 13–21; and Numbers 15: 37–41. To this day, devout Jews recite the *Shema* every morning and evening. This statement was understood to mean that Yahweh was not only the God of the Jews, but of the Universe.

Jesus details the four ways we are to show our love for God: this involves every aspect of our being.

Our heart (*kardia*): the inner depths of a person;

our soul (*psychē*): the whole self;

our mind: our thoughts and reasoning;

our strength: a commitment that will take all our energy.

#### **You must love your neighbour as yourself.**

#### **There is no commandment greater than these.**

Jesus completes his answer by again quoting from the Old Testament (Leviticus 19: 18).

Although in its original context 'neighbour' meant one's fellow Israelite, elsewhere Jesus makes it clear that our love must extend to everyone (Matthew 5: 43–44; Luke 10: 29–37).

The rest of the law is fulfilled by the first two commandments (Romans 13: 8–10; James 2: 8).

#### **This is more important than any holocaust or sacrifice.**

The scribe replies by quoting Deuteronomy 4: 39, agreeing with all that Jesus has said. He then adds a comment echoing 1 Samuel 15: 22: loving God and one's neighbours can be done anywhere, whereas burnt offerings could only be done in the Temple in Jerusalem.