

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

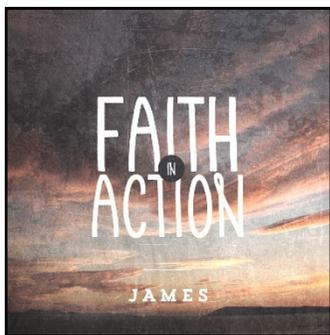
#### Second Reading James 2: 14–18

These verses lie at the heart of the Letter of James, which we continue to read and pray. They provide a theoretical basis for the author's practical advice. So far, James has been focusing on the importance of a practical religion – one that doesn't simply follow rules and regulations, but is governed by faith. Here he develops the need for faith to be combined with works.

To do this he uses the Semitic rhetorical device of exaggeration, reminding his audience of the importance of hospitality and charity. Faith is a re-orientation of all aspects of our lives.

Anyone who claims that they have faith but does not do good works to back it up, is deceiving themselves. That sort of faith is a dead faith.

Good works, as today's example shows, is to follow God's will in all aspects of our lives. Even when it appears that good deeds have been done without faith, a close look will quickly reveal that faith in fact underpins those good works.



The contrast is not so much between faith on its own and faith as shown in good deeds, as between a dead faith and a living faith.

James is here echoing Old Testament teachings, which demand that all should support the poor (Deuteronomy 15: 7). Similarly, sacrifices and burnt offerings are of no value if those making them do not

also care for the underprivileged (Isaiah 1: 11–13, 17–18).

The New Testament sees Christ in the needy (Matthew 25: 31–46), thus supporting James's 'practical Christianity' approach.

#### Gospel Mark 8: 27–35

The verses we read this week mark a turning point in St Mark's Gospel. Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Christ is the climax of the first eight chapters, and the theme of the suffering Messiah is now introduced with Jesus's first prediction of his Passion.

#### Caesarea Philippi

This small town is situated about 25 miles North East of the Lake of Galilee. The ancient town of Paneas was rebuilt by Philip the Tetrarch and renamed in honour of Caesar, the Roman emperor. It is called Philippi as opposed to Caesarea Maritima, which is by the sea.

#### Who do people say I am?

The disciples' answer puts Jesus at the centre of the prophetic tradition. Elijah was expected to come back (Malachi 4:5). The people see Jesus as an esteemed spiritual leader.

#### Who do you say I am?

Peter's answer is variously translated as 'the Christ' or 'the Messiah'. The word means the 'anointed one'. A messiah, who would establish God's reign and be a royal figure, had long been expected by the people. However, the following verses show that Peter had not fully appreciated the kind of Messiah that Jesus was.

#### The Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously

'Son of Man' is the way Jesus defines himself; a term taken from the prophet Daniel (7:13). Each time, the disciples fail truly to understand what he is saying.

#### To be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes.

The Pharisees are not mentioned. In Mark's Gospel they take no explicit part in Jesus's downfall.

#### He said all this quite openly

Up to now Jesus had always asked his disciples to keep silent regarding who he is.

#### Let him take up his cross and follow me.

This is the first time that the cross is mentioned in this Gospel. Some scholars think that the saying is not to be taken literally. The sign of the cross was a Hebrew sign indicating that a person belonged to God (Ezekiel 9: 4–6). Others see in this image a symbol of submission to divine authority, in the same way that crucified Roman criminals submitted to Rome's authority.

#### Anyone who loses his life for my sake

Jesus is not encouraging suffering for its own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel. The self-denial advocated here is more than the small sacrifices one might make during Lent (no biscuits or chocolate etc.) It is about living for others rather than at the expense of others. The true disciple must put God's values and not human values first. It was because Peter failed to appreciate this that Jesus rebuked him.

