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Sunday Mass Notes for 04-24-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the earliest history about the church, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, relating their ministry in the very first weeks of the newly created Church after Pentecost and the Holy Spirit's descent upon those earliest believers. The second reading is from the very latest book of the New Testament, the Revelation of Jesus as given to the last of the apostles, John. John records the vision he received of the Lord Jesus, which serves both as a warning to the Church of Jesus Christ and as an introduction to the revelation of the final events in earthly history and into eternity. The Gospel reading, interestingly enough, is from the same author who recorded the Revelation. The chapter in this week's assignment includes the miraculous appearance of Jesus and significant teaching about faith and believing in Him.

Introduction to the First Reading:

By the fifth chapter of Acts the early Christians (and the number had grown to the thousands, Acts 2:41, 47) were demonstrating the love that Jesus said would be the mark of His disciples (John

13:34). They met together for worship, and they gave generously to the needs of others in the Christian family. Today's reading tells of the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit working through His chosen people.

First Reading:

Acts 5:12-16 NAS95 12 At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. 13 But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. 14 And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number, 15 to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. 16 Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

"Signs and wonders" were miraculous events that not only brought healing to many, but, more importantly, served to authenticate the authority of the apostles, those who were sent by God to do His work and to lay a foundation for the establishing of His church on earth, the body of called-out believers (that's what the New Testament word for church means). The early Christians "were all with one accord" meeting near the Temple. Jesus had prayed (John 17) that His followers would be united, would be as one as He and the Father are. Nothing has hurt the image of the church so much as its disunity over the centuries of its history and even today.

Verse 13 is perplexing. Perhaps it suggests that non-believers did not associate with believers, though they highly respected them. Maybe they knew about the couple, earlier in chapter 5, who tried to deceive the apostles, claiming to give the gains from the sale of their property to the needy while keeping a part for themselves. They were stricken to death immediately, and the church learned the seriousness of deceitfulness and lying. That could explain why non-believers stayed away.

The remaining verses testify to the miraculous healing power of the apostles. Throughout the Book of Acts, these men of God gave testimony time and again that the power was not theirs, but was the work of the Jesus whom the religious leaders had rejected. Succeeding chapters will reveal the great price true believers often had to pay to remain true to their faith. Yet, they counted it as nothing compared to what they had in Jesus and would ultimately enjoy with Him (2 Corinthians 4:17).

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

John is the last of the apostles who had traveled with Jesus, witnessed His crucifixion, and fellowshipped with Him after His resurrection. In exile, John received a vision of the Lord Himself. What he writes is so important that Jesus told him, "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it." That in itself is enough reason to study this book, for it reveals the concluding events in God's ultimate plan of redemption. The details of John's vision are complex and confusing, and a thorough knowledge of the rest of God's revelation (the Bible) is helpful in understanding the unfolding of the plan. John addresses his writing to "the seven churches that are in Asia." Those geographical sites in Asia Minor were in what is now Turkey, real places in real time.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 15 – 16 which were omitted from the reading are included below.

Revelation 1:9-19 NAS95 9 I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; 13 and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. 14 His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. 17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. 19 "Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.

John is in exile "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," verse 1. The other apostles have all been killed, but John remains to hear this final revelation of Jesus. He hears a voice that

instructs him to write in a book what he is about to see and hear and send it all to seven existing churches where the Gospel has been preached and received. What he sees in his vision is overwhelming. First, he sees someone "like a son of man" in the middle of seven lampstands. The description of the man clearly pictures the Lord Jesus, perhaps in a glorified, majestic state. "Son of man," by the way, is the title that Jesus most often used to refer to himself. Each of the descriptions about this man is of interest and no doubt reflects something of His divine nature and activity. Of special interest is the reference to "a sharp two-edged sword" out of His mouth. It reminds us of the statement in Hebrews 4:12, "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The reference is not just to the written Word of God, the Bible, but any and every word from God.

John's reaction was similar to Isaiah's in Isaiah 6 when he saw the Lord "high and lifted up" and Job when he finally encountered God in person (chapters 40 & 41). God's presence causes one to fall upon his face in an abject sense of his own unworthiness and in recognition of the worthiness of God.

The response of the "Man" to John in verse 19 is insightful. It likely provides a key to the understanding of the relation he is about to record. He is to write about three topics: 1) what he "has seen," no doubt the revelation of the Son of God; 2) "the things which are," referring to the character and the action of the seven churches to which he is to send the letters (chapters 2 & 3), and 3) "the things which will take place after these things." Chapter 4 begins, then, the revelation of what is yet to come in God's completed plan.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Chapter 20 of John's Gospel is a highlight. It begins with the discovery of the empty tomb, confirming the miraculous resurrection of the Lord Jesus! It includes several appearances of Jesus to His disciples and some significant statements to be considered. And John concludes the chapter, telling us that there were many other signs that Jesus performed. He has chosen only certain ones to relate that are given to bring his readers to faith.

Gospel Reading:

John 20:19-31 NAS95 19 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." 24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." 26 After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." 30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

The first event in today's reading must have been a shock to the disciples who were meeting privately, probably in secret, in a closed room. It's the same day of the resurrection, and Peter and John had already observed the empty tomb. Mary had actually had a personal encounter with the risen Jesus, at first thinking he was the gardener. Apparently, the disciples were confused, not having understood Jesus' teaching them in advance about these events. All of the sudden, Jesus appears in their midst. He knows of their fear and encourages them with "Peace be with you." The next words in this first of several significant statements in this encounter are surprising: "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." They will likely not fully understand this instruction until they have further teaching before His return to heaven and the events of the Day of Pentecost. Then they disperse over the world to preach the gospel.

Another noteworthy word from Jesus bestowed the promised Holy Spirit on them. From this point on, they would carry the message of the Gospel with the clear offer of the forgiveness of sins to all who will hear them and respond to the truth in faith, acknowledging Jesus as Lord.

We're all familiar with the doubts expressed by the disciple Thomas. Like many of us, "seeing is believing" to Thomas. He was not present on this occasion and when the others tell him about what happened, he simply cannot believe it. A week later, Thomas is given just the opportunity he thought

he needed to believe; the proof stands before him. Immediately, he recognizes the truth; his doubts depart, and he worships, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus then offers another important statement: "Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." How blessed we are today to know of the work of Jesus to be our sacrifice for sin and give us the faith to believe when we have not seen with our eyes, but realizing instead that "believing is seeing."

Finally, note that John says that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples that John does not write about. He chose only seven great signs which prove Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, and he recorded them "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that believing you may have life in His name."

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does John's message in Revelation resonate with you during your own trials and tribulations (revelation 1:9)? How does reading his revelation of the Lord help you through these things?

Challenge: Have you read the Book of Revelation? This Book promises a blessing to those who read it (Revelation 1:3). We urge you to read through this important Scripture, taking into account the Old Testament references that are noted in your Bible.

2. In what ways do Thomas' experience give you hope as one who may have never seen the Lord Jesus? (We qualify this because of some of the events we have heard about in Islamic regions where the Lord has appeared in dreams and visions).

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-17-2022

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. On this joyful day of celebration, we remember how God raised His Son, our Savior, Jesus from the dead. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have eternal life through faith in His finished work on the cross. Accordingly, this week's readings answer some of the most important questions that humans have ever asked about eternal life. The first reading is a message from Saint Peter that explains the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection that has been provided for all humankind. The second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians provides the implications of what believing in Jesus looks like in the life of the believer. Finally, we conclude with the glorious story of Jesus' resurrection from the Gospel of Saint John.

Throughout my earlier years, our family always held a special celebration of Jesus' resurrection on this important day of Easter Sunday. Our festivities included a delicious dinner with special people, including my grandmothers, grandmas, aunts, uncles, and of course my brothers and sisters. Back then, I understood that Jesus' resurrection from the dead was very important. As I grew into adulthood, I came to a much fuller understanding of the meaning of Easter Sunday. I am learning how to live in the reality of Jesus' resurrection for every day of my life. My prayer is that through this study you, too, will come to a deeper appreciation of what Jesus did for us and live in His resurrection power all throughout the days ahead.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading this week is from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10. The context of this section is Saint Peter's address to Cornelius, the gentile Centurion from Caesarea. A Centurion was a Roman military leader who led 100 men. The story of what we are about to read happened a few days after Peter had seen a vision of a huge sheet lowered to the ground containing a variety of animals, including ones that the Jews were forbidden from eating according to the Old Testament Law. God revealed to Peter that he was no longer bound by these dietary food laws, and by extrapolation, that the proclamation of the Gospel was being opened to the Gentiles. God told Peter, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (Acts 10:15b-ff). At the same time that Peter had his vision of accepting Gentiles, Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, had a vision in which an angel of God spoke to him about salvation. He sent messengers to Peter in Joppa with orders to bring him to his home in Caesarea. Because Peter had been convinced in this vision about associating with Gentiles, he agreed to travel to Cornelius' home. When Peter arrived, Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him, but Peter stopped him. Peter then said, "Stand up; I too am a man" (v. 26). He addressed the crowd that Cornelius had gathered by saying, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (v. 28). Then Cornelius explained that he had seen a vision of an angel who told him to send for Simon Peter at the home of one Simon the tanner who lived by the sea (v. 32). It was at this point that we join Peter's address to Cornelius along with his relatives and close friends (Acts 10:24).

Now let's read the text, noting that some of the omitted verses were included in order to provide the full context.

First Reading:

Acts 10:34-43 NAS95 34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him

receives forgiveness of sins."

Peter said quite an earful; his message encapsulated almost the entirety of the Gospel. He told the gentile Cornelius and his family the Good News regarding the forgiveness of sins offered to anyone who believes, Jew or Gentile alike (v. 34), through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 43). Peter, fresh from his vision of the animals coming down in the large sheet, affirmed that God was no respecter of persons; this salvation was available to everyone (vv. 34-35). Peter provided a high-level narrative to Cornelius of his personal, eyewitness testimony concerning the events about Jesus Christ. He said that Jesus:

- Was anointed by God with power (v. 38),
- Ministered to the people by healing and opposing the devil (v. 39),
- Was crucified by the Jews in Jerusalem (v. 39b),
- Was raised by God on the third day (v. 40),
- Was made visible to select witnesses after His resurrection (v. 41), and
- Provided the disciples with specific instructions regarding preaching the truth about Jesus being the divinely appointed Judge of the living and the dead (v. 42).

Peter confirmed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the testimony given by all of the Old Testament prophets. Finally, Peter announced the best news of all, that **anyone** who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of their sins (v.43). What, though, does "believing in Jesus" mean? For many believe that Jesus existed or that He was a good teacher. When the Bible talks about believing in Jesus, it means having a personal, experiential trust that we put in Jesus for our salvation. We all know that we have done evil things and thought wrongly about people. These wrong behaviors and mindsets are what the Bible calls sin. Because of our choices to sin, we each have a debt that we owe to the Holy God, our Creator who designed us for Himself. By sinning, we basically declared cosmic treason. This sin debt will need to be paid. The question is, who will pay? We have two payment options: 1. an eternity in hell, or 2. belief in Jesus' payment for our sin. All of the best deeds in the world do not cancel out our sin debt. The Bible is very clear about this, for it says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Death, meaning eternal separation from God, is the payment for sin. And that is why Jesus' death on the cross is so important. Here is where He made the payment for my sin and your sin. This payment is offered to us as a free gift of eternal life. Therefore, belief in Jesus is accepting this gift of Jesus' payment for your sin debt and trusting in Him for eternal life. This is why the celebration of Easter (Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday) is such a glorious memorial in the Christian church.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Understanding Peter's testimony in the first reading that anyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of their sins, provides a convenient gateway to the second reading where we see that humans cannot attain to God through their own efforts. This reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians, chapter 3. This Book is one of the biblical books known as the "Prison Epistles" named because Paul wrote them while he was in prison in Rome. The reading today opens with the word "therefore" in verse one. Any time we see that word (as you may have noted in previous editions of Mass Notes) we have to ask, "What is it the 'therefore' there for?" The "therefore" in 3:1 refers to what Paul said in the previous chapters. In order to give the passage more context, we will explore this in much further detail below.

Stepping back to look at the big picture, Paul's overall purpose in the Epistle was to correct heresy that was being taught in the church. The heresy had four elements that Paul addressed in chapter 2. These false beliefs included the denial of the sufficiency and preeminence of Jesus Christ (2:8), the exaltation of Jewish ritualism (2:11, 16-17), the teaching of the extreme denial of the flesh as a way of getting closer to God (known as "asceticism," 2:20-23), and the ungodly practice of worshiping angels (2:18). All four teachings clearly contradict the Scriptures. Paul corrected their misunderstandings early in the second chapter by making some clear statements to help them stand in the midst of false teaching. Paul said, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:8-9). This statement addressed elements of all four of the heresies that were being taught and practiced by certain members of the church.

With this context in mind, let's read from Saint Paul's Letter, the second reading in the Mass today. As you read, keep in mind the sufficiency that we as believers have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

Colossians 3:1-4 NAS95 1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Paul said, "if you have been raised up with Christ. This has a threefold meaning. First, he meant this in the sense that **if** we have believed in Jesus' death and resurrection, then we are in a sense

crucified with Him and therefore "raised up" on the cross with Him. Paul said in Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Second, we have been "raised up" in the sense that, when we believe, we have been "born from above," something that Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus in John 3:3. The third meaning that Paul had in mind regarding being "raised up" with Christ is that in a spiritual sense after we die we will be "raised up" to a much greater authority in order to reign with Jesus Christ. Paul said, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us" (2 Timothy 2:12).

Here is another important insight from the reading. Paul said in verse 4, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." Notice the repetition of the word "revealed." We spoke about one aspect of Christ's revelation last week in the Palm Sunday readings when we discussed His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. However, in this reading Paul wasn't referring to Christ's exaltation as King when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Rather, he was referring to Jesus' Second Coming, at which time He will return in glory to judge the world. As we said last week, Jesus came the first time as a humble, unblemished Lamb (Revelation 13:8). However, Jesus will return the second time as the glorious Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). He will return as the Almighty Warrior on a white horse, not a donkey (Revelation 19:11). Jesus **was revealed** as the King of the Jews when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey. He **was revealed** as the King of the universe when he rose from the dead, this is what we are celebrating today. Finally, Jesus will be revealed when He comes again in glory with all of His believers in tow, that is us, His saints (Revelation 19:14, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:13, Acts 9:32, Acts 26:10, Romans 16:2).

As we conclude the second reading and discussion, it may be helpful to rephrase the flow of thought before the first few verses. After the three verses of the reading, a capstone statement provides my personal summary of the reason why we must set our minds on things above:

Keep in mind the correction given to us regarding the false teaching that depends on self-effort,and realize we **have been** crucified with Christ, we **have been** born from above, and we **will be** exalted to participate in reigning with Jesus Christ. Since God **has** granted us all of these incalculable gifts, **THEN** let us "*Set [our] minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For [we] have died and [our lives are] hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then [we] also will be revealed with Him in glory*" (vv. 2-4). We are called by God to do the latter (vv. 2-4) because the teachers of the theological heresies were attempting to bring Jesus down to their level by falsely thinking they could reach up to heaven by practicing man-made religion.

I hope that this illustrates the importance of reading the context of the verses of the reading. The big idea is that humans cannot attain fellowship with God in heaven through religious rituals, ascetic practices (like starving the body), or the worship of angels (see Luke 4:8, Matthew 4:10, and Revelation 22:8-9 where the practice is expressly forbidden). The only way that humans can attain eternal life and fellowship with God is through faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, believing that Jesus atoned for our sin (Romans 10:9-13).

Alternative Second Reading:

This week's reading included an alternative to the second reading. This optional passage was from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's confrontation of a certain church member who was having an immoral relationship with his stepmother. In verse one of this chapter he said, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife" (1 Corinthians 5:1). Paul was upset with the church because rather than disciplining the one that was involved with this sin, the church acted as if this was an acceptable practice for a believer in Jesus. The Corinthian church failed to exercise these proper steps of church discipline that could have eventually led to the restoration of the man that was trapped in this sexual sin. This would have included first calling the person to repentance and separating him from the church. Paul's confrontation is strong, but it is based on the power of the Gospel, Jesus' sacrifice for sin.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8 NAS95 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? 7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The root of the issue was that this young church was flaunting the freedom that they had in Christ. Paul explains this by using imagery drawn from the Old Testament Feast of Passover. In verse 6 Paul referred to the Jewish religious practice of purifying their home from yeast (leaven) during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:15). Every Jewish home would have to get rid of yeast and bake unleavened bread during this season. He uses this imagery to provide a metaphor for the purity that God requires in the church. Paul's point was that the "leaven" of the man's sin permeated throughout the church, in the same way yeast permeates the dough (v. 6). It was bad enough the church tolerated this sin amongst them, but they even boasted about it (v. 6).

As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection today on Easter Sunday, this passage helps us to recognize God's calling to live holy and pure lives. This is especially true in our culture that is filled with temptations to be drawn into sexual sins, something with which the ancient Corinthians also struggled. Today we can celebrate that Jesus fulfilled once and for all the repetitive, annual practice among the Old Testament Jews to sacrifice their Passover lamb (Hebrews 10:10). We can turn to the victorious One in prayer to deliver us from our temptations (Matthew 6:13), even difficult things such as sexual sin. Jesus calls us to "confess our sins one to another" (James 5:16) meaning that we can turn to a fellow Christian to ask for their intercessory prayer on our behalf when we encounter struggles that we are unable to overcome through our own prayer and obedience. Paul calls believers to celebrate the feast with sincerity and truth before God and our community. What better day to contemplate making some serious changes in our life than on Easter Sunday?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel reading from Saint John Chapter 20 we will see the "reason for the season" of Easter. Throughout the Lenten period, we have looked forward to the celebration of this glorious day. Before you read, say a short prayer asking God to show you what the resurrection means for your life.

Gospel Reading:

John 20:1-9 NAS95 1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." 3 So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. 4 The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; 5 and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. 6 And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. 9 For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

The narrative continues beyond what was covered in the reading (which is not covered next Sunday):

10 So the disciples went away again to their own homes. 11 But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. 13 And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). (John 20:10-16)

Can you imagine being one of the disciples who watched Jesus die on the cross? Then all of a sudden news reaches you that Jesus' body is not in the tomb. You run to the tomb on Sunday and realize it is empty. What are the options? Maybe someone had taken the body or maybe Jesus' prediction that he would rise again really did come true. It would have been confusing, mind-blowing and extremely scary, for those who sought to kill Jesus were still feeling emboldened to snuff out any memory of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene believed and was the first person to see the risen Lord alive. She received confirmation that since God raised Jesus from the dead, she would one day be raised herself.

We can also have the assurance of salvation which leads to eternal life by trusting in what the Scripture says about how a person does make it to heaven when they die. The first reading brought up the idea of "belief in Jesus." Let's recap what this means, for this is the foundation of our faith. First, God says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). God says that because of our sin the payment, we will receive without some outside intervention is death, meaning eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). In that same verse, God says that the outside intervention has been given as a free gift: Jesus died on the cross for the payment of our sins. This good news can also be found in the famous verse that is often seen printed on cardboard signs held up at sporting events. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Saint Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Does this sound like something that is simple to achieve? It is simple, but if it's not necessarily easy. If it were easy then everyone in the world that ever heard the Gospel would become a believer. Peter

said in Acts 2:38 that belief is intricately tied to repentance. When we believe in Jesus, it is because we are convicted of our need for a Savior. This leads us to repent of (or turn away from) our sins. This means that we have come to agree with God about our sins, and recognize them for what they are, deadly (Romans 6:21). The Bible says that even one single sin would keep us from entering heaven – forever (James 2:10). So, repentance of sin, turning away from the destructive forces that once ruled our lives, is an on-going part of exercising faith in Jesus. One teacher said, "If your faith hasn't changed you, it probably hasn't saved you." This is not to imply that works are necessary for salvation. But it is to say that true faith is manifested in our lives being oriented around the values that Christ had, because He is our life (Colossians 3:4). Jesus' death and resurrection were given as a gift to all, to cover our sin and provide us with the right to be accepted into heaven. As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, keep in mind the simplicity of this Gospel message that Jesus gave to the world.

Reflection Questions

We covered a great deal of ground today in our study. The main point that we ask you to consider in light of your study is, what difference does the resurrection of Jesus Christ make in **our** lives? Contemplate this question in light of the following contexts.

1. What difference does Jesus' resurrection make as I move about in many relational networks where I rub shoulders with people who don't all believe that faith in Jesus is the only pathway to God? How does my life reflect the power of Jesus' resurrection and become an apologetic for His life-transforming presence?

2. What difference does Jesus make if you find yourself in an unhappy situation this Easter? How does the knowledge that Jesus rose from the dead give you hope through these difficulties?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-03-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. This week we open with the Old Testament reading from Isaiah in which we see his foretelling of an aspect of the New Covenant. In the second reading we learn about Paul's passion in running the race for Jesus in opposing the false teachers of his era. We close with the story of the woman caught in adultery from the Gospel of John.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Let's review the background of the Prophet Isaiah from which the first reading was taken. Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah shortly after the Northern Kingdom (called Israel) was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. Isaiah brought a dire message to Judah that God was going to use a foreign nation to judge them, like what had just happened to Israel. He also proclaimed a message of hope and restoration, including a promise that a Messiah would come to restore all that would be taken from God's chosen people. He is one of the most important prophets because of all of the information he provided regarding the coming Messiah. He said regarding this future Ruler, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (7:14). He continued, "For a child will be born to us, a son

will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). His writings then moved onto the near-term prediction about the coming invasion by Babylon and closed with a series of messages with a very long-range view, including the time during which Jesus will reign on earth during the Millennial Kingdom.

Today's reading is from a section in which we see how God reminds the people of Judah about God's greatness as well as His sovereignty. Chapter 43 opens with, "But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!" (Isaiah 43:1). God reminds the people of His unique covenantal relationship with them. He shows how He is with them during their hardships that He allowed to overtake them in order to accomplish His purposes. The second verse in the chapter says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you." We see similar wording in today's reading.

First Reading:

Isaiah 43:16-21 NAS95 16 Thus says the LORD, Who makes a way through the sea And a path through the mighty waters, 17 Who brings forth the chariot and the horse, The army and the mighty man (They will lie down together and not rise again; They have been quenched and extinguished like a wick): 18 "Do not call to mind the former things, Or ponder things of the past. 19 Behold, I will do something new, Now it will spring forth; Will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, Rivers in the desert. 20 The beasts of the field will glorify Me, The jackals and the ostriches, Because I have given waters in the wilderness And rivers in the desert, To give drink to My chosen people. 21 The people whom I formed for Myself Will declare My praise.

Isaiah is providing comfort to those in the future who will return from the Babylonian Captivity some 150 years in the future. He reminds them of who God is because it will be hard for them to understand God in the midst of their discipline that came about through the exile. God reminds them of how He acted powerfully during the first Exodus under the direction of Moses (vv. 16 – 17). Moses was the one to whom the Law was given (Mosaic Covenant). The Mosaic Covenant included the Ten Commandments and the other requirements, which the Jewish people had to fulfil in order to show their covenant relationship with God. Isaiah brings out a contrast in the next verses. In other words, he is saying something like, "if you through the Exodus was amazing just wait until you see what I do in the future." To which future event is Isaiah be referring, has it already happened or is it yet to

transpire? Here are some characteristics of this future event.

- It comes on suddenly (v. 19b).
- It is undetected (v. 19b), the Jewish people will miss it.
- It is something supernatural because it defies the natural order of things (streams in the desert, v. 19c).
- Everything and everyone will praise the Lord, right down to the wild animals, jackals and owls (v. 20).
- It will completely satisfy people's spiritual thirst (v. 20, see also Isaiah 55:1-3).

Based on what Isaiah predicted, it becomes clear that he was referring to the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus. This is a new and better deliverance (and "exodus") which outshines the original Exodus from Egypt and the Mosaic Covenant. It started at Jesus' First Advent (His death and resurrection), but it will be fully realized at His Second Advent when everything will be made right.

In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews made the superiority of Jesus very clear as we see in the following verses.

Hebrews 10:12-18 NAS95 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

What does this mean for our lives? Since God has been powerful and trustworthy in the past, we can trust Him to be powerful and trustworthy in the future. Even if our circumstances seem to be a desert experience, He will sustain us and eventually make all things right, but it may not happen during our natural lifetime. As part of God's family through which we have been engrafted (Romans 11:17) we can bring praise to God (v. 21) as we trust Him and sense Him working in our lives.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Philippians, one of the "Prison Epistles" since it was written while Paul was under house arrest (Philippians 1:13) in Rome (Acts 28:16). Paul viewed this time of captivity as a special ministry of service to Jesus Christ as we see especially in Philippians 1:12-14. Paul said there, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (v. 12). Today's reading is from chapter three in which Paul discusses the great value of following his leader Jesus through the use of an athletic metaphor.

Second Reading:

Philippians 3:8-14 NAS95 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul surrendered everything that he had on earth in order to serve Jesus Christ (v. 8). Paul was clear that even his most admirable achievements fell far short of earning his way into the kingdom of heaven, this came only through faith in the Lord Jesus (v. 9). This revealed Paul's heart for the people to find their true righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ alone, which comes not by striving but through God's power (v. 9). This was in contrast to the false teachers plaguing the church (see Philippians 2:21, and Philippians 3:2). These "dogs" as he called them in 3:2 just before today's reading, were those who interfere with spiritual matters about which they didn't have true knowledge. These "Judaizers" sought to impose the Old Testament Law upon the Gentile church, something which Paul wrote an entire epistle against in the Book of Galatians. The bottom line is that it is a distortion of the true gospel of grace given by Jesus Christ when anyone attempts to impose requirements for salvation outside of faith in Christ alone. In contrast to the false teachers who hoped in obtaining power and success in this life, Paul looked toward the eternal future. His hope was in gaining perfection through his personal resurrection from the dead (vv. 11-12), the first

fruits of which we see in Jesus' resurrection from dead.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul used an athletic metaphor in saying that while running towards the future he was striving to forget what was behind him while racing ahead towards this future hope of resurrection "for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14). Paul frequently used such terminology in his letters as a means of connecting with his readers with symbolism with which they would have been familiar. He likened the Christian life as a race towards the finish, rather than a walk in the park in which we slouch our way towards the finish line (that is coming upon us whether we want it to or not). As an athlete, we take an active role in running the race, and are not just spectators on the sidelines as the others run by us.

What does this mean for us today? We are not to look to things like what the New Testament Jews desired (such as political power). We are also not to think that we can find righteousness through good works in obedience to an elevated (and false) interpretation of the Scriptures, as did the Pharisees. Believers are called to shift their focus not upon the things of this world but to "press on" in order to accomplish God's purposes. All the while we have to remember that the righteousness that we do finally obtain is from God, not our works. Paul said clearly in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are to take our Christian lives seriously in the same ways that an athlete competes in a race. Although we can cheer others as they run, we too are called to compete in the event of the Christian life. During the race we can remember that Christ is the One from Whom comes our power, as Paul said "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 8 in which we see Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery. The event happened in the temple court after Jesus began to teach there early in the morning (John 8:2-3). As you will see in the reading we are not told about that other half, the man involved in the adulterous affair. In the early New Testament culture, the society tolerated a larger degree of sexual sin among men. In our day we might say something like, that is what men do. In that day we would expect more scrutiny upon the sexual sin of woman, especially one in Jerusalem that was outside of the sexual activities considered normal in the cults of the Roman pagan culture. So it is in the reading that the sin of the woman is brought front and center to Jesus who is placed in a kind of judge position, something for which Jesus was appointed before the creation of time.

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Gospel Reading:

Note: This particular section of the Gospel of John is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and was first added to by Jerome in the year 382. If you are interested, we encourage you to research the findings on this matter.

John 8:1-11 NAS95 1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, 4 they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" 6 They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. 7 But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. 10 Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

The two opposing groups known as the scribes (the scholars and lawyers) and Pharisees (legalistic lay people) had strong evidence against the woman, the evidence revealing that she was "caught in the very act" (v. 4). Jesus doesn't question the weight of evidence that they have against the woman. However, rather than responding to their legal question which was nothing more than an attempt to trap Him, Jesus simply stoops down again and begins writing on the ground (v. 6). Evidently, He had risen from His earlier seated position, since it says in verse 2 that "He sat down and began to teach them." One can imagine Jesus in a submissive, kneeling position with His head held low such that he could reach the ground on which to write. We are not told what He wrote on the ground, but it seems evident from the reaction of His listeners that it affected them deeply. The scribes and Pharisees expected an answer, and evidently grew impatient when Jesus failed to answer. After the lawyers questioned Him a second time, He responded by straightening up and saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7), after which He went back to His writing. This was the answer to their question regarding what should be done with the woman caught in adultery. The oldest in the crowd responded first by leaving, until one by one, Jesus was left alone with the "convict." Jesus then admonished her to leave and "sin no more" (v. 11). The completely vulnerable woman who had previously surrounded by a covey of rapt prosecutors bearing overwhelming evidence which would certainly have convicted her was set free by the supreme judge of all the universe (2 Timothy 4:1).

The reading makes it clear that when we examine our lives, we understand that we too are sinners in need of Jesus' forgiveness. We have committed adultery of the heart by going after things other than God in which we find our pleasures. Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Sin is a serious matter, and God teaches us that the natural end of a non-believer living out their life of sin is death. Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). We can identify with the woman caught in adultery; a person who in that society stood condemned and squarely caught in her sin. We can heed Jesus' warning to her in which he says, "From now on sin no more" (v. 11c). We don't naively think that the woman left the interaction with Jesus and become the most saintly figure in Jerusalem. However, we can imagine that after being set from the consequences of her sin that she was deeply affected by the "Word of God." During those times in which the Spirit of God indicts us for our sin, we too can find healing from the eternal consequences of sin even if God doesn't deliver us from the temporal ones. In each incident in which we find ourselves confessing the depth of our sinfulness, we can celebrate that as believers in the Lord Jesus we will be delivered from the eternal consequences of our sin.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. When was there a time in which you were caught in the very act of sin? Based upon what you learned in the Gospel lesson, how can you imagine that Jesus would have addressed you?

2. In what ways does the story of the woman caught in adultery help you to avoid your own sin? What about certain besetting sins that you keep committing, a cycle of sin / repent / sin?

3. How does the following verse speak to you about your own sin?

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-27-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Joshua. The successor to Moses, Joshua was one of only two of the original multitude that left Egypt who entered the Promised Land. The conquest of the land was accomplished under his leadership with victories, defeats, and noted events. The Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is the source for the second reading. These verses reveal God's wonderful plan of reconciliation (a big theological term) in its twofold aspect: for ourselves and through us for others. The final reading from Luke's Gospel includes stories of losses, a sheep, a coin, and a wayward son. The emphasis is on what we refer to as the "Prodigal Son." From all three readings we can learn a lot about God and His loving relationship with His people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first five books of the Bible are sometimes referred to as the Law. The sixth book introduces the historical books, capturing the continuing story of Israel from their entrance into the Promised Land (under General Joshua) to their captivity and removal from the Land. In this first history book, Israel is taken into the Land, experiences ultimate victory (with significant defeats along the way), and

comes into a period of rest. Chapters 1-4 detail the crossing of the Jordan River and the initial arrival in the land of Canaan. Today's reading reports on a divine encounter with God and the renewal of certain rituals.

First Reading:

Joshua 5:9-12 NAS95 9 Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. 10 While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.

God appears to Joshua in this passage to encourage him. Having completed the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Joshua is fully aware that only he and Caleb were among the original survivors among the Jews in Egypt. The long wilderness journey was as a result of the sin and disobedience of God's people, particularly their refusal to enter the Land when they first arrived there. What a tragedy! Literally hundreds of thousands of Israelites died on the journey. God in verse 2 seems to be telling Joshua that now the reproach of Egypt's opposition and the sin of the people were all in the past. The name "Gilgal" in the Hebrew language sounds like "roll." So their formal reproach was rolled off. This was a new, fresh start for His people.

Two startling events occur next. First, the people observe Passover. The Passover celebration is a vivid reminder of the deliverance of the people from Egypt. You can read about it in Exodus 12. God sent the death angel to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian families and their cattle. The Israelites were *passed over* if they splashed a bit of the blood of a slain lamb on the door posts and lintels of their houses. It's a magnificent illustration of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus would make as the Lamb of God when He gave His life for the salvation of all who will by faith accept His work on their behalf and commit their lives to Him.

The second startling event occurred on the very next day. You will recall that for their entire wilderness journey, the people were provided manna (and later quail) for their daily food. It was a marvelous provision for the people, but how tedious it must have been to have the same diet day after day after day! So, here the people are finally in the Promised Land that was said to be a land of

"milk and honey." On this day they were able to eat of the fruit of the land they were given. After that, the manna ceased, and from then on they could enjoy the produce of their new homeland.

How wonderful is God's provision for those who trust Him! More than mere physical food, He offers a personal relationship with Him that is made possible by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Trust Him!

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians dealt with numerous problems that had arisen in the young church: disunity, sin, false teaching, to name a few. This second Letter, in part, is a defense of his apostleship, for there were some who questioned his authority. He also writes to encourage the faithful and to strengthen their faith. The earlier portion of chapter 5 includes important teaching regarding the current trials of life for the Christian, but the wonderful expectation for the future. Although we may struggle and ultimately die, he notes that "to be away from the body [is to be] at home with the Lord" (v. 8). Then today's passage takes us into some deep but precious truths.

Second Reading:

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 NAS95 17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Paul's statement that anyone in Christ is "a new creature" is astounding! He goes on to explain why that is true. The person who is "in Christ" is one who has confessed Jesus as lord and has by faith accepted His finished work on the cross as sufficient to cover his sin and make him right with God. Elsewhere Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself

for me." So, the believer is not only "in Christ," but Christ is in him. The born-again Christian (John 3:3) discovers that the things of his old life are no longer of dominant interest. Everything is seen in a new light; everything has changed.

As mentioned earlier, the next verses reveal God's wonderful plan of reconciliation (a big theological term) in its twofold aspect: for ourselves and through us for others. The term is more easily understood if we think of the frequent practice of reconciling our bank statement. The bank reports our balance is X number of dollars, but our checkbook may show a different number. We have to bring those figures into balance; that's called reconciliation. Verses 19 and 20 tell us how it has happened when we are reconciled with God. He did it through Christ. We had a debt to pay because of our sin. ("All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul wrote in Romans 3:23). Jesus paid that debt by accepting the punishment due us and satisfying God's demand for justice, so that he is "not counting [our] trespasses against [us]." So, we can be reconciled with God when we accept God's gracious provision.

Paul continues to show us that, having been reconciled to God, we now have the responsibility of taking that message of reconciliation to those who have not yet been restored to God by faith. He says that the message has been "committed" to us. In fact, he calls us "ambassadors for Christ." When we share God's truth with others, we are officially representing God; we are authorized and commissioned to do so. It is not a responsibility we can shirk or take lightly.

The final statement in today's reading is mind-boggling. The whole matter of reconciliation (or salvation in the broader sense) is because of the willingness of Jesus to "be sin on our behalf." It's beyond human imagination: the perfect, sinless, holy Son of God, who experienced life as we do, but without sin, was willing to take our sin, bear it and its penalty for us so we can experience God's righteousness. If you have not yet accepted this gracious gift of God, do so now and begin living as that new creature he spoke of earlier.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Luke 15 includes three parables, all about losing things. Parables are stories with familiar images and characters that illustrate important truths—truths that are made clear by the telling of a simple story. Often, no interpretation is necessary; the application is obvious. At other times Jesus uses parables that are understood by His disciples, but are not clear to hearers who are not sincerely looking for truth. Note that in this instance, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and scribes who were

complaining that Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them." They were the audience that Jesus taught using these three stories.

Gospel Reading:

Note: Verses 4–10 that were omitted from the reading are included below for context.

Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying,

4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 "Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 "And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 "And the son said to him,

'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 "But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

The first parable is simple to understand. For a shepherd to lose one of his flock is disastrous. He will go to almost any length to find that single sheep. When he finds it, he rejoices and calls his friend together to rejoice with him. Jesus makes an interesting application to the story. He likens it to the rejoicing in heaven when a single sinner repents and is reconciled to God.

The second story has a very similar concluding statement: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." In this story a woman has lost one of her ten coins, perhaps the total of all her assets. Like the shepherd, she goes on a serious search, checking every nook and cranny of her house until she finds the missing coin. She, also, calls her friends to come and celebrate the find.

One can readily conclude from these two stories that God is in the search-and-rescue business. As Peter put it, God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). All of heaven's beings rejoice when a rescue is successful and a lost one repents and returns to God. But Jesus tells one more story, this one in great detail that emphasizes God's great love for a lost one. It is commonly referred to as the story of The Prodigal Son.

The reader is probably familiar with the story. The younger of two sons asks his father for his inheritance. He doesn't give a reason, but the succeeding events indicate that he wanted out from the confining influences of home so he could live life as he wanted to. Surprisingly, perhaps, the

father gives him what he asks and does the same for his older brother who remains at home and continues his usual life working the homestead with the father. The younger son goes far from home geographically and in every other sense, as well. He spends his inheritance in "loose living," wasting it all on his selfish desires. His dream of fun and fulfillment was burst by his wastefulness that became acute in the midst of a famine in the land he had fled to. Life became a nightmare, and he was disgraced to take a job feeding pigs (exceedingly distasteful to faithful Jews).

"When he came to his senses," he realized that the servants in his father's house had it much better than he was experiencing life, so he vowed to return home, humble himself, and beg to live as a servant. Apparently, he had come to a full appreciation of what he had lost and that it was his own sinful pride, greed, and desire for the "good life" that had brought him down to the gutter. We can't be sure about what he expected of his father. Surely, he hoped for acceptance back onto the farm as a lowly servant, but he probably would not have anticipated the response of his father to his return.

What follows is an amazing illustration of the unfathomable love and grace of God. It seems that the father had been on the lookout for his son, and he hastened to greet him, to welcome him, and to present him with multiple tokens of his love and forgiveness. And like the first two stories, a celebration follows the son's return, and there are a banquet, gifts, forgiveness, and rejoicing. Oh, but there's a catch—not everyone rejoices. Now we are re-introduced to the elder son, who, perhaps, is the real prodigal. He has been faithful in his work of the father, but apparently, his heart is not open to receive or forgive his brother. The elder brother had enjoyed his home and work, and he had his inheritance. Why should he be upset? Why couldn't he rejoice at the return of his brother? Perhaps Jesus was drawing a verbal picture of some in His audience that day. Was He thinking of the Pharisees and scribes, who like the older brother were deceived in their own self-righteousness?

The three parables clearly illustrate the value of every human being. Like the sheep, the coin, and the son, God highly values the lost ones, and he deeply loves those who have not yet repented and accepted His gracious offer to reconcile them to Himself.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. With which of the sons in the story of the prodigal son do you identify with most, the elder or the prodigal himself? Why?

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2. How do you feel about the reaction of the father upon the return of his youngest son? Do you feel that the youngest got what he deserved, or what he didn't deserve? In what ways does the father's love for his son(s) emulate the characteristics that we see of God the Father in the Scriptures?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-20-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of Exodus where we will see Moses follow God's instruction to bring water from a rock. Then we move to Romans Chapter 5 where we will discover Saint Paul's explanation of how Christians are justified by faith alone. Then we study an amazing encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus Chapter 17. The context of the passage was a few months after Moses guided the Hebrew nation out of Egypt where they had been subject to slavery for 400 years after Joseph's reign with the Pharaoh. God had provided them with manna some months earlier (Exodus 16:14). They had just left the Wilderness of Sin and had camped at a place called Rephidim after camping at other places along the way. This was right before the Amalekites attacked the defenseless Hebrews at that location (Exodus 17:8-16). We included the first two verses in order to add some additional context.

First Reading:

1 Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. 2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." 5 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:1-7)

Moses said that the congregation of Israel journeyed "by stages," meaning that they made other stops along the way. Numbers Chapter 33 said that they made three stops between the Wilderness of Sin and Rephidim (Numbers 33:12-14) indicating that these in between campsites may have been less eventful than what happened here. Here Moses encountered serious opposition, to the point that he was concerned that if the conflict wasn't resolved the people would stone him (v.4c). It was so significant that Moses even named the place "Massah and Meribah" after the conflict (v.7), words which mean "testing" and "contending." The people commanded Moses to give them water for them to drink along with their animals (vv. 2-3). The significant point is that rather than pray to God themselves to ask for water, the people "quarreled" with Moses, who was their obvious intercessor between them and God (v.2). Moses asked the question, "Why do you test the LORD?" (v. 2e). A clue to what the people meant by this can be found in verse 7: "He named the place "Massah and Meribah" because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us, or not?'" What happened was that they doubted that God was still watching over them to provide for them. This is amazing because God had just delivered them from the army

of the Egyptians just a few months earlier and was guiding them in their journeys through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21)! How soon they forgot about God's divine deliverance of them from their slavery in Egypt, His supernatural parting of the Red Sea and His subsequent visible leadership on their journey!

As the story continued, Moses interceded in prayer on behalf of the people, something that he did very frequently as Moses was one of the most prayerful people in the Bible. Moses' prayer was something which shouldn't be taken for granted, as he evidently prayed so hard and so long for the people in the subsequent battle against the Amalekites that men had to hold his arms up (Exodus 17:12). God could have just provided water immediately upon Moses' request, but instead He answered Moses' prayer in a way that revealed Moses' authority as a leader of the people along with the elders.

The truth that emerges from the text is that everyone has access to God's miraculous provision through prayer without the need for an intercessor. Moses was their intercessor between them and God, and theologically was what is called a "type of Christ," meaning that he was a person that prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ. As believers in the risen Lord Jesus, we have direct access to God's miraculous powers through prayer, and our Intercessor lives in our hearts through God the Holy Spirit. When we face difficult challenges in life, God calls us to turn to Him in prayer, as well as to ask others to pray on our behalf, as Moses did for the Hebrew Nation. The Hebrew people turned to Moses to pray for them instead of the God that they could see in the pillars. God calls us to turn to the God that we can't see. James said in the New Testament Book by his name, "*Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*" (James 5:16). The Book of Hebrews says, "*Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:16). The Apostle John said in 1 John 5:

13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him. (1 John 5:13-15)

We can rest in the fact that God receives our prayers *faster* than the speed of light. Although we don't always agree with the outcome or the timing of God's answer, we can have peace that God works on our behalf for our own good (Romans 8:28) regardless of our feelings.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Chapter 5 in the Book of Romans. In the previous chapter, Paul explained the case that God justifies sinners on the basis of their faith in Jesus alone and challenged the false notion in the early Roman church that although believers received salvation by grace alone, they preserved it by their good works. Again, additional verses were added for context.

Second Reading:

1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. 6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-8)

Paul started out by connecting this section of teaching with his previous teaching about justification by faith. "Therefore, having been justified by faith" (v. 1a). He said that believers have a new relationship with God, one of peace, through the Lord Jesus Christ. He went on to say that believers have hope in seeing the glory of God and that they can persevere during their trials because this produces godly character which in turn produces hope (vv. 3-4). Finally, Paul made an amazing statement about how Jesus died for us while we were still in our sinful state. He said, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" v.6). He continued, "***But God*** demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (v.8, emphasis added). Notice the phrase "But God." God's direct involvement in the affairs of our lives greatly reassures us of the reality of His love for us! God loved us so much that he gave his only begotten Son for us (John 3:16). He did this with the full awareness of the *future* sins that we would commit, yet He went through with a humiliating death on the cross for us anyway. As we approach Good Friday, think about the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for us. Moses left a heavenly palace in the court of the Pharaoh to deliver the Hebrew slaves from bondage, so that they might find rest in the Promised Land. Jesus left the realities of Heaven to deliver us from the bondage of our sin, so that we might find rest in His eternal home, our Promised Land. May we continue to appreciate and adore our Savior for what He did for us!

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading covers a story of Jesus freeing a woman of the bondage of sin. While we may or may not be able to relate to her sin (sexual immorality), we can relate to the problem of looking for love in all the wrong places.

Gospel Reading:

5 So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; 6 and Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. 7 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. 9 Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." 11 She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? 12 "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?" 13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." 16 He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." 17 The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." 19 The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. 20 "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He." 27 At this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why do You speak with her?" 28 So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" 30 They went out of the city, and were coming to Him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging

Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. 35 "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. 36 Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. 37 For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." 39 From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. 41 Many more believed because of His word; 42 and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world." (John 4:5-42)

Some key observations from the reading are as follows.

- This story of misunderstandings shows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world
- He shows Himself to those who are seeking to worship God in spirit and in truth (not just to the religious elite)
- While she is seeking validation and significance through temporal realities (water, wells, religious argumentation, human relationships), Jesus is wanting to open her heart up to eternal realities (living water that will truly satisfy her soul, a life that is regenerated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, a life that is not afraid of the truth).
- Jesus loves her enough to break through her misguided notions of where life comes from and helps her to see that He is the Messiah, the anointed Deliverer, to save people from their sins.
- As a result of her changed life, others see the reality of Jesus and believe in Him as their own Savior.

It's easy to look with judgment on this poor Samaritan woman, who was looking for love in all the wrong places. She bumps into Jesus one day and gets a whole new lesson on her need for a Savior. But as Christians, we can grow cold to our need for a Savior. But, if we're honest, we have our own broken cisterns that don't satisfy our deep thirst:

- Finding approval from others
- Achieving goals and accomplishing things

- Perfectionism
- Religiosity
- Looking to others for our sense of identity and validation

It's easy to do what this woman did and argue about places and forms of worship, to punt to mystery, to look for love in all the wrong places. What religious conundrums do you throw into Jesus' face when he is trying to deal with spiritual life issues? What strategies do you use to deflect the painful sense of thirst that gnaws at your soul?

God is patient and keeps pressing us to come out of hiding and be honest: to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. But what does it look like to drink this living water, to become true worshipers? It looks like a relationship with Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. One of the common themes for this week's reading has to do with being delivered from the bondage of sin. In what ways does sin feel like slavery or bondage? How does Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well reassure you that he is powerful enough to free you from the bondage and penalty of sin? How would you respond if He offered you living water?

2. How are you like the Hebrew people? Re-read the 1 Cor. 11 passage and take a personal inventory. How can this story be instructive to you in your life? Ask yourself who in your circle of believing friends and relatives prays for you on a regular basis. Ask yourself for whom you have been praying recently.

Second, reach out to one other believer this week with a specific prayer request and ask them to pray regarding this one specific issue throughout the week. Finally, ask the person with whom you communicated how you may pray for them in one specific way this week.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-13-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. Today's study reveals God's gracious plan to make Abraham the progenitor of a physical line of the chosen people and the spiritual line of God-followers. The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's favored letters—that is, it's favored by many Bible readers because of the promise of joy and confidence to those who trust God wholeheartedly. The Gospel reading from Luke takes us into a very intimate occasion in the life of Jesus that demonstrated visually and orally His unique character as the very Son of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

So much is packed into this passage of Scripture that it could take several pages of commentary to explain it all clearly. Note that this choice servant of God is known first as Abram ("exalted father"). His name is later changed to Abraham ("father of many nations"; Gen. 17:5). It begins with the reassuring promise of God that He will protect Abram; He will be "a shield" to him. And he promises him a great reward. In what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant, introduced in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in chapters 13, 15, and 17. God had promised Abram that he would be "a great nation"

and his "offspring" would be blessed. And that raises a great question in Abram's mind. This passage answers the question and gives us a preview of the history of the nation to be born of Abram.

First Reading:

Note: The reading omitted verses 1-4 and 16 that are included below.

Genesis 15:1-18 NAS95 1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

Abram is perplexed. How could he have offspring, he asks, "since I am childless"? Not knowing the miraculous plan that God had in mind, Abram proposes that God use Abram's servant Eliezer as his heir. But God responds that his heir "will come forth from your own body." Then God gives this faithful follower an object lesson. He instructs him to look at the stars and count them. That's

impossible, of course; the stars are innumerable. "So shall your descendants be," God tells him. In response, Abram offers a statement that reveals the depth of his trust in God. It is a statement that is referred to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23): "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is a critical faith statement. It is not on the basis of any action of Abram that he is declared righteous, but it is on the basis of his faith, his trust in God. That same principle of faith remains true today. It is not by our holy deeds that we are considered righteous before God but because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus who paid the sacrifice for our sin.

In confirmation of God's promises to Abram, there follows a demonstration of God's commitment to fulfill His promises to Abram. The ceremony of sacrifice that is pictured is the affirmation of God that He alone will fulfill the covenant He is making with His servant. Not only that, but God also gives Abram a preview of what is to happen to his progeny, events that we will read about in the later chapters of Genesis and the early portion of Exodus. The 400-year captivity of Israel (the descendant nation from Abram) in Egypt is clearly foretold. And the promise of their ultimate release is predicted, as well.

The ceremony pictured in these verses included symbols of God's presence (a smoking oven and a flaming torch) which were to give Abram assurance that God Himself is making this covenant with him, and it is certain of fulfillment. It concludes in this passage with the promise that the land from the River of Egypt (the Nile?) to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia will be the homeland of God's chosen people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul rehearses some of the factors of his relationship with the people of the church at Philippi and what he hoped and prayed for them in terms of their spiritual growth and steadfastness. He wanted them to live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (2:27). He also taught some very important spiritual truths that should have encouraged his readers to work together for unity among themselves and to recognize the great personal sacrifice of Jesus for them. They should understand, also, the exalted place that Jesus has been given as a result of His obedience to the Father, even to the point of death.

Second Reading:

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NAS95 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. 1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

In today's reading, the writer offers a significant contrast. He wants his readers to follow his example and that of others who "walk according" to the pattern of his life. And he warns them of the many who walk as "the enemies of the cross of Christ." He is distressed by such conduct; it brings him great sorrow. But the followers of Christ must be warned. These evildoers are characterized by unwholesome appetites, an unseemly pride in their wrongdoing. Perhaps the danger of their behavior is suggested in the last characteristic, "who set their minds on earthly things." What God has created and given us here on this earth is not inherently bad, but an unhealthy attachment to earthly things is fatal. As John wrote in 1 John 2:16, "For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." And his conclusion is the key: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." Paul makes it clear that the "end" of them "is destruction." Believers must concentrate on the eternal, not the temporal that distracts us from God and will not last. Rather, the Christian has much more to look for.

Paul goes on to note the contrast between the "enemies" of Christ and the true believers. The Christian's citizenship is not in this temporary, passing world. It is in heaven, and it's not just something we hope to enter someday; it is the place where we should continually and eagerly be looking "for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," who will descend from our spiritual homeland to come for us. And then the changes that Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15 will occur. He says our current "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory." We surely don't fully understand all that that means, but it will occur, not by anything we can do but by His power. After all, He has the power to subject everything to Himself, and He eventually will do so.

Once again, Paul reveals his deep passion for the Philippian believers. He calls them "beloved brethren," and he again speaks of his longing to see them, whom he considers "my joy and crown." In light of the glorious promise for the alien Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, their future and eternal abiding place, Paul gives a final challenge to those he loves so dearly, "Stand firm in the Lord."

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels present Jesus in a variety of settings, each writer including those events and sayings that fit best into his argument. The four together give us a complete picture of what God wants us to know about Jesus' life and ministry. After all, according to the writer of Hebrews, God "in these last days has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus provides the very best picture of who God is because He who was and is God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In today's passage, Luke gives us a unique picture of Jesus, different from every other representation of Him in the Bible.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:28-36 NAS95 28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. 33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not realizing what he was saying. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.

In the paragraph just preceding these verses, Jesus had spoken of the cost of being His disciple. The disciple "must deny himself and take up his cross daily"; "whoever wants to save his life will lose it." To follow Jesus is to be willing to serve Him unashamedly and faithfully. Knowing that there will be some who will faithfully follow, He concludes this teaching by promising that some of His hearers "will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." That was said many years ago, and yet we still have not yet seen God's kingdom established on earth in the fullest sense that He has promised it. So, what could He have meant?

Today's passage may well be the fulfillment of that promise, as we shall see. A little more than a

week after that pronouncement Jesus took three of his most intimate disciples—Peter, James, and John—with Him to a mountain to pray, which was a common practice for Him. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus prayed. (Interestingly, the same thing occurs on a later occasion in the Garden of Gethsemane on Jesus' last night before His crucifixion, Luke 22:45.) When they awoke, they saw what must have seemed like a dream to them. They saw Jesus with different facial expressions and clothes that were dazzling white and gleaming. Two men were talking with Him, and somehow the disciples recognized the two as Moses and Elijah, long dead and revered Old Testament prophets. They were "appearing in glory," and the three disciples "saw His glory." It was Moses in Exodus 33 who asked to see God's glory, but God indicated that no one could see His glory and live.

There must have been something about the appearance of these three that was supra-natural. It was an appearance beyond anything earthly normal. It's also interesting to note the topic of discussion between Jesus and the two prophets; they "were speaking of His departure." Jesus had told His disciples on more than one occasion that he would be leaving them, and He had indicated the method (His death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven). Peter, in his usual impetuous way, was eager to keep them from leaving, so he suggested building "tabernacles," probably the kind of booths that were associated with the Jewish festival. He was interrupted by a cloud that came upon them, frightening them. Then they heard a voice, the very voice of God. "*This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him*!" As God had spoken at Jesus' baptism, so He speaks once again, confirming that Jesus is the Holy One, the anointed one of God, the one above all others who should be heard and obeyed. It seems abundantly clear that these three close disciples of Jesus had the unique privilege of having just a glimpse, a peek of what the Kingdom of God is like. The qualified king, the representatives of the old covenant, and disciples of the new, all are represented. Glory shone around as it will in that glorious future kingdom. Watch for it! Be prepared!

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Saint Paul talked about "stand[ing] firm in the faith" (Philippians 4:1). List at least three specific ways in which you are you living as a citizen of heaven, for eternal values rather than worldly pleasure and standing firm in your faith?

2. In what ways do you recognize Jesus as God Himself as seen by Peter, James, and John, in the great transfiguration scene? God said to listen to Him. In what ways are you doing this in your life? In what ways are you acting upon the information you are receiving from God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-06-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Today we learn about the nature of faith and the importance of knowing God's word so that when we need it, we have it to combat temptations we encounter in our lives.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, the last Book of what is called the Pentateuch, the first five Books of the Bible. Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land (see Numbers 20:12), so God gave him instructions about what the people were to do when they entered the land. As always, understanding the context is important because some forty years had passed since God had delivered the Israelites from their captivity in Egypt. Only the people who were twenty years

and younger were allowed to enter because of their sin of unbelief (Numbers 14:29). This was a time of much grieving because many memorials would likely have been held for the numerous people that had died during the era of wandering in the desert. The chapter opens with an introductory statement which sets the tone for today's reading. "Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it" (Deut 21:1). Finally, God had opened the way for the people to enter the Promised Land.

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 26:4-10 NAS95 4 "Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. 5 "You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. 6 'And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. 7 'Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; 8 and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; 9 and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 'Now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which You, O LORD have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God;

God architected the people's entry into the Promised Land at a time to correspond with the harvest, at which point the manna would cease (Joshua 5:12). God provided instructions to the priest that the first thing that was to be done was to make an offering to Him (v. 4). God affirmed the legacy of the father of the Israelite nation, "a wandering Aramean," likely referring to Jacob, who sojourned for a long period in that region (Syria) under the control of his father-in-law Laban (v. 5). During the Nation's time in Egypt, the population of Jews greatly multiplied, a trend which began way back when Jacob had first entered Egypt (v. 5e). This is affirmed in Genesis, "Now Israel lived in the land of Egypt, in Goshen, and they acquired property in it and were fruitful and became very numerous" (Genesis 47:27). The Egyptians then began to resent and distrust the people and took them as their slaves (v. 6). God, however heard their cries and began the process to move them out in the Land that he had promised to Abraham. The closing verse of the reading marks a bookend of God's instructions to make a kind of "first fruits" offering to the Lord upon entering the Land.

Today's message served as a reminder to the people who were about to enter the Land about the nature of God's fruitfulness. When the people entered the Land, they would find it very fruitful, just

as the Lord had promised them (Exodus 3:8, Numbers 14:8, etc.).

In our day it is perhaps easy for us to overlook the fact that everything comes from God when His actions are more behind the scenes compared to His bold and obvious acts in leading the people out of captivity in Egypt and eventually into the Land. As we approach Easter Sunday, we also have the opportunity presented to us from God to reflect upon the nature of God as our supreme provider. God has given us fruitful blessings beyond comparison by sending His Son to atone for our sins once and for all. Like the fruit of the harvest that waited for the Jewish people for which they had done nothing to earn, we can celebrate how God gave us Jesus as a totally free gift which we cannot earn and not deserve. We will learn move about this gift in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Today's second reading is from one of the most important texts in the entire New Testament Bible. The context of the tenth chapter or Romans deals with the current situation of the Nation of Israel. This section of Romans is sandwiched between chapter nine dealing with Israel's past situation, and chapter 11 which deals with Israel's future. Chapter 10 opens with a message concerning the Nation, "*Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation*" (Romans 10:1). This is God's present-day message for all people, not just Israel. Many in the Nation of Israel in Paul's day misunderstood the message of faith, a condition which continues until the present time. Paul said in the second verse, "*For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge*" (Romans 10:2). In today's reading, Paul will explain the basis of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Second Reading:

Romans 10:8-13 NAS95 8 But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart" –that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

Here, Paul quoted from a crucial Old Testament text in Deuteronomy, which explained the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant. It is important to understand the biblical citation any time when all capitals appear in the text. This section in the Law first provided the list of blessing that God has promised to the Nation, but then concluded with the condition, "*if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul*" (De 30:10). The Law then went on to say that the Law was undeniably right within their reach, "*But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it*" (De 30:14). Paul quoted from the Greek version (Septuagint) of this important text to say that God's message of the New Covenant is right here among them through his message. Whoever trusts in the Lord through belief that God raised Jesus from the dead will be saved, whether they are a Jew or a Gentile. "Whoever will call on the name of the LORD will be *saved*" (v. 13), period.

Paul wrote his message to a church which was being tossed by the false Gospel that salvation came through works and not by faith alone which produces the fruit of good works. In fact, he dedicated the entire Book of Galatians to refute the controversy brought about by the Judaizers who taught this false doctrine. Paul summarized the matter in the second chapter of that Book, "*nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified*" (Galatians 2:16).

What does Paul's message mean to the church in our time? Everything, since this same false message has continued from the time when Paul first wrote against it. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a free gift (Ephesians 2:8-9), one that is brought about from reading the word of God. Paul made the source of our Christian faith clear just a few verses past today's reading, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*" (Romans 10:17). As believers in the resurrection and the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can trust in our salvation as an accomplished fact of God from which will flow the fruit of our good works. Our salvation does not come from works any more than the Creator comes about from its own creation. This is a crucially important core truth about salvation that makes today's reading one of the most important texts in the entire Bible.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the reading from Saint Luke is right after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (Luke 3:21), which marked the opening of His ministry when He was around 30 years of age (Luke 3:23).

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Gospel Reading:

Luke 4:1-13 NAS95 1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness 2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. 3 And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." 4 And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE.'" 5 And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6 And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. 7 Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" 9 And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; 10 for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,' 11 and, 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" 12 And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'" 13 When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.

Luke recalled how Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit of God to be tempted by Satan in the desert for a period of forty days during which he fasted. These temptations were many (see verse 13, "every temptation"), however, since Jesus was hungry the first one recorded here dealt with Satan's offer of food (v. 3). Satan's question to Jesus began with the word "if," through which the master deceiver doubted Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Jesus replied to each inquiry of the devil by answering with the Word of God. "If you are the Son of God," then make the stones into bread (v. 3). Also, "If you are the Son of God," throw Yourself down from the height of the temple (v. 9).

Today's reading teaches us how we are to resist temptation, whether we understand that it comes from the devil or not. By placing God's word into our hearts through reading and memorization of it, we can "answer" each temptation with the word of the Lord in our hearts.

I remember once when I was a teenager our family went on a summer vacation trip to the Washington, DC area with its rich history. One day we visited an old well which was famous for some events during the Civil War in which people tossed coins into it expecting a blessing. As I peered into the well, I saw the large amount of money sitting just a few feet below the edge and within an easy hop into the now dry ditch. I looked around and seriously considering jumping in at a time when nobody was watching. However, a thought began to reverberate through my mind as I began

to carry out my plan. "Though shalt not steal" (Exodus 20:15). I had evidently heard this from my Catechism classes. But, I thought, this isn't stealing, these people are just throwing their money into this hole. Still, the words echoed through my heart, and I finally turned away from my folly. Looking back on this many years later I realized how knowing just a bit of God's word had protected me from carrying out something that was truly stupid!

Carrying God's word in our heart takes hard work and isn't something that comes about by accident. Instead, we have to endeavor to prepare before we face temptation such that when it comes, we will be prepared to answer it with God's word in our hearts. If we don't have the word in our reserves, we will never be able to rely upon it when the need arises. That is the heart of what Luke taught us in today's reading.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw how God prepared the Nation of Israel before their entrance into the Promised Land by asking them to first prepare a sacrificial offering from the goodness of His provision from the fruit of the harvest. In what ways can you prepare your heart to celebrate Easter Sunday in such a way, so that then it comes you can see things differently in light of God's provision?

2. In the second reading we learned about God's teaching regarding faith. Once a person understands the Gospel message faith is indeed truly mixed with works (please refer to James 2:18 on your own). In what ways have you ever, perhaps trusted in works instead of faith for your salvation at some point in your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-27-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about the power of words to reveal a person's heart. We discover how as believers, we can look to a future time when we will overcome death. Finally, we continue the study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

First Reading:

1 SIR 27:4-7

When a sieve is shaken, the husks appear;

so do one's faults when one speaks.

As the test of what the potter molds is in the furnace,

so in tribulation is the test of the just.

The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had;

so too does one's speech disclose the bent of one's mind.

Praise no one before he speaks,

for it is then that people are tested.

Today's reading profoundly reveals how a person's word reveals their heart. It closely parallels James' words in James Chapter 3. Words are very powerful, and the writer shows how one's words easily reveal our faults, so it is perhaps better to keep silent Words are the fruit of a person which disclosure the inner working or the heart. My fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Dow, who has since gone away to heaven, had many sayings. I remember that he used to tell me, better to silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt! His words and those in the first reading make good advice for us today.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study from the past several weeks in the fifteenth chapter of First

Corinthians. The context is the teaching on the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth to capture and reward His church. Paul said about this a few verses before today's reading, "*Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed*" (1Corin 15:51-52). When Jesus returns, those who are alive on the earth and who are believers in Him will not die, but rather will be translated into heaven to rule and reign with Him forever (1 Thess 4:17). With these things in mind, let's proceed with the reading.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:54-58 NAS95 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. 55 "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

In the first verse of the reading, Paul quoted from Isaiah 25:8 which reads, "*He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken*." The context of Isaiah was the restoration of Israel after their exile to Babylon as a result of their sin. Paul quoted the Septuagint version of Isaiah and applied it in an eschatological context. Paul looked forward to the God's ultimate restoration of His people in glorified bodies like what Jesus displayed after His resurrection (1 John 3:2, "we shall be like Him"). Next, Paul quoted from Hosea 13:14, a passage in which God is chastising Israel for their sin and telling them that they will not be ransomed from physical death. Here, Paul used an Old Testament quotation to show the uselessness of trying to outrun the penalty of sin, because all sin leads to death (verse 56, Romans 6:23a, "for the wages of sin is death"). Israel had forsaken the Lord and was paying the price for it through exile and ultimately death. Thankfully, the reading does not end there, with an all-important "but God" idea in verse 57. "[B]*ut thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*." As believers in the Lord Jesus through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), we have achieved victory in an eternal sense the moment we believed. Through our faith we can stand strong in the Lord, "steadfast, immovable" (v. 58a) while living with God's promise that our work for Him will be worthwhile (v. 58).

When I wrote this, I was dealing with the impending death of both my father and my father-in-law.

Both men were professing believers in the Lord Jesus. Through their testimony I have stood strong in my faith and know that after they passed, they will be forever with the Lord in heaven. All of the other believers in my family can look forward to the day when they will be reunited with these two godly men.

Living with these biblical truths greatly helps us as we ourselves age and watch as our family and friends pass away. The hope that we have in Jesus helps us to safeguard our hearts from the hopelessness experienced both people in this world who have no such hope.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Saint Luke is Jesus' continued teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount in which he addressed "a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon" (Luke 6:17).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 6:39-45 NAS95 39 And He also spoke a parable to them: "A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit? 40 A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher. 41 Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. 43 For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. 44 For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. 45 The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

Jesus taught His disciples and the crowds some important truths about the nature of His kingdom, a kingdom which was already there (Luke 17:21), and yet to come, as we saw in the second reading. First, the truths of the kingdom must be taught by teachers of the real truth (vv. 39 – 40). Jesus,

Peter, and Paul were very clear about what was happening in their times about the false teachings and about what would happen in the future. Jesus said, "*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*" (Matthew 7:15). Paul said, "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths*" (Timothy 4:3-4). Peter said, "*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves* (2 Peter 2:1). Someone once said in reference to the post millennial spirit of our age, "the only truth that counts is true truth."

Second, believers are called to approach others (and God) with great humility by first examining themselves and getting right with God by repenting of their sin and seeking reconciliation with people whom they have offended (vv. 42-43). The good work of God is produced by a person with a humble heart, such a person is known for their good works that flow from their relationship with God (v. 44). As we saw in the first reading, a person is known by the words they speak (v. 45).

It is perhaps easy to judge the false nature of a group of people called a "cult" whose teachings are so absolutely unbiblical that anyone inside the Christian church can easily understand their insidious nature. However, when false teaching happens under the guise of the Christian church it can be much harder to recognize and deal with. When Jesus spoke His Sermon message, He was beset by the false teachings of the cult of the Pharisees. They taught that the way to reach God was through strict observance of the Law as they interpreted it, a religion of "do." Jesus came along and contradicted their false teachings with a different message, a message of "done." Jesus taught them that God had already secured their salvation, all that was necessary was for them to believe it. These contrasting messages, the false religion of "do" versus the true religion of "done," continue in modern times. Jesus secured eternal life for His believers, none of whom will be lost (John 18:9). Through our faith in Jesus Christ, we can say, "*thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Corinthians 15:57). When "blind guide" attempt to mislead us in the church, we can turn to the truths revealed about God's granting of eternal life to us through faith alone as a result of God's grace. For, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

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1. In the second reading we saw how Paul quoted from the Old Testament where God had poured out curses upon His people Israel for turning away from their covenant with him. However, Paul showed how the Gospel of Grace eclipsed this temporal punishment and pointed the way to an eternal kingdom with eternal life in a perfect human body. How does this contrast between the two covenants help you to understand the struggles you face in your own life? In what ways do you feel that God has in some way given you over to death? How does reflecting upon and growing in your faith in Jesus help you to understand how to achieve victory over these thoughts?

2. Doing the work of God is evidence of our salvation through faith in Christ Jesus as our works flow from our hearts that are changed by God and Who also placed His Holy Spirit in us as a testimony to the truth. However, in what small ways have you perhaps bought into certain aspects of the false Gospel of "do" versus the true Gospel of "done" in which we feel that in some ways we have earned the right to eternal life? In what ways do enduring hardships point us more deeply to the work done by Jesus on the cross for us and oppose the false construct offered by the Pharisees who vainly worked to earn their salvation?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-20-2022

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at several readings which get at the concept of dying to ourselves in order that God may work out His plan in our lives. This is counter-cultural and something that we can only do through God's empowerment, for which we cannot even expect a reward during our natural lifetimes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading from First Samuel is evil King Saul's continuing effort to locate David and murder him. The reading is a self-explanatory narrative of yet another of Saul's many unsuccessful attempts on David's life. Earlier, the Prophet Samuel had anointed David as king in place of Saul (1 Samuel 16:13). After this, the now king David became Saul's armor bearer (1 Sam 16:21) and personal harp player (1 Sam 16:23) which helped comfort the soon to be dethroned king who was tormented by evil spirits from God (v. 23). We included the intervening verses from the reading which were omitted since it made the story clearer.

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First Reading:

Note: The reading covered only 1 SM 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23, the intervening verses have been included.

1 Samuel 26:2-25 NAS95 2 So Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph, having with him three thousand chosen men of Israel, to search for David in the wilderness of Ziph. 3 Saul camped in the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon, beside the road, and David was staying in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness, 4 David sent out spies, and he knew that Saul was definitely coming. 5 David then arose and came to the place where Saul had camped. And David saw the place where Saul lay, and Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army; and Saul was lying in the circle of the camp, and the people were camped around him. 6 Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite and to Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, saying, "Who will go down with me to Saul in the camp?" And Abishai said, "I will go down with you." 7 So David and Abishai came to the people by night, and behold, Saul lay sleeping inside the circle of the camp with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the people were lying around him. 8 Then Abishai said to David, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand; now therefore, please let me strike him with the spear to the ground with one stroke, and I will not strike him the second time." 9 But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD'S anointed and be without guilt?" 10 David also said, "As the LORD lives, surely the LORD will strike him, or his day will come that he dies, or he will go down into battle and perish. 11 "The LORD forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed; but now please take the spear that is at his head and the jug of water, and let us go." 12 So David took the spear and the jug of water from beside Saul's head, and they went away, but no one saw or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a sound sleep from the LORD had fallen on them. 13 Then David crossed over to the other side and stood on top of the mountain at a distance with a large area between them. 14 David called to the people and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, "Will you not answer, Abner?" Then Abner replied, "Who are you who calls to the king?" 15 So David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? And who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not guarded your lord the king? For one of the people came to destroy the king your lord. 16 "This thing that you have done is not good. As the LORD lives, all of you must surely die, because you did not guard your lord, the LORD'S anointed. And now, see where the king's spear is and the jug of water that was at his head." 17 Then Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord the king." 18 He also said, "Why then is my lord pursuing his servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand? 19 "Now therefore, please let my lord the king listen to the words of his servant. If the LORD has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering; but if it is men, cursed are they before the LORD, for they have driven me out today so that I would have no attachment with the inheritance of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 "Now then, do not let my blood fall to the ground away from the presence of the LORD; for the king

of Israel has come out to search for a single flea, just as one hunts a partridge in the mountains." 21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have committed a serious error." 22 David replied, "Behold the spear of the king! Now let one of the young men come over and take it. 23 "The LORD will repay each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the LORD delivered you into my hand today, but I refused to stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed. 24 "Now behold, as your life was highly valued in my sight this day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the LORD, and may He deliver me from all distress." 25 Then Saul said to David, "Blessed are you, my son David; you will both accomplish much and surely prevail." So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place.

The reading details how King Saul set out to locate and murder David, but God delivered Saul into David's hands who did not take advantage of the opportunity and kill him because of his respect for "the Lord's anointed" (v. 11). David seized the opportunity only so far as to gather evidence of his innocence in harming Saul by taking his water pot and spear, which he then offered to return to him by means of some long-range yelling across the canyon (v. 14). The whole affair resulted in Saul making a public confession of his sin by way of screaming a reply to David whose voice he recognized. Saul said, "*I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have committed a serious error*" (v. 21).

This chronicle revealed some very important attributes of godly King David. Although David was in fact the king whom God has already ordained to replace Saul, David waited for God to resolve the issue of the dueling kingship. David respected the position of King and God's ordination of the office, and he left the deposition of the king in the hands of God rather than taking advantage of the many opportunities he had to remove Saul and step in as the rightful ruler and King of Israel. Additionally, King David was patient in waiting on God to formally induct him into the position of King.

In the context of theocratic kingdom, the king of Israel served not only as an all powerful civil ruler but also held a defacto religious position by means of their direct appointment by God. There is a clear distinction between the former kings of Israel in the rulers of our day because the religious and civil powers are more clearly separated. In terms of application, in our day, which of us hasn't seen the obviously evil goings on of our civil rulers and wished that we could take advantage of some easy opportunity to remove these rulers from power, even if by recounting or a recall election? Which of us hasn't looked upon a religious leader with disgust because of abuse of their position and some moral failures? Yet, even today God has made it clear that we are called to respect those people who are placed in positions of authority while not approving their wickedness. Saint Paul said in Romans,

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"1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil" Romans 13:1-4).

This reverence for authority, both of civil and religious leaders, is the primary lesson which we can take away from the reading. Second, we can learn from David and seek to become like him as he was "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22) who waited with great patience and virtual for God to work out His plan in his life.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week's second reading continues from First Corinthians last week which ended at verse 20. This portion of Chapter 15 picks up after Paul had explained how our natural bodies are planted as seeds that then emerge as spiritual bodies after we die in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15: 36-44). Paul said about our natural bodies, "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (v. 44). We pick up with the reading in verse 45.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:45-49 NAS95 45 So also it is written, "The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. 47 The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. 48 As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

The reading opened with Paul's quotation of Genesis, the creation account of how God created man. "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath

of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The central idea in the reading was the continuation of the concept of the spiritual seed we mentioned in the introduction. The natural body is planted as a spiritual seed in order to accomplish God's work on the soil of the world. It is only after the seed dies in the course of the world that it then blossoms into a spiritual one and bears much fruit by bringing others to do so.

Paul's teaching in the reading closely parallels the Lord Jesus' Parable of the Grain of Wheat in John 12. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). In essence, one must die to ourselves and allow God to work through ourselves in order to produce spiritual fruit. After the seed of our natural body dies on earth it then blossoms into the fruit of eternal life which comes through our faith in the Lord Jesus.

We saw in the first reading how David, in a way, died to himself when he didn't take advantage of a blatant opportunity to kill Saul, even though Saul sought to murder him. We know how Jesus during His first reign set aside the independent use of his divine power while looking forward to the day when He would receive His new body upon resurrection from the dead and the day in which He would return to the earth to rule and reign forever. In our lives, we too are called to die to ourselves and can do so knowing that our earthly bodies will be replaced with eternal ones in heaven with God. Through our faith in Jesus and through what we have learned in the Scriptures we can set aside our rights and privileges and die to our own desires, even when it appears obvious to nonbelievers that we should claims our rights.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's Gospel reading continues from last week in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 6:27-38 NAS95 27 "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. 30 Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not

demand it back. 31 Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. 32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. 37 Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. 38 Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure–pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."

Jesus' heavenly perspective challenged those who heard Him to engage in many unheard of practices in a culture of Roman oppression and occupation. And yet even the common sense of that era would have ruled against doing good for one's enemies, the most obvious case the Roman soldiers who forced the Jewish citizens to assist them in various ways or face prosecution. Imagine standing in a marketplace in Jerusalem minding your own business when you are approached by a soldier demanding you to carry his armor some distance to an adjacent city? Or one of them demanding a bribe from you in order to alleviate you of the burden. This was the culture in which Jesus presented this message.

Jesus challenged those listening to love their enemies (v. 27), bless those who cursed or mistreated them (v. 28), not retaliate against someone who struck them (v. 29), give to the needy (v. 29), and the treat others the same way that they wanted to be treated, i.e. the Golden Rule. By following these prescriptions, they would receive a heavenly reward. Jesus went on to challenge those listening even further, extending even to their thought lives regarding not judging people in their minds. In closing, Jesus reminded the people that their blessings to other people will be repaid (v. 38), however not in exactly the way they may have imagined in an earthly sense. Rather, their repayment Jesus is describing is one of spiritual value, like we saw in the second reading with the sowing of an earthly body maturing into a spiritual one.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount isn't as much a calling to behave better, to become a better person by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Rather, he is challenging us to maximize our production of spiritual fruit by setting aside our earthly rights to things like responding to unfair criticism. Instead, He calls us to hold our words in the hope that our behavior may be so counter cultural that the offending party will seek to find out what is so different about us. In this way our quiet behavior may result in the worldly parties seeking the truth of the Gospel for themselves.

My brother in law once owned a breakfast / brunch type restaurant in which he had invested a great deal of money in new equipment after taking on a large business loan. One day he went to the store to begin his work day only to find out that his key wouldn't work, he had been locked out of his own restaurant after the locks had been changed. Come to find out the store was being taken over by the employees who thought that they had better ideas on how to run the operation. My Christian brother could have sued, but with the equipment being in a rented building and the landlord in cahoots with the new "owners," there was little possible value in the legal case. His attorney told him that he would likely win the case against his former employees, but then be unable to collect anything of any real value, and then the restaurant equipment would have to be destroyed in order to be removed. In the end and after much prayer, my brother in law chose to take the high road and allow the employees to reopen the restaurant without his interference.

How many of us could have followed Jesus' instruction in today's Sermon and acted in such a counter cultural way as my brother in law?

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time when your rights were violated, and you were rightfully allowed some form of retaliation but instead chose not to? What was the long-term impact of this upon the others in that case?

2. In the seed-bearing analogy, God has planted us in the world in order to die to ourselves so that we can produce spiritual fruit. What are some specific circumstances in which you have recently died to yourself, and how does knowing about Jesus' life and ministry help to deal with your feelings regarding these matters?

Keywords: ,

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-13-2022



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and finally the Gospel from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the prophet Jeremiah, who was known as the weeping prophet, due to the devastation and grief he experienced with the exiled people of God in the days of the Old Testament. He makes a set of contrasting statements in this passage, that provide a stark interpretive framework for the meaning of life on this planet. While there are many confusing and chaotic experiences in life, some things are very easily defined, based on Jeremiah's words here.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 17:5-8 NAS95 5 Thus says the LORD, "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind And makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the LORD. 6 For he will be like a bush in the desert And will not see when prosperity comes, But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, A land of salt without inhabitant. 7 Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD. 8 For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit."

First of all, Jeremiah delivers the bad news: cursed is the one who puts his/her trust in the wrong things. What are these false places of trust? The list includes: 1) mankind, 2) one's own strength, and 3) anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. Then he provides a word picture to help the reader taste the severity of this misplaced trust. Putting our trust in the wrong things creates a desperate situation, likened to a bush in a desert where there is no water. The unquenching thirst becomes a wasting sort of lifestyle, where there is no hope for flourishing or true prosperity. The "bush" lives in a wasteland, where it is surrounded by unsatisfying and harsh conditions, incompatible with life. This is an excellent picture of the soul that is disconnected from the Lord. While there may be signs of life on the outside, the sentence of death is already pronounced on it and it cannot survive, let alone thrive in this world.

Jeremiah describes this inhospitable environment as "a land of salt" where there are no people who can stand to live there. Again, this picture conjures up a truth about the soul, namely, that it is thirsty. But apart from God's provision, there is no satiation for our thirst. It is a land of salt. And though we may try and try to find water, we end up joining in the song that is sung by the world (in a myriad of different ways): "I can't get no satisfaction."

What hope is there for the thirsty soul? Jeremiah delivers the good news. There is a blessing for those who are tired of living under the curse. There is life for those who are feeling the sting of death. There is abundance for those who are willing to give up their pursuit of false notions of satisfaction. The key to true blessing is to put your trust in the Lord. The result of putting your trust in the right place is likened to a tree that is planted where it can flourish, next to water. Even in a time of heat and drought, it still finds water, because the roots extend into the rich and fertile soil that has been saturated with the life-giving stream. The tree is not "anxious" because the water gives it stability and strength to weather storms and extreme conditions. The tree can give its energy to bearing fruit, even if the immediate climate is not conducive to growth and flourishing. What a picture of contentment and satisfaction. Who would not want to experience the abundance of this second picture of the flourishing tree and avoid the forlornness of the first picture of the scroungy bush?

The problem is not that the tree is thirsty; the problem comes when the tree is not planted into the One who can satisfy the thirst. And there comes the rub. We all want an abundant and fruitful life, but there are different philosophies of how to get there. Will we trust the Word of the Lord, or will we experiment with trying to find life outside of God's provision for us? Will we trust the Lord, who Is the One who created all things, knows all things, and provides us with all things? Or will we determine our own path and put our confidence in our own paths?

Trusting in the Lord. How simple, and yet how very difficult this is for us. The human soul has a tough time believing and trusting in the Lord, especially when life's circumstances are going poorly. We wonder where God is and why He is not doing more to protect and help us. Hardships and setbacks, like what the people of Israel experienced, mock us for being naïve enough to trust a God who seems impotent to save us from the difficulties of life. But is it possible that when God is not saving us from trials, He may be saving us from something more destructive and dangerous that is intangible? Is it possible that God really is helping us, even when we hurt and He doesn't take the pain away?

Jeremiah had to live out of this type of crusty, determined faith in the LORD in the midst of the exile and physical oppression during the siege of Jerusalem. His roots had to extend very deep and far to find streams of living water, for God's chosen people were being brutally attacked, pillaged, and destroyed. If Jeremiah can trust in the LORD, then maybe we, too, can walk by faith in the One who is ultimately "faithful and true" (Revelation 19:11). The two ways are clearly depicted in this passage. The question is, where will we plant ourselves and where will we place our trust?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading drops us in the middle of a heated discussion that was being tossed around in Paul's day and was affecting the Corinthian church. Some were heretically saying that resurrection from the dead was emphatically an impossibility. But instead of divorcing themselves totally from the message of Christianity, they were trying to syncretize this belief into the Gospel (Good News). Paul starts out this chapter by clarifying the message of the Gospel. In verses 1-4 of chapter 15, he states the heart of the Gospel: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day. All of this happened according to what Scripture had predicted and what had been recorded by eyewitnesses. Paul himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus. God's Word was trustworthy on this point, which meant it was trustworthy on other points as well.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

Omitted: (vv. 13-15)

13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

Paul continues to adamantly proclaim the importance of the resurrection of Christ from the dead as the linchpin that holds the Christian faith together. For if Christ did not rise from the dead, "your faith is worthless" (v. 17). Paul, a master orator, takes their logic to the final outcomes and shows how ludicrous it is to believe in a Christian message that is devoid of resurrection power. Some points of logic that he makes include:

- The resurrection of Christ and those who follow Him is a fundamental part of the Gospel (Good News). For if the resurrection is impossible, then Christ was not raised, and cannot raise us.
- IF the resurrection did not happen, then
    - Paul's preaching (and suffering) was in vain and he was a false witness,
    - their faith was in vain, worthless, and, in fact, they were still in their sins,
    - those who had already died in Christ were completely lost—without hope and never to rise again, and
    - Hoping in Christ for this life only is a fool's game—not at all a smart move.

Seeing the nature of the ridiculous conclusions that were stacked up on top of this heresy makes this position untenable with the Christian faith.

The definitive "But" comes into play in the last verse of this passage (v. 20a). "**But** now Christ *has* been raised from the dead" which makes all of the above obsolete. Paul in this sweeping way, underscores the importance of the resurrection of Christ, which has bearing on our lives today. For He was the line leader of what is to come for all who trust in Him. He was the first "fruit" and our resurrection from the dead will be a fruit that follows this inaugural event. Christ changed the trajectory of the human race by living a perfectly righteous life as a human being, which meant that death had no hold on Him. He bore the weight of the world's sin on His shoulders, even though He did no deserve the punishment of our sin, which is death. Therefore, His victory over the grave is our victory over the grave. And while we still experience physical death, we no longer are sentenced to spiritual death, if we will but entrust ourselves to His provision of grace. This is not just good news, it's the best news ever! May the resurrection life of Christ reorient our lives and become the most important organizing principle of our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The heavenly perspective of Jesus is often shocking to those of us who have been saturated in a worldview where there is no God and that operates according to the prince of this world. The Gospel passage for this week provides one of these experiences where the world's values are juxtaposed to God's value system. If we don't have eyes to see, it's not that God is out of step with reality, but more likely that we are blind to the power of an unseen world. Jesus came to shine light into our darkness.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 6:17-26 NAS95 17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon,

Omitted: (vv. 18-19)

18 who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. 19 And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all.

20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. 23 Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.

The setting of the Gospel reading finds Jesus gaining acclaim and recognition amongst not only the Jewish people, but even those from more distant regions that were not particularly God-fearing (Tyre and Sidon). His acclaim, though, seemed to have more to do with what He could do to alleviate finite trials, than about what He could to do to alleviate the infinite problem of sin and disconnection from the Father. So, while He was willing to demonstrate the power of God by healing people of diseases and delivering others from demon possession, He was not willing to further the bent of the human soul that seeks to "use God" for devilish purposes. This passage clarifies that God is not a genie in a bottle, or a vending machine that can be formulaically approached for one's own desired ends.

Instead, Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Here is what He calls blessed:

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead, it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Here is what He cautions us against by saying "Woe" to you who:

- Using your wealth as an end in itself; thinking that material goods can fill the cavernous hole in your soul
- Satisfying your hunger now with finite things, leaving no room for spiritual hunger to drive you to pursue eternal satisfaction
- Seek to always be amused, for there is a somber reality of this life that is designed to bring us to a place of contemplating the meaning and purpose of human existence
- Find approval from others as the organizing principle of your life, for you will never find truth. Instead, you will be willing to accept what is false in order to impress others and fit in with the crowd's worldview.

This teaching of Jesus is not popular, nor easy to incorporate into our lives. The very fact that we have a hard time with it is one of the authenticating proofs of its validity. If it meshed with our human value system, we could hardly believe it as representative of heavenly realities. So, before we try to domesticate what Jesus teaches, we must ask ourselves if we trust Him. If we do, then we will seek to understand and incorporate His perspective into our worldview and allow Him to reorient our value system, no matter how difficult or long this process may take. The good news is that we do not have to attain this perspective on our own strength or through our own striving. When we feel overwhelmed by these truths, we are in a good spot to look up and call out for help. A heartfelt acknowledgment of our weakness to live out of this heavenly mindset is the entry point for God to do a new work in our lives. The Spirit is willing to reshape us to have the mind of Christ—the question is are we willing to let Him do this work in us? Do we trust Him enough to let Him take us where we need to go, to become the type of people who have a counter-cultural mindset? If we do, then we will stand out as lights in a dark and decaying world.

Reflection Questions

1. The Prophet Jeremiah listed three false places of trust which were mankind, one's own strength, and anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. It was perhaps easier for this man of God to understand his own weaknesses. Can you identify with any of these three false places of trust? In what ways does having faith in Jesus help to deliver you from any of these in which you identify?

2. In the Gospel reading we learned how Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable

if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Review the four points of blessing. With which of these can you identify with and what spiritual circumstance brought (or is bringing) this about?

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead, it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.