Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-09-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week's reading begins with a passage from the Apocrypha. We begin our exposition with the second reading which is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi then conclude with the Gospel reading from the third chapter of Luke. The Philippians passage allows us to see into the heart of the Apostle Paul and the mutual affection he shared with the believers in Philippi. The Gospel account introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. The reading includes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which foretells something about both John's ministry and the work of the one whom he introduced.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament. Due to copyright and other restrictions we are not allowed to share a study of this text.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The beginning of Paul's ministry in Philippi is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 16, beginning at verse 11. Philippi was a leading city in the Roman colony of Macedonia, and became the location of the first Christian church in Europe. While there, Paul and his companions were mistreated because of their preaching and were imprisoned. Paul and Silas were miraculously released during an

earthquake and had the opportunity to bring about the conversion of the jailer and his family as a result. The missionary team departed the city and continued what is regarded as Paul's second missionary journey.

Paul wrote the letter to his converts in Philippi to express his gratitude for their financial support in his time of need. The letter was delivered by Epaphroditus, Paul's companion. This is a very personal letter that encourages the church to live with joy and in unity.

Second Reading:

Philippians 1:4-11 NAS95 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Typical of his letters, Paul tells his readers about his prayers for them. He is joyful because of their involvement with him in the sharing of the gospel from the very beginning of their relationship with him. They can have great joy, he writes, because of his confidence that what God started in them at their conversion will be completed. They will be preserved and kept until the "day of Christ Jesus," no doubt a reference to the second coming of Christ to establish His eternal kingdom, about which Paul writes in many of His epistles. That confidence should encourage today's believers, also. If a person has placed his trust in the work of Christ to provide salvation, he can be assured that he will be saved until the very end.

Verses 7 and 8 assure the Philippians of Paul's great affection for them. He tells them, "I have you in my heart." That is true, in part, because he considers that they have been a significant part of his life through their gifts and prayers and during his imprisonment and the difficult times he has had in proclaiming the gospel. His feeling for them is so great that he describes it in strong terms of longing and affection.

The specific elements of Paul's prayer reveal his concern that these converts grow in their spiritual lives. He prays that their love may increase continually. It is not just a feeling, however; it is a love that is based on "knowledge" and "discernment." In the 20 centuries since Paul wrote those words, current society seems to have lost the real meaning of love. Today, it seems to be either a fleeting sentiment based on passing emotions or a purely physical attraction. But true love requires knowing the loved one well and the ability to discern qualities worthy of affection.

Such discernment enables one to choose what is truly best ("excellent" is Paul's term). He writes in

a later chapter that Christians should "let [their] mind dwell on" things that are honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good report "if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise" (4:8). Why? So that until the end of life on earth they will be "sincere and blameless." It is only by filling our minds with those kinds of things that we can live a holy and righteous life. It must have been difficult for believers to live such godly lives in their godless society. What a challenge that is for 21st century Christians with the constant influences of evil through the ever-present media of our times.

Is it possible to live such holy lives? To be sure, it is difficult. But the final portion of today's reading reveals the secret. It is possible only because the believer, as Paul writes, has "been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ." Apart from the indwelling Christ, it would be impossible to be blameless, but while we are still in our present bodies and are incapable of perfection, we do have the power within to increase in holiness and righteous behavior. And, Paul reminds us that all such spiritual progress will be "to the glory and praise of God."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we begin the next reading, we should remember that Luke's Gospel is the result of careful study so that he can present an accurate review of the life and ministry of Jesus. He introduces his story by assuring the readers of "having investigated everything carefully from the beginning." Luke's perspective, not in contrast with the other Gospels but as complementary to them, focuses on Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human.

Although Luke seems to be writing mainly to Gentile Christians, he makes it clear that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He seeks to add to the knowledge of those early Christians confirming that what they already believed was true and trustworthy. Today's reading follows the first two lengthy chapters which relate the stories of Christ's birth and surrounding events. As we approach the Christmas holiday, it might be good to re-read those familiar passages before looking at today's text more carefully.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:1-6 NAS95 1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. 5 'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; 6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'"

Verse 1 of today's reading gives very specific details of the political and geographical environment

into which John the Baptist was to come. Verse 2 introduces the religious leaders of the immediate area. Furthermore, it states that "the word of God came to John" as a simple fact without indicating how or under what circumstances except that it came "in the wilderness" where John seemed to live (Matthew 3:1-5). Zacharias is noted as John's father. The unique story of the announcement and birth of John is recorded earlier in Luke's Gospel (1:5-25).

John the Baptist's message was very clear. Luke says he came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." We should be reminded that repentance means a lot more than just being sorry for your sin. The New Testament word actually means "changing your mind," and it's not just a mental attitude. Genuine repentance involves a change in behavior that results from the renewed mind. John must have been a powerful preacher (enabled by the Holy Spirit, of course), because many responded to his message, repented, and were baptized. Elsewhere, we read that John's message of repentance included his preaching that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This is the same message Jesus preached (Matthew 4:17).

All of this was predicted centuries before by the prophet Isaiah (ch. 40) as repeated by Luke in today's reading. The first prophesied statement is obviously fulfilled in John. Clearly, he was a voice "crying in the wilderness." In an apparent allusion to the preparations that were usually made for a dignitary's travel, John is to make the way clear for the promised Messiah by his teaching. The next several clauses are thought to be poetic ways of saying that the way for Messiah will be advanced, and obstacles will be removed. These clauses may also be metaphors suggesting that the proud and arrogant will be humbled.

Verse 6 quite clearly has reference to the ministry of Messiah, not John the Baptist. In the preceding chapter (2:30-32) Luke had quoted other Scriptures indicating that salvation ultimately would be for both Jews and Gentiles. This is a message that Luke particularly emphasized since he was writing primarily to a Gentile audience, and the Jewish population often mistakenly thought that salvation was for Israel alone.

Reflection Questions

1. What did you learn today about having confidence that God has begun a good work in you and will complete it? That is possible only if you have put your personal trust in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to atone for your sin.
2. In what ways are you filling your mind with the "excellent" things of life that will honor God and build your Christian character?
3. During the past year, what are some specific circumstances when you acknowledged your sin before God, and change your mind and behavior so that you can live a life of holiness?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-03-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the Old Testament book of Exodus and learn about the giving of God's Law and the people's response to it. Then we move to Hebrews in the New Testament, where Jesus is shown to be our high priest, fulfilling the role pictured in the Old Testament offering of sacrificial blood to cover sin. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel of Mark where we learn about the Last Supper. Here Jesus clearly spoke of the significance of Communion, the offering of His body and blood. As you study all three, look for a common theme among them.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). As the name implies, it records the story of Israel's deliverance after 400 years of slavery in Egypt and the long journey of forty years to the Promised Land. After the Exodus from Egypt and during the long journey through the wilderness, God appeared to Moses on Sinai Mountain and delivered to him the Law. The summary of it, the Ten Commandments, is in chapter 20, and the next

several chapters explain more fully the covenant God is making with His people. Laws and regulations relating to worship, offerings, sacrifices, and the building of a tabernacle for His dwelling place are given in great detail.

First Reading:

> *Exodus 24:3-8 NAS95 3 Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!" 4 Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. 6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" 8 So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

We have read now about the people's response to the giving of God's Law. When Moses came down from the mountain and revealed the Law the people twice agreed to obey the Law completely, first in verse 3 and again in verse 7. After hearing the people's response to the Law, Moses wrote down the words that God had told him (v. 4). Then, he built an altar and made the sacrifices that God had commanded, including the sprinkling of blood on the altar. The blood from the sacrificial animals represented the covenant, in a similar way as we remember the shedding of the once for all sacrificial Lamb Jesus through celebration of communion. This was the beginning of many years of sacrificial offerings which prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of blood to be made by the Messiah Jesus many centuries later. When Moses read from the "book of the covenant" that he had written down (v. 4a), the people they once again vowed to obey the Law.

We know how all of this turned out. Although the people agreed to obey the Law, they very soon broke away from strict observance of it to the extent that God prevented any of them except Joshua and Caleb from entering the Promised Land. In subsequent generations the people fell into cycles of sin, punishment from God, and return to following His Law. At the end of the Old Testament when the voice of the prophets fell silent, the people began increasingly seeking the coming Messiah. Obedience to the Law became codified by the scribes and Pharisees into the Jewish religion through which the doers of this "law" felt justified.

As Christians we too are called to obey God's Law but through a new relationship granted to us through the New Covenant initiated by Jesus' death and resurrection. Like the Jews in the reading, we agree that we want to obey God. However, unlike those in the reading, our ability to obey God's teaching is granted through the new heart given to us from above (John 3:3). Although obedience ought to be our response when we hear God's Word, God knows that we will continue to struggle with sin (Romans 3:23). Through our relationship with Jesus Christ was have an Advocate, Jesus

Christ, Who intercedes on our behalf with our Father God. Saint John said, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:1-3). We should not look back at the Jews and think that we would do any better than they do. Instead, we have a unique empowerment through God's Holy Spirit living within us that they didn't have. This should provide us with a sense of even greater responsibility since to whom much is given, much is demanded (Luke 12:48).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the First reading we saw how God's covenant was display to His people Israel through the observance of the sacrificial practices in the Law. In this passage from Hebrews we read of a "New Covenant." Although the old covenant was sealed with through the repetitious offering of the blood of sacrificial animals, the New Covenant was sealed with one single offering of the blood of Jesus. In the reading we will see how Jesus is shown as the High Priest Who offers this single, acceptable sacrifice (His death burial, and resurrection) to atone for our sin.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 9:11-15 NAS95 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*

The Old Testament priests had to repeat the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the Temple, which were mere symbols of the dwelling place of God, for "the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands" (Acts 7:48). But Jesus entered into "the greater and more perfect tabernacle"—into the very presence of God—to present the sufficient sacrifice of His blood. So, not only has Jesus paid the price for our sin, He has also become the one mediator between man and God (1 Timothy 2:5). Therefore, as Christians we can rejoice that through the work of Jesus on our behalf, we have the "promise of the eternal inheritance," ever to be with Jesus in heaven.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

All three of the readings today made mention of a covenant. In the first reading from Exodus it was God's covenant with man that required the keeping of the Law, including blood sacrifices as a

picture of cleansing. In the second reading from Hebrews the writer reminded us of a New Covenant that God offers to people through the sacrifice of Christ's blood that satisfied God's demands for justice. Finally, as we look at today's Gospel reading, we have the account of the Last Supper with its deep, significant teaching of essential truth. In the reading we will see Jesus celebrate His last Passover meal with the twelve disciples.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 14:12-26 NAS95 12 On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?" 13 And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; 14 and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' 15 "And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there." 16 The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover. 17 When it was evening He came with the twelve. 18 As they were reclining at the table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me–one who is eating with Me." 19 They began to be grieved and to say to Him one by one, "Surely not I?" 20 And He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who dips with Me in the bowl. 21 For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." 22 While they were eating, He took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is My body." 23 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 And He said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Jesus had evidently conferred with the person whom the disciples met regarding the place with they were going to prepare the Passover meal. However, only Jesus could have known that at the instant when they went into the city they would meet this certain man carrying a pitcher (v. 13). The disciples then prepared the meal perhaps not understanding the full significance as we do with the benefit of hindsight. The Passover supper provided clear illustrations of God's grace and mercy to sinful men. First, it pointed back to the delivery of Israel from Egypt. When the angel of death fell upon the Egyptian households, their firstborn children died. But the Jewish children survived because the families had sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial lamb (representative of Jesus, the Lamb of God) on their doorposts. The celebration of Passover for the Jews is a vivid reminder of deliverance by blood. Now, on this special night in Jerusalem Jesus used object lessons to demonstrate that it was essential to identify by faith in His blood and body in order to receive the offered gift of salvation and a personal relationship with God. In stark contrast to this gracious offer, Jesus points out that one of the Twelve, who had walked and worked with Him, would betray Him. In fact, before the night was over, all of the disciples would fail the Master (however eleven repented and returned to Him).

As we look back at Jesus' Last Supper, we recognize the great importance of our communing with Jesus through the celebration of the communion meal. Communion helps us to recognize how our Savior willingly offered His body and blood as the supreme sacrifice once and for all. Although we take communion many times, each time we look back to the single sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf forever. Unlike the priests in the Old Testament who had to offer repeatedly the same sacrifices which never took away their sin (Hebrews 10:11), when we celebrate communion we recognize how our Great High Priest Jesus sat down at the right hand of God after offering Himself once, taking away our sins forever (Hebrews 10:12). Communion provides a time for us to reflect upon our unique relationship with God through the New Covenant, one in which we no longer have to rely upon the Old Testament priests offering sacrifice on our behalf, as we saw in the first and second readings today.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading we saw some powerful statements about both the identity and the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ towards believers. Study the text of this reading again and answer the questions that follow.

> *Hebrews 9:11-15 NAS95 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*

A. The author of Hebrews described how Jesus as the eternal High Priest entered not into the tabernacle built by Moses but into a far different place. Describe the attributes of the "more perfect tabernacle" (v. 11) into which Jesus entered. In what ways is this tabernacle different from the one built by Moses?

B. Verse 15 begins with the phrase, "For this reason." For what reason is the author or Hebrews referring?

2. In the Gospel lesson we read about Jesus' last supper with His disciples and His call to the disciples to reflect upon whether they would be the one who betrayed Him (v. 18). How does what

you learned today about the eternal nature of the ministry of Jesus as our highly priestly King enable you to better answer a question about your own ability to take a stand for our Lord?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 05-27-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Our first reading is from one of the first five books of Bible, the Books of the Law. The second reading is from the letter of St. Paul to the church in Rome, which explains the basic elements of the Gospel. Finally, the reading from St. Matthew includes the final instructions of Jesus to his disciples.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Deuteronomy, the name which means "second law." In reading Deuteronomy it's helpful to remember that God is not only reminding Israel the law but also of her special place in his love; they are his chosen people. Furthermore, in this repeating of the law given to Moses, God is reminding the nation of their responsibility to live within the sphere of that love.

Special privilege, as God's chosen people, always means increased spiritual responsibility. This last Book of the Law was written by Moses near the end of his life. Just before today's reading we learn that God forbid Moses from entering the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 3:36). Although God didn't oblige Moses' request to go and visit the land, He did provide Moses with a panoramic view of the land from on top of Mount Pisgah (v. 27).

Today's As you read the passage, reflect on God's special love for those who follow Him, and how this love is played out through God's protection and sovereign control of circumstances.

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 4:32-40 NAS95 32 Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? 33 Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived? 34 Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? 35 To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. 36 Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. 37 Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, 38 driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in and to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is today. 39 Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other. 40 So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time.*

In this passage, God reminds his people of his miraculous care for them up to this point as they journey on to the Promised Land. He has provided for them as for no other people. He delivered them miraculously from slavery in Egypt, and He was delivering them from nations much larger and more powerful than they. He has spoken to them through Moses, and He had disciplined them for their failures, but always in order to restore them. God reminded them of the conditional nature of His covenant with Moses, where obedience was required in order to obtain the promised blessings. "So you shall keep His statutes and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you" (v. 40). God had repeatedly warned the Hebrew people about this necessity, and we know from the later Books in the Bible that they missed the mark in obeying Him.

In applying today's reading to our lives, we recognize that we are under a New Covenant with God made through the blood of Jesus Christ. We entered this covenant when we placed our trust in Him and not in any merit found in ourselves (Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8-9). As believers

in Jesus Christ we are in a unique position in contrast to those we just read about who were under the Mosaic Law. God has provided us with His Holy Spirit Who lives in our hearts which provides us with the ability to obey Him. While we live under God's grace His Holy Spirit compels us with the ability to obey Him while we can look back at the Old Testament Law and observe How God cared for and guided His people. We will learn more about how God empowers us through His Spirit in the second reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The first reading is from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is how as believers we are heirs with Christ, not only in His exultation but also in His suffering (Romans 5:3, Romans 8:17). As we just looked at God's warning given to Moses about the requirement for obedience, we see in the verses in Romans leading up to today's reading how God provides us with the Holy Spirit to empower us to obey. "[F]or if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14). We pick up with today's reading in verse 14.

Second Reading:

> *Romans 8:14-17 NAS95 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.*

In the reading we see the relationship of the Christian to God. It's not an association of fear, as one who is under the bond of slavery. Rather, the person who is "led by the Spirit of God" is considered an adopted son and can rightfully speak of God as his father. What's more, as an adopted son, he is also an heir; he has an unspeakable inheritance (which Paul writes about in his letter to the Ephesians). In fact, the Christian is a co-heir with Christ. All that God has planned for Jesus, who obeyed the Father even to His death and resurrection, will be shared with his adopted brothers. There is a word of caution, however. Paul writes that the Christian will suffer with Christ (see also Romans 5:3) and later be glorified with Him. If our faith in Jesus is genuine, we will be willing to suffer for Him, not to earn salvation in any way, because He has paid the full price for that, but to demonstrate our love, obedience, and loyalty to Him.

Saint John said, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). We see this in today's reading where the Holy Spirit Who lives within us cries out "with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16b). How glorious is it that we have God's living testimony within our hearts to help us especially during out times of doubt!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew. The context is the very closing of the Book where Jesus met with His disciples just prior to His ascension back to heaven.

Gospel Reading:

> *Matthew 28:16-20 NAS95 16 But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. 17 When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. 18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

These verses are known as Jesus' "Great Commission." Here Jesus provides a summary commandment to His disciples, and by means of application to all believers regarding the work that He left us here on earth to accomplish. The question of obedience that we saw in the first reading is also mentioned in this reading. In these few verses, we hear Jesus making His final appeal to his disciples, giving them instructions, clearly stating what his purpose is for them. To settle the doubts of some, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that He has all necessary authority to commission them, and, what's more, He assures them of his presence with them throughout the future. Jesus is the God that we heard speaking with authority in the first reading, and the God that lives within us and testifies to us that we saw in the second reading. God had promised (especially in John's Gospel) that He would send his Holy Spirit to lead, teach, and counsel them in his absence. Sandwiched between the statement of his authority and the promise of his presence is the distinct purpose which He has for them. They are to go, make disciples, baptize them (in the name of the Holy Trinity), and teach them to obey all that He has commanded (vv. 19 – 20).

Jesus' calling makes it clear that in our day we are to make disciples, that is, we are to take the gospel message to the world and encourage them to put their faith in the Son of God who sacrificed his life to pay the penalty for mankind's sin. The evidence of that believing faith is baptism into the name of the triune God. But there's something beyond faith and baptism. We are to teach new disciples "to observe (or obey) all" of Christ's commands.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw how Moses relayed God's message of the need for obedience to the people under the Law. In what ways do we as believers in the New Covenant have it "easier" to obey God?

2. In the second reading Paul said, "but you have received a spirit of **adoption** as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15). How might this verse resonate with someone who was adopted into their family? In what ways could this speak to the person who never experienced a loving, human father? In what ways can you relate, and how does knowing God make the difference?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 1-1-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week begins with an Old Testament reading that expresses a wonderful benediction on God's people. The second reading is most appropriate for this season of the year. Paul writes to the church in Galatia and encourages them with the marvelous truth that God sent His Son, Jesus, to be the promised Messiah, and He did so at just the right time. The Gospel reading reveals one of the prominent features of the Christmas story, the shepherds, who were the first to hear of the newborn child. [This week was written by Jesse Deloe.]

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Book of Numbers takes up the story where Exodus left it; Leviticus was parenthetical with lots of teaching about the law that had first been noted in Exodus. Numbers is a book of order, preparing the people for the wilderness wanderings. Its theme is service, how God's people should worship and walk in a life of purity.

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First Reading:

Numbers 6:22-27 NAS95 22 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 23 "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: 24 The LORD bless you, and keep you; 25 The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; 26 The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.' 27 "So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them."

There are three triplets in vv. 24-26. Could that be a hint of the Trinity? In any case, there are five blessings that the priest is to share with the people. "The LORD bless you" is the first. The term means merely that God will show favor to His people. That would have been a great encouragement to this multitude of people wandering in the wilderness. "… and keep you." God promises to guard, protect, and preserve His people. "The LORD make His face shine on you." This was the request of the psalmist many years later, "Let the light of your face shine on us" (Psalm 4:6). You will recall that after Moses met with the Lord on Mt. Sinai, his face shone with the reflected glory of God (Exodus 34:30). And Paul tells us that "the knowledge of God's glory [is] displayed in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

"And be gracious to you." God is the God of grace; He continually gives to His people what they don't deserve (that's grace). "The LORD lift up His countenance on you" is another way of saying "make His face shine on you." It's a comfort to know that God is always looking at His people and seeking to provide for them. "And give you peace." The Old Testament word for peace is still heard today in many parts of the Middle East. It's "shalom," and it means far more than the absence of hatred and war. It suggests health and wholeness, harmony. And, of course, it is only God who can give that kind of peace ultimately.

To make this text relevant to believers today, remember that if you are in Christ, God extends these same blessings to you: favor or grace, protection and provision, shining His face on you, and giving you spiritual health and wholeness.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's letter to the Galatians is an argument against falling away from faith. It's a challenge to recognize our position in Christ and conduct our lives as people of faith. The portion we're reading today has some really deep theological content that is important for the believer to understand.

Second Reading:

Galatians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a

son, then an heir through God.

The first verse of our study takes us to the Christmas theme, "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman." It's the fulfillment of centuries of promises of the Old Testament prophets. And it occurred at exactly the right time; Paul describes it as "the fullness of the time." The known world at the time of Christ's coming was largely centralized with the Roman Empire in control. There was a trade language that was known worldwide, so the message of the Gospel could be circulated and understood within a few years of Christ's life. Many of the religions of the day were expecting some kind of "savior." During the 400 silent years between the Old and New Testament God was preparing men, nations, and civilizations—unwittingly to them—for Messiah's arrival.

In fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, Jesus was born. And Paul gives the reason for His coming: "that He might redeem those who were under the law." He came to be the sufficient sacrifice that God demanded as the penalty for our sin. But, there's more than that. Paul speaks of "the adoption as sons." In the culture of that day, a lad had no legal rights or standing until he reached a certain age. He was a real son of his father, but he was not entitled to an inheritance or standing as an adult son until he reached that age, and then he was "adopted" legally as the heir of his father. God, in His grace, has given to the believer today the Holy Spirit ("Spirit of His Son"), and we can call God "Father" or "Papa." As the young men in Galatia, once they were adopted, they were no longer like slaves, they were legitimate sons, heirs. So are believers today; no longer slaves to sin and the law, but free, adopted sons of the Father. And it's all of God's doing out of His amazing love and grace.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Among the many "Christmas" passages in the Bible, Luke 2 is probably the most often read. As told there, the story is filled with the miracles associated with the coming of Messiah, with a report of the first to be told, the shepherd. On the other hand, Matthew 2 tells of the wise men from the East who were led by a star to find the promised Jesus. We would do well, however, to read Philippians 2, also, which in a way tells the Christmas story from Jesus' point of view (vv. 5-8) and what it cost Him. Today's reading begins after the birth of Jesus and the shepherds hearing the announcement from the angels.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:16-21 NAS95 16 So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. 17 When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. 21 And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision,

His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

In our passage today we read that the shepherds, after hearing the announcement from the angels, "came in a hurry" to check out the story. Isn't it interesting that the announcement was made to men who were considered to be pretty low on society's register? But, it was to them that the announcement was made. We don't know all that they had been told, but they obviously believed the angels' message. They came and saw, and then they left to spread the good news, all the while "glorifying and praising God." As a result, many heard the story and wondered about it.

We're told that Mary also pondered about what had happened. The birth had been foretold, so she knew that this little baby was to be the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). There is a popular Christmas song that asks, "Mary, did you know?" Well, she knew a lot. The angel had told her that this baby would be "great" and would have "the throne of David" and "reign over the house of Jacob forever in a "kingdom [that] will never end." (Luke 1:32-33). Even his name was given Mary and later to Joseph: Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). So, Mary knew a lot about God's purposes for this baby, but she couldn't understand it all. Thus, she wondered about what it all meant and how it would work out.

According to the custom and the practice laid down by God for His people, Mary and Joseph presented the child to God; He was circumcised on the 8th day, and He was given the name Jesus, which means, "God saves." Thus began Jesus' human life on earth, one that He would eventually offer as the only sacrifice that can take away the sins of the world forever.

Happy New Years from Christians for Christ. May this New Year bring you closer to God in many ways.

Reflection Questions

1. Jesus, as the Son of God was truly God in the flesh whereas we as children of God are adopted into His family. In what ways have you yourself understood what it means to be an "adopted" son or daughter of God?

2. As adopted children of God not under the Law but under grace, in what ways to you rejoice in being free from the law and enjoying this father-son type of relationship with God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-31-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-31-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon, king of Israel, and the wisest man of his time. Although it is inspired by God—as is all Scripture–it is written from the perspective of a frustrated man who is seeking for answers to life's hard questions. The second reading is from Paul's epistle to the early church in Colossae. Its theme is the Christian life that is centered in Jesus Christ and how that is lived out in everyday life. Finally, we look once again at the Gospel of Luke and hear Jesus speak about the dangers of human greed.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Ecclesiastes is a hard book for many readers to understand, because at times it seems to support ideas that are contrary to other biblical teachings. For example, "There is a time to kill" (3:3). Of course, context is all important in interpreting Scripture, so we have to remember that the author, though the wisest of all men, is looking at life from a purely secular perspective. He uses the expression, "under the sun" more than two dozen times in the book.

First Reading:

Ecclesiastes 1:1-2 NAS95 1 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity."

Ecclesiastes 2:21-23 NAS95 21 When there is a man who has labored with wisdom, knowledge and skill, then he gives his legacy to one who has not labored with them. This too is vanity and a great evil. 22 For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? 23 Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.

The authorship of this book is made perfectly clear from the very beginning. He is the third king of Israel, under whose reign the nation reaches the pinnacle of its world prominence, especially in terms of wealth. God had spoken to Solomon on at least two occasions and had asked him what he wanted above all else. Solomon asked not for riches or fame, but for wisdom, and God granted his request (1 Kings 3:5-12). And it was Solomon who built the temple for God to dwell in by His Shekinah Glory.

To read the exploits of Solomon is to discover a man of great talent, having written three thousand proverbs and a thousand and five songs (1 Kings 4:32). He failed to keep his promises to God, however, and he took numerous foreign wives and accumulated thousands of horses in direct disobedience to God's commands. As a result, Solomon questions life's realities. What is life all about? What is its purpose? What good is it for man to work hard when he gains little and cannot rest?

Today's reading records those questions and the completely unsatisfactory answers in Solomon's judgment. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity," he writes. Another translation of this conclusion is "Completely meaningless! Everything is meaningless." We must remember, however, that this is not the end of all things. Solomon concludes this writing by acknowledging that his search "under the sun" has produced nothing, but there is a lesson to be learned. He writes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind (12:13). Today, then, in spite of the apparent hopelessness of life sometimes, we are to keep God's commandments. That will give us the peace that Solomon was searching for.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Whenever a paragraph begins with the word "therefore," you have to ask what has preceded and how is it related to what is to follow. As a consequence to what Paul has taught in chapters 1 and 2, the believer should follow the instructions he is about to give. In other words, because the Christian recognizes that Jesus is God in the flesh (2:9), has "received Jesus as Lord" (2:6), and has been "made alive with Christ (2:13), he or she does not need to submit to the rules of the world that is controlled by Satan and his evil system (2:20).

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 6 – 8 which were omitted from the reading are included below.

Colossians 3:1-11 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. 5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. 6 For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, 7 and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, 10 and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him– 11 a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Instead of following the worldly way, the believer is to have a different motivation. The Christian has been raised up with Christ and is to "keep seeking the things above" (3:1). That is, his incentives should be spiritual, inspired from above, not worldly. Believers are to focus on "things above not on the things … on the earth (v. 2). The apostle uses the phrase, "set your mind," which reminds us of what he wrote in Romans 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters . . . Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (verses 1-2). It's a matter of the mind—what we think. Instructions like this have less to do with emotion and more to do with sound thinking and proper conduct as a result.

How is all this possible? Paul makes it clear; the believer "has died" (to sin), his life is "hidden with Christ in God," and one day Christians will be "revealed with Him in glory." It all begins with acknowledging these facts as true, considering our bodies as being dead to the evils that the writer lists (v. 5). Paul recognizes, as the Christian will, also, that we once walked in such sinful behavior, but now we are to put off all those sinful traits.

Since the Christian is part of the body of Christ, the church, he must put off sinful behavior and put on the new characteristics of the believer who is born again of God and has a new nature. Paul concludes this portion of the reading by reminding us that when men and women come into a relationship with Jesus Christ by faith, they join a host of believers whose prior differences are of no significance now. The family of God is distinct in itself but it no longer involves ethnic origins, religious distinctions, social positions, or any such differences. We are all in Christ and He is the center of all things and the head of the body.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Jesus was speaking to a large crowd, "many thousands," the text says (Luke 12:1). He speaks first to His disciples, warning them about dangers to come. Even though there will be some who will try to kill them, they are not to fear, because they belong to God. He encourages them to realize that God

cares for every sparrow, and they are much more precious to Him than the birds. As Jesus was telling them about what would occur, He is interrupted by a request from the crowd. It's a personal concern that Jesus addresses and uses to teach important principles about possessions and greed.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 12:13-21 NAS95 13 Someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." 14 But He said to him, "Man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?" 15 Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." 16 And He told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man was very productive. 17 And he began reasoning to himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?' 18 Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.' 20 But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?' 21 So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

The request: "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Without responding to the specific request, Jesus uses it as a springboard to reveal real-life principles that are not widely recognized or practiced (either in His day or today). Good teachers, by the way, will wisely take such opportunities to launch a lesson that has much broader application than the personal request or question of an individual inquirer.

Jesus begins by saying, "Not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." Then, as He often did, Jesus tells a parable, a story, to illustrate His point. He tells about a rich man who could think only of how to accumulate more riches and how to hoard them. He thought that he would then be able to enjoy a life of ease and plenty. The rich man's plight sounds a lot like many of our 21st century citizens in more affluent countries. To look at the size of people's houses and their overflowing garages, one might think that Jesus was wrong. "Stuff" does seem to be of great importance. Yet, as the Broadway play says, "You Can't Take It With You." So, we should consider our spiritual condition more than the abundance of things we own.

Jesus went on to share the climax of the story. God intervenes in the rich man's life and enlightens him—and us—of the insignificance of life if it is all wrapped up in what we have. There are two dire consequences of the rich man's plan. First, he has not thought of the future in eternal terms. His soul is lost forever. Second, he has not thought of his possessions in terms of their true value. What happens to them when he's gone? Perhaps we should also recognize that he gave no consideration to how those possessions could be used for wider benefit than his own personal enjoyment.

Jesus concludes, applying the lesson to all his hearers (and readers of the text today): "The man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" is doomed as was the rich fool. So, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves

break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What are one or two ways in which you are storing up for yourself treasure on earth? In what ways does Jesus' teaching inform you heart as a defense against this?

2. Since you have placed your trust in Jesus for salvation, are you setting your mind on heavenly things, avoiding the lure of the world, and renewing your mind in God's Word? In light of what you learned today, what are some of the things that God has empowered you to do differently next week?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/073116.cfm

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 114

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-10-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-10-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from the book of Deuteronomy, which means "second law" or "copy of the law." A whole new generation had grown up since Moses first gave the law, so the new generation is given a review of the history of Israel since the Exodus and a modified and expanded review of the law. The second reading, from Paul's letter to the Colossians contains an essential explanation of who Jesus is. The final excerpt for this week is the recording of Jesus telling the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan. The story itself is amazing, but its application to the hearers (and today's readers) is most significant.

Introduction to the First Reading:

To understand literature of any kind, it is always important to consider the context of the passage under consideration. This is especially true of the Bible, since it is the inerrant Word of God, is given in a historical setting, and is intended to be relevant to the lives of the current and subsequent hearers or readers. Verse 10 of today's reading actually begins in the middle of a sentence, so we should look back several verses to see the context. Moses has promised (v. 9) that God would make His people prosperous both in the produce of their work and in their progeny. He will take delight in them . . . (now see today's reading).

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 30:10-14 NAS95 10 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. 11 For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' 14 But

the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.

Two conditions are given for this promised blessing of God: "if you obey" and "if you turn to the Lord … with all your heart and soul." It has been suggested that "obedience" may be the key word in Deuteronomy, because "obey" and "obedient" are used at least ten times in some translations. Not only does God expect His people to obey His commands, but Moses says that God has made His command easy for them to grasp. Verse 14 suggests that when God's people obey, He enables them to understand His Word (His commands), because they are "near," "in your mouth and in your heart."

Many people are seeking God as if He were unreachable, so transcendent that human beings cannot find Him. Although sin will surely separate a person from God, He remains available to the true seeker. Isaiah wrote, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). One of the strong lessons from Deuteronomy is that obedience is necessary in order to know God. Jesus Himself said, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14.23).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Colossians is one of the so-called "Prison Epistles," because the Apostle Paul wrote them to various churches in Asia Minor while he was jailed in Rome. His writings usually include a succinct but rich theological passage, explaining doctrine for the benefit of young believers and their leaders. Those deep teaching passages are most often followed by very practical instruction about Christian living. Today's reading is a primary statement of who Jesus is. One New Testament scholar notes, "In Colossians we have the most thorough presentation of Christology in the New Testament." The substance of the epistle may be summed up in a key verse (3:11), "Christ is all and in all."

Second Reading:

Colossians 1:15-20 NAS95 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities–all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. 19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, 20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

Paul concludes a very wonderful prayer for the Colossians with a reference to God's "beloved son, in whom we have redemption" (v. 14). Then, our reading for today begins, detailing who this "beloved son" is. First, "He is the image of the invisible God." We learn two very important ideas here. "Image" means an exact copy; in other words, there is no difference in essence between God and Jesus. Also, since God is invisible, He has made it possible for us to see Him in physical form through

the incarnation of Jesus. John's Gospel is helpful here: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known (1:18).

The term "firstborn of all creation" has been confusing to many, thinking that Jesus was a created being, not having existed as God before creation. However, what Paul has in mind here are the rights and privileges of a firstborn son, especially the son of a monarch. The expression was used of David in Psalm 89:27, "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." So, the idea is of priority, not birth order.

Speaking of creation, Paul teaches that it is Jesus by whom everything has come into being: "All things have been created through Him." Not only that, they were created "for Him." He is supreme over creation. In fact, everything in the world is held together by Him. Jesus is the creator and upholder of the physical universe, and He is also the creator and head of the church, that body of believers who, by faith, have become a part of His body (a metaphor for the church) of which He is the head.

If we learn nothing else from this passage, it should be very clear to the reader that Jesus is to "have first place in everything." He created it all; He sustains it; He will bring it all to completion when God's gracious plan of redemption is fulfilled. And that plan is made possible because in God's "good pleasure" Jesus provided the means of reconciliation with God by the "blood of the cross."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

We sometimes read the story of the Good Samaritan, admiring his kindness and generosity in helping an unfortunate stranger who had been mugged (in today's parlance). To profit most from the story, we must recognize the circumstances that prompted Jesus to tell the story and understand both the the question that prompted the interchange and the answer. It's far more than an interesting tale. Its lessons may require some tough introspection and application.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 10:25-37 NAS95 25 And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" 27 And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 28 And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." 29 But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. 31 And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, 34 and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he

put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' 36 Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" 37 And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

A lawyer asks Jesus about eternal life. He asks, "What do I have to *do* to earn it?" Jesus reminds him of the basic law of God, which the lawyer acknowledges: to love God and your neighbor. When Jesus affirms his answer, He tells the inquirer to do it, to love God and his neighbor. "Who is my neighbor? the lawyer asks, and Jesus then relates the parable that has become so familiar to us today.

In the story there are four characters that are easily identified. The injured man is a traveler on a busy road between two cities. Three other travelers are noted: a priest who passes by the victim, perhaps because he thought he was dead and to touch a dead body would make the priest unclean until he went through certain required cleanings. The Levite was another religious person, who undoubtedly served in the temple or synagogue. Very likely, he also wanted to avoid the uncleanness associated with a possibly dead man. Finally, a stranger came along who was from Samaria. Most likely, the injured man was Jewish, perhaps identified by his clothing. Although Samaritans and Jews did not associate, this traveling Samaritan took pity on the victim and offered him assistance at some personal cost.

As someone has said, Jesus' parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. So, as we hear the story, we wonder what is the basic lesson to be learned. Who does each of the characters represent: the injured traveler, the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan? Simply put, the first two represent people who, though religious, put feelings and convenience ahead of compassion and help. The Samaritan pictures the person who, though of a different religious and/or ethnic background, has compassion for someone in need and freely offers help. But the critical question is how do we identify the neighbor?

In answer to the Jesus' question, the lawyer replies that the neighbor is "the one who showed mercy," the Samaritan. Most of us misread the story. We seem to think Jesus is telling us to identify the needy around us as the neighbors who need help? No, He is teaching that we who see someone in need are to be the neighbor who brings aid and compassion to the needy even when they are not "our kind," and may be different from us in many ways.

We should also observe that the lawyer's initial question assumes that he—or we—can *do* something to inherit eternal life. The action of the Good Samaritan is evidence of a heart that is right before God. The heart that has a genuine love for God and serves Him comes to Him by faith and serves by His grace.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the roles of the characters are easy to identify. In real life it is much harder to recognize the needs of the strangers and then to do something about it in a

timely manner. In what ways do you see opportunities for you to be a compassionate neighbor to someone in need, even someone very different from you?

2. Whom among your neighbors and workplace could you consider as a "Samaritan" in that they are different from you in terms of beliefs and culture? What are some ways in which understanding this in advance may help you to accept help from others?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/071016.cfm

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 105

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_07-10-2016.pdfDownload

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-5-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **6-5-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from one of the Old Testament history books, 1 Kings. The passage relates the story of a miraculous healing by the prophet Elijah, who is sometimes thought of as a precursor of the Messiah Jesus. The second reading tells us how the Apostle Paul received the message He preached largely to Gentiles. It comes in the epistle that most clearly differentiates the Gospel message from Judaism. The Gospel reading once more is from Luke. The miraculous event of this episode might very well remind us of the story of Elijah in the first reading.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Anyone familiar with today's story will recall the context. In the opening verses of chapter 17, we read about the prophet Elijah moving on to the region of Zarephath where a famine was raging because of the lack of rain, which Elijah had predicted in verse 1. Here, he encountered a widow who was gathering sticks for a fire to prepare what she thought would be a last meal for her and her son. The widow followed the prophet's instructions, and the flour and oil were multiplied to provide food for the three of them.

First Reading:

1 Kings 17:17-24 NAS95 17 Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!" 19 He said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. 20 He called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" 21 Then he

stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." 22 The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. 23 Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." 24 Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

In today's episode, the son becomes ill and dies. The widow, forgetting the miraculous provision of food that had sustained her and the boy, blames Elijah for her son's death. Without any argumentation, Elijah takes the boy upstairs, stretches out over him, and prays. He calls upon the LORD to let the child live, and God grants his entreaty. It's a wonderful, heart-warming story, of course. And we should praise God for His answering prayer and restoring life. After all, this is not fable; it is recorded in God's Word, and it is historical reality.

We can benefit from this historical incident by understanding at least two important truths. First, God is the giver of life. As Job said, God gives and God takes away. He remains God. This miracle demonstrates once again His omnipotence and His grace. The widow's response also bears an important reminder. She said that she recognized that God's presence and power were evident in His prophet. Although, we won't likely perform life-giving- miracles as Elijah did, still we should live and speak in such a way that those who observe our life and words will recognize that we belong to God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the opening verses of his letter to the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul argues strongly against false teachers who have perverted the true gospel of Christ. His language is pretty emphatic. He says that even if angels were to teach a gospel that was different from what he taught, they should be "eternally condemned" (v. 8). He, then, proceeds to tell them about his own experience in receiving the gospel from God Himself.

Second Reading:

Galatians 1:11-19 NAS95 11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. 15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. 18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I did not see any other of the

apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

Paul makes it clear that what he had taught the Galatians about Jesus had not come from the teaching of other men. God's gracious provision of salvation by faith through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was revealed to Him by God Himself. It was on the road to Damascus (the story is told three times in the Book of Acts) that Jesus appeared to Paul (then called Saul) and dramatically changed his life.

The writer indicates that his readers knew that Saul, before his conversion, had persecuted the church of God, even trying to destroy it altogether. Because of his zeal for God and Judaism, he had risen high in his religious pursuits, being even more zealous for Jewish traditions than his contemporaries. God intervened in the persecutor's life, and Paul acknowledges that God had chosen him ("set me apart") even before his birth. The Apostle makes it very clear that it was all by grace; Paul had not earned the right to know and serve Jesus. In fact, his pre-conversion life and his sinful nature (like all the rest of us) could earn only God's wrath and condemnation. But in God's mercy—not giving us what we deserve, He offers us grace—giving us what we don't deserve as a gift when we put our trust in Jesus and acknowledge Him as Lord.

Paul continues to relate something of his early experience as a believer. He didn't consult with the church leaders, but he went away for meditation and learning. It was only after three years that he went to Jerusalem where the largest number of Christians was. He became acquainted with the Apostle Peter and stayed with him for two weeks. Paul is telling his readers all of this history so they would understand that the gospel he preached did not come from the teaching of other men but by direct revelation from God.

Perhaps the most important lesson from this reading for us today is to acknowledge that the gospel message preached and written by the Apostle Paul is the continuation of the story of Jesus—His life, ministry, and provision for the salvation of those who will trust in Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This significant event in the life of Jesus reminds us of the earlier reading of Elijah's restoring the widow's son to life. We must keep in mind that miracles in the Bible have great temporal benefit when they occur, but their primary purpose is to certify the prophet (or Messiah) as a bona fide messenger of God and to authenticate their message.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 7:11-17 NAS95 11 Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. 12 Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus

gave him back to his mother. 16 Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" 17 This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district.

The story is simple. A widow's only son has died and is being carried to his burial. Jesus demonstrates once again his compassion for the suffering, and he orders the young man to arise. Immediately, he is restored to life and begins to speak. There is a significant difference in this event from the prophet's raising of the widow's son in the Old Testament. In Elijah's case, he was alone with the boy. There were no witnesses, but, of course, the miracle happened nonetheless. In Luke's story, there were the people in the funeral procession ("a sizeable crowd") and Jesus and His disciples who were accompanied by a large crowd.

We can be sure that the mother was overjoyed at the raising of her son, but this miraculous resurrection brought fear to the crowd. Whether that was basically terror because of the extraordinary event or fright at the power demonstrated by this unusual preacher, we do not know. In any case, whether they understood fully what they were saying or not, they spoke truthfully, acknowledging that Jesus was "a great prophet." Furthermore, they confessed that "God has visited His people." The report of this event spread widely throughout the countryside. One might wonder, then, why Jesus was not more widely accepted by those who saw the miracles and heard the preaching.

Before we cast judgment upon those who did not respond in faith to what they witnessed, accepting Jesus as their promised Messiah, we must examine our own hearts. We have this story and many more recorded in the Gospels. We have the teachings of the New Testament witnesses, which, as the Apostle John wrote, "… were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways do the miracles recorded in the Bible cause you to bow in adoration and worship before the God of the miracles?

2. Have you rejected the false teachings of men and trusted fully and only in the gospel message that Jesus paid the price for your sin and offers you the gift of eternal life by faith?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/060516.cfm

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Lectionary: 90

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Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_06-05-2016-Jesse.pdfDownload

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-24-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-24-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from the book of Acts. The full title for the book is The Acts of the Apostles, relating the beginnings of the church that Christ established. Today's reading involves a portion of one of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. By contrast, the second reading is from the next-to-the-last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 21, which gives us exciting information about the new heaven and earth that God will bring into existence. The final reading, from John's Gospel, relates important words of Jesus on the night before His death, words that are intended to give us a means by which we can be known as His disciples.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Missions has always been at the heart of the ministry of the church. Just prior to His return to heaven, Jesus had told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). He had commissioned them to make disciples, to baptize believers, and to teach new Christians to obey all that Jesus had taught (Matthew 28:19-20). The Apostle Paul and Barnabas had set out from Antioch to do exactly that, and they found a mixed reception wherever they went, first reaching out to the Jews.

In the previous chapter Paul and Barnabas had come to the city of Lystra in their journey. They healed a lame man, and the crowd thought they must be gods. But some trouble makers from out of town came and incited the people against the missionary team. As a result Paul was stoned and left for dead. He was raised up, however, and the next day moved on to the city of Derbe. Our reading begins with the report that their preaching in that city had "made many disciples."

They then began a return journey to Antioch, their starting point, and along the way they "strengthened" and "encouraged" their converts to "continue in the faith." They made it clear, however, that the spiritual journey is often through times of tribulation and difficulty. As the Lord's representatives, they appointed leaders in the various churches and entrusted them to the Lord to give them guidance. After stops in a few other cities, they arrived back in Antioch to the church that had commissioned them to missionary service (Acts 13:2-3).

Paul and Barnabas gave to their home church a full report of all that "God had done with them." They recognized, as all of God's servants must, that anything of eternal value that is accomplished through their ministry is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. It's what God does through his disciples that is critical, not what the disciples themselves may do. Their report included a new idea that later was to cause a great deal of disturbance among some of the Jewish-Christians. They reported that God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." That was a new and troubling thought to many of their audience. They had thought that Jehovah was the God of the Jews exclusively. They were to learn, and Paul was the chief conveyor of this new truth, that God's redemptive plan is to include all nations and peoples on the basis of faith not ethnic or religious origin.

Although Paul was to continue in further missionary journeys, he remained in Antioch for "a long time," no doubt teaching and encouraging the saints in this new perspective of Jesus' church.

First Reading:

Acts 14:21-28 NAS95 21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." 23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 They

passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. 27 When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they spent a long time with the disciples.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The preceding chapters in this final revelation from God included word-pictures of cataclysmic events in the heavens and on earth. God's wrath against sin and rebellion is clearly evident in his judgments against evil empires and the devil himself along with his angels and those he has put in power. When we come to chapter 21, however, the final judgment has occurred and all those who have rejected God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus are cast into the Lake of Fire along with the devil and his angels for whom the lake was intended. What remains in this final book reveals more of God's gracious plan for His own redeemed people.

The use of symbols and figures of speech throughout the Revelation leave the reader enthralled with the splendor of God's future provision for the church. John, the human writer of this book, sees "the holy city, the new Jerusalem" coming down from heaven. He sees the city as "a bride adorned for her husband." This is clearly a reference to the church that is often described in the New Testament in terms that clearly define "the bride of Christ." (See, for example, Ephesians 5:22-32 and Revelations 19:6-9.)

John uses the term "tabernacle of God" to describe God's presence among men. Tabernacle basically means "dwelling." As God "dwelt" symbolically among His people in the Old Testament tabernacle in the Shekinah glory above the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place, so His presence will be known as He dwells among His people in a permanent relationship in eternity.

If all that is true, it is no wonder, then, that there will be no tears in heaven, no death, no mourning, crying, or pain. The ruler (Jesus, the promised Messiah or anointed one), sitting on His throne, says, "Behold, I am making all things new." And John indicates that he has been instructed to write these words because they are "faithful and true." We can count on them.

Second Reading:

*Revelation 21:1-5 NAS95 1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He *said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."*

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

What someone says just before he dies is most often regarded as extremely important. The night before Jesus was crucified, He had close, personal fellowship with His disciples at what we refer to as the Last Supper. In addition to having a meal with them, reminiscent of the original Passover in Egypt, and washing their feet in a new picture of His servant nature and the ministry of cleansing that He continues for His followers yet today, Jesus made three significant statements.

First, He said that the Son of Man (His most frequent reference to Himself) and God the Father are glorified in Him. Isaiah wrote of this feature of Christ, and, no doubt, it refers specifically to His death in which God's marvelous plan of redemption is made possible, ultimately to bring great glory to Jesus and the Father.

In the next chapter of John (14:1-3), Jesus makes it clear that He is to leave His disciples to return to heaven. Here, He seems to be speaking more directly of the experience of His death and separation from the Father, which is a path the disciples cannot follow. The Apostle Peter tells us that Jesus, during those three days His body lay in the tomb, actually visited where the devil's angels suffered, and He preached, revealing to them their doom as a result of His sufficient sacrifice on the cross.

Finally, Jesus offers what he calls a "new commandment": they are to love one another. The standard for such love is "as [Jesus] loved" them. Previously He had repeated the Old Testament commandment about loving God and your neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39; see Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). His final statement in this passage is significant, as well. He says that His followers will not be known by their doctrinal knowledge, astute learning, or their following of religious ceremonies and rites. Rather, they will be recognized as His disciples when they practice His kind of unselfish love to their brethren. Such a lifestyle will draw others to the One who can give that kind of love to His people.

Gospel Reading:

John 13:31-35 NAS95 31 Therefore when he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; 32 if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately. 33 Little children, I am with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, now I also say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. These readings offer a call to self-examination. In what ways is your heart open to receiving fellow believers into your company regardless of ethnic origin, gender, or previous religious background? When are several times which your heat was darkened?

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2. List two ways in which you demonstrate that you love your fellow believers as Christ loves you, seeking to encourage and build them up in their faith?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/042416.cfm

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_04-24-2016-Jesse.pdfDownload

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-3-2016



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-3-2016**. 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 chapter 5, 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 portion 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).

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 descriptives 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 (chs. 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 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."

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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Old Testament references that are noted in your Bible.

2. In what ways does 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).

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/040316.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 2-21-2016



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **2-21-2016**. 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 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, God 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 evil-doers are characterized by unwholesome appetites, an unseemly pride in their wrong-doing. 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 carvings 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, who 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."

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 lost 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 say what must have seemed like a dream to them.

They saw Jesus with a different facial expression 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!

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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 to 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?

Readings for the Week

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