

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
YEAR A

### Second Reading 1 Thessalonians 1: 1–5

As from today, we shall be reading Paul's letter to the Thessalonians for five consecutive weeks.

It is believed that this is the first of Paul's letters and the earliest document of the New Testament: it has the status of the oldest existing Christian document. It is placed later in Paul's collection of letters within the New Testament since they are presented in order of length.

The assembly of Christians to whom this letter is addressed was located in the port city of Thessalonica in Macedonia, the modern city of Thessalonike in northern Greece. It was apparently almost entirely a Gentile congregation who would have gathered in their homes for worship, since no churches were built this early. It is likely that the letter was sent from Athens or Corinth about the year AD 51.

Acts 17: 1–9, written about thirty to thirty five years later (after Paul's death), outlines how Paul came to found the church in Thessalonica and the difficulties encountered there. In the past, 1 Thessalonians has been interpreted in the light of Acts, which differs from Paul's account. But since 1 Thessalonians is a first-hand document written by Paul himself, who was present at the time, and Acts is an historical work, it is now accepted that Paul's account can be read on its own merits.

Paul had still to establish his epistolary style in writing to the Thessalonians at this time: indeed, he was communicating in a new way via the Christian letter. Here its form takes the order Introduction, Sender, Recipient, Greeting, Thanksgiving, Instructions, Conclusion, Prayer, Greeting and Blessing. This would change slightly in later letters.

In these earlier writings, Paul's emphasis is on the coming of the Lord at the end of time. This was a major concern for the Thessalonians who expected this event to occur in their own lifetime. In later writings, Paul stresses the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.



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## Gospel Matthew 22: 15–21

The Pharisees have been the target of Jesus's previous teachings, and are keen to keep to the truce they have reached with Rome which allows them to practise their religion freely. In this passage they seek unlikely allies in the Herodians to try and entrap Jesus.

### The Herodians

As their name implies, they are supporters of the dynasty of Herod, the puppet kings Rome has appointed to rule Galilee. They are absolutely loyal to Rome.

### The Trap: 'Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'

This is a no-win question. If Jesus says yes, he loses popular support; if he says no, he gives the Pharisees grounds to have him arrested as a revolutionary.

### The taxes

A census tax had been collected since the year 6 AD, paid by men and women between the ages of 14 and 65. Paying one's taxes was a kind of tribute to Rome.

### One denarius

This was the Roman currency, worth about a day's wages. Striking your own money was a sign of sovereignty over a people and the Romans attached great importance to this symbol. Other currencies were in circulation at the time, but only with Roman permission.

### 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God'

Jesus defuses the debate by this answer. There is no doubt that the coins belong to Caesar: his face is on them, but then what belongs to God?

The Jews will have been familiar with phrases like *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it* (Psalm 24: 1).



Over the years, the disciples came to understand the necessity and the rationale of dealing with civil authorities and with the authority of God (Romans 13: 1–7 and 1 Peter 2: 13–17).