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, 8-20-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The readings this week all follow a central theme, God's revelation of the mystery of salvation being given to the Gentiles in addition to the Jews. The Jews were always God's chosen method of bringing light to the Gentile world. We will see that in the first reading from Isaiah 56 and the second reading from Romans 11. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we will see Jesus' interaction with a Gentile woman and how her faith in Jesus' ability to heal her daughter provided a glimpse into God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. Chapter 56 is in the closing section of the Book of Isaiah, where God revealed important spiritual truths including the importance of His Word (Isaiah 55:10-11) as well as some further information about His plan of salvation for the Gentiles. In the section immediately prior to today's reading, God outlined His promises that He made to the covenant people, the Jews. As you read, note that verses 2-5 which were skipped in the mass lectionary have been added in order to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of the text.

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD, "Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed. 2 How blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who takes hold of it; Who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil.

3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people." Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, 5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, And a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. 6 Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant; 7 Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7)

Several important points arise from Isaiah's prophecy. First, in light of the previous chapters in which God recounted His promises to the Jews, He announced a charge to them to maintain a clear conscience. In verse one He tells them to "preserve justice and do righteousness" because His salvation would come in the future and at that point His righteousness would be revealed. For a Jew, keeping the Law meant honoring the sabbath as well as "keep[ing] [their] hands from doing any evil" (v. 3).This is a calling to all believers to walk uprightly with the knowledge of salvation that they possess, whether Jew or Gentile. This is clear because in verse three God began to lay out further details about his plan of salvation for the Gentiles. Second, everyone would be welcomed into God's kingdom who walked in faith with God including the Gentiles (foreigners) or those who felt unwelcome in it such as the childless eunuchs. Large families were considered a blessing of God in the Jewish world. God said that he would "give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off" (v. 5c) and that he would "bring [them] to [His] holy mountain and make them joyful in [His] house of prayer" (v. 7). Finally, God revealed through Isaiah that anyone could join the Jewish community of believers and partake in their worship and celebration of God. He said, "[His] house [would] be called a house of prayer for **all** peoples" (v. 7c, emphasis added).

Although Isaiah provided additional information about God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through the Jews this was not a new concept in the Bible. Even in the very first Book of the Bible God spoke about salvation coming to all people through Abraham the father of all believers. God told Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:18). King David said some three hundred years earlier, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, And all the families of the nations will worship before You" (Psalm 22:27). Earlier in Isaiah's record he provided insight into the ultimate method that God would use to bring salvation to the whole world. He said regarding the future Messiah Jesus, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them" (Isaiah 9:2). Though the Jews were always a light that pointed to salvation through faith in God, the ultimate light would be the Lord Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we turn to the second reading, we will find additional information about God's plan of salvation to the Gentiles that came through the Jews. In this portion of Romans, Paul uses an analogy of an olive

tree to describe God's saving ways. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, some of the original branches (the Jews) had been broken off. This grieved Paul to no end. But this made room for the wild branch (that of the Gentiles) to be grafted into the pure olive tree (the Life of Christ). Our hope is in God's ability to take what is broken and make it whole again (both Jews and Gentiles). And if He is able to do that at the macro-level, can we not trust Him to do that at the micro-level of our lives?

As you read please note that a large section of the text was omitted in the mass reading (verses 16-28 shown separated from the rest) but have been included in order to provide the full meaning of the text.

Second Reading:

13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

16 If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? 25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery–so that you will not be wise in your own estimation–that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." 27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God

has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Romans 11:13-32)

The big idea in the reading is the revelation of the "mystery" (v. 25a) that God has allowed the Jews to be disobedient to Him for a period of time such that the Gentile believers may be "ingrafted" into God's plan of salvation. Paul affirmed that as the "apostle to the Gentiles" (v. 13) he hoped that through his ministry to them that he may motivate his fellow Jews to trust in Jesus (v. 14). He said that at some future date that all of Israel would be saved (v. 25). As Gentiles without the knowledge of God we are being shown God's mercy during what some commentators refer to as the "church age." The church was something that wasn't reveled to the Old Testament Prophets, or even to Jesus' own disciples until close to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. In the Old Testament the Hebrew people were distinct from the surrounding nations because of their Law, culture, food, temple, and their worship practices. In the New Testament, Jesus' vision for the church would be for us to be "in the world, but not of it" (John 17:15-16). In the reading Paul stated how the people of God (both Jews and Gentiles) were now one.

Saint Paul revealed more revelation from God about the mystery of the church. Later in Ephesians, God used the analogy of the love that exists between a man and a woman to show how He loves the church. Paul said that husbands are to "love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it" (Ephesians 5:25). He continued, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32, emphasis added). Paul said more about the mystery of the church:

4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, (Ephesians 3:4-6)

How could God allow the hardness of the Jewish people's hearts and to set them aside until the last Gentile that desired salvation would find faith in Jesus Christ? This is one of the deep mysteries with which Paul was wrestling. The answer, at least partially, is found in the last verse of the second reading. "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all" (v. 32). God loves us so much that He is willing to endure the hardness of the Jews hearts until all of us Gentiles that desire salvation find faith in Jesus Christ. The point that Paul makes throughout his letters and the passage in Romans in particular is that we can trust God's mercy, even if we don't fully understand His ways.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In today's Gospel lesson remember that at this point the church age was still hidden and God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through faith in Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross wasn't in view yet. The context of the Gospel reading is just after Peter (and Jesus) walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:25-31) that we studied last week. After Jesus had calmed the wind and the

waves they crossed the lake and came to the region of Gennesaret (14:34) located on the northwest shore of the lake. A series of events preceding this caused Jesus to leave this Jewish region. This included the unwillingness of the Jewish people to repent (Matthew 11:20-24), the rejection of Jesus by the people in his own hometown of Nazareth (Matthew 13:53-58), and the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-10). Jesus' movement to this region spoke symbolically of the future ministry to the Gentiles that some of the disciples would have.

We drop in on the story of the Canaanite woman right Matthew highlighted the hardness of the hearts of the Pharisees. This story provides a sharp contrast between the Jewish religious leaders' response to Jesus and the non-religious Gentile response to Jesus. In the previous verses, Jesus was grilled by the Pharisees and then He shows them to be the frauds that they are. Then in contrast, we read a story about the real journey of faith.

Gospel Reading:

21 Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." 23 But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." 24 But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" 26 And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 27 But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once. (Matthew 15:21-28)

The Gentile woman was from a group of people who had always troubled Israel. The Canaanites were first mentioned in the Bible way back in Genesis Chapter 10 (v. 18). They were among the people groups that God promised to drive out during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt (see Exodus 33:2 and 34:11). They were a people that in Old Testament times lived in the lowland regions west of the Jordan River. Mark called her "a Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race" (Mark 7:26), indicating that she was a Greek. Jews had always been separated from the Greeks (or Gentiles) although the Jews were immersed in a thoroughly Greek culture. As the story plays out the Gentile woman called out to Jesus by using a respectful title, "Lord, Son of David" (v.22) and one which elicited that she had some understanding of Jesus. She called Jesus by the name "Lord" three times. The word "Lord" means master and the one using the term would be implying their submission to His authority in their life. Certainly, she had heard about his healing powers, but now she used a title that was reserved for the Messiah. She was a persistent woman, and Jesus' disciples implored him to send her away "because she keeps shouting at us" (v. 23c). Then Jesus addressed her and said that His ministry was only to the Jews (v. 24). Next, the woman bowed down before Jesus and He used a metaphor and told her that "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27). The "children's bread" referred to God's covenant people the Jews. This meant that since she wasn't a Jew she was not technically Jesus' first **priority** during his short earthly ministry, which

was to the Jews, not to the Gentiles. Her answer to him was very surprising and was an indication of the faith that she had in the Lord Jesus. "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). Jesus rewarded her faith by immediately healing her daughter. The Bible is clear that God commends those with faith, He is a "rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). The Gentile woman was rewarded by having her daughter healed. One can only imagine what became of the woman afterwards since Jesus absolutely made a tremendous impression upon her.

What do the readings this week mean to us in our lives? First, God emphasizes the necessity of faith in the perfect, finished work or Jesus Christ for all people, whether Jew or Gentile, and is no respecter of persons. He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). God provided the plan of salvation through Jesus and made this available to everyone. "For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God said "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" Romans 10:9-10).

Second, we should love and respect the Jews who although their hearts are hardened are the ones who brought salvation to us through Jesus Christ. We should "not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either" (Romans 11:20). God has made Israel to be a blessing to the world, and all the way back in Genesis He cautioned us about how we should treat them. He said, "And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Finally, with the privilege of faith we also have great responsibility to share with everyone the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Jesus didn't give us many commands when He left but did leave a clear message about what should be our priority in life. This is called the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Reflection Questions

1. How do you personally respond to God's call to salvation?

    - Have you made a decision to accept His call and be grafted into the life of Christ?
    - What does God's inclusion of Gentiles into the salvation story tell you about His character and

heart?
- How does God's longing to see all people saved encourage you to reach out to others with His good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

2. How does the faith of the Canaanite woman challenge or affirm you in your own faith journey? Have you seen anyone model this type of faith? Who is God using you to encourage with this type of faith?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-13-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of First Kings in which Elijah hides in a cave and waits to hear from the voice of God. Then continue

the study in Romans in the second reading and conclude with yet another continuing study in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus and Peter walk on water.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of First Kings where Elijah was fleeing from Queen Jezebel who had threatened his life (1 Kings 19:1-2) after he had killed the Prophets of Baal at the conclusion of a contest with them. Elijah had fled first to Beersheba where an angel of the Lord had fed him leading him on a forty day journey to Mt. Horeb "the mountain of God" (19:8). The reading skipped the ending of verse 9 and all of verse 10 that provides important contextual information for the eventual revelation of God's message to Elijah. Therefore these verses are included in our study.

First Reading:

9 Then he came there to a cave and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and He said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 10 He said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 11 So He said, "Go forth and stand on the mountain before the LORD." And behold, the LORD was passing by! And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. 12 After the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9-13)

Elijah incorrectly thought that he was the only remaining follower of the Lord (v. 10, "I alone am left"). God corrected his false belief later in the chapter and told him that seven thousand believers remained (1 Kings 19:18, see below). It is important to note that Elijah had just come from a very important spiritual victory. Sometimes after a victory, we can be the most vulnerable. So God, in His mercy, meets Elijah in his place of need in a cave at Mt. Horeb. This is the same mountain where God met Moses and gave him the Ten Commandments. Now hundreds of years later Elijah, another great leader, met God in an unexpected way. God caused the wind, earthquake, and fire, but these things weren't His voice. No, these fearful things brought about by the fall of Adam (Genesis 3) were not the Word of God for which Elijah was waiting, this came in the sound of a "gentle blowing," or as rendered in some versions "a tiny whispering sound" (v. 12). When Elijah heard this he knew that this was God's voice. This is what Elijah needed to continue on.

Some life lessons through which we can learn from Elijah's interaction with God as follows, God may be wanting to get our attention in the same way. First, God may be asking us, "What are you doing her?" This is a question of purpose, personal meaning and identity. Only God can give us the answer to this question. Second, God may be telling us where to find Him. In Elijah's case it was geographical, however in our case it may be more of a state of our heart, seeking Him where He has

chosen to reveal Himself – His Word, the Bible. Finally, He may be showing us Who He is. Surprisingly enough, God chose to reveal Himself in a still, small voice. Our world shouts, but God whispers. What can we do to quiet ourselves and listen?

This is how the story ended with God giving Elijah specific instructions and information.

14 Then he said, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the sons of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." 15 The LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus, and when you have arrived, you shall anoint Hazael king over Aram; 16 and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place. 17 "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. 18 "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him." (1 Kings 19:14-18)

Elijah thought that he was alone when in fact God revealed that there were at least 7,000 in Israel that had remained true to Him. Oftentimes we may feel all alone as believers in Jesus Christ, especially when we find ourselves in circumstances around nonbelievers for extended periods of time.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading, Saint Paul likely felt that way as he poured out his heart to his fellow Jews who stubbornly resisted the Gospel message. The reading this week is a continuation of the previous weeks study in Romans. Romans chapter 9 through 11 mark a section in which Saint Paul outlines Israel's past (chapter 9), present (chapter 11), and future (chapter 12).

Second Reading:

1 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, 2 that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, 4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 9:1-5)

The big idea is that Paul was a Jew, "my kinsmen according to the flesh" (v. 3) born into the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5) and is greatly distressed that as a Jew his fellow Israelites haven't believed in the Messiah Jesus. We can learn several things from this passage. First, may we be grieved over those we care about who don't know Jesus Christ. Are we willing to make even minor sacrifices to reach the lost with the Good News of the Kingdom? Second, this section about the Jewish people reminds us that God chose this specific people group to be a blessing to the rest of the world. It was through the Jews that God established His covenants (relational commitments), gave

the Law (moral, dietary, religious and code of conduct), set up a place and avenue for worship (the responding to God's worth), and the promises (God's record of faithfulness). Their lineage includes the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), King David, and ultimately Jesus. Finally, Paul emphasis who the Person of Jesus Christ is: God over all forever praised. This is clear evidence that the early church had a solid sense of who Christ is (Christology) which includes His deity. His followers worshiped Him as God, and we would be wise to do the same.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is a continuation of the study in previous weeks that began in Matthew with the Jesus' parables in Chapter 13. Here Jesus once again proves by performing mighty miracles that He is God.

Gospel Reading:

22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24 But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" (Matthew 14:22-33)

As we saw the forces of nature in the first reading, the wind and the waves caused a frightful condition on the lake. This scene then became even more frightening when the disciples saw a man walking across the water (v. 26), evidently not recognizing the person as Jesus until He called out to them (v. 27). By this point, similar to what had happened to Elijah, they knew that they had heard the voice of God (v. 32).

There are actually three miracles in the story. First, Jesus Himself walking on that water (v. 25). Second, Peter's walking on the water through Jesus' power (v. 29). Finally, the calming of both the wind and the waves (v. 32). Notice how Jesus sought solitude away from the crowds (v. 22). Jesus often did this right before he performed a might miracle. He did this just before He fed the crowd that we studied last week. He wanted to be by Himself to pray to His Heavenly Father. This is a good reminder to us that if Jesus Himself needed to pray, how much more do we need this time with the Father?

Peter was the disciples with courage. We can sometimes look at this story of Peter sinking in the

water as a show of fear, but he was the only one that got out of the boat! Sometimes God grows our faith by allowing turbulent circumstances and impossible odds. These are opportunities for us to turn our attention to Christ and trust Him to provide for us in the midst of the storm. I bet that Peter had a great time talking about his experience of walking on the water. We too will enjoy talking to others about how God has enabled us to do what we thought was impossible.

Reflection Questions

1. We read in the Gospel lesson how Jesus enabled Peter to walk on water, and also how as Peter's faith grew weaker his ability began to fail. Faith is a key element in accepting God's empowerment in our lives. How has God empowered you to "walk on water" in a certain circumstance?

2. In the Gospel lesson, Peter experienced the exhilaration of walking on water holding the hand of Jesus. If you were going through a time when your faith is being tested, how can Peter's story of walking on water encourage you to keep looking to Christ? Second, how might this experience help you to take a more radical approach in your outreach to the lost in your own life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-6-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will learn about the final world empire in the first reading from the Prophet Daniel. Then we will learn about suffering from Saint Peter and the importance of listening to God from the Gospel of Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading from the Prophet Daniel follows the incident in Chapter 6 when Daniel was thrown into the lion's den but safely delivered through the divine providence of God. Chapter 7 opens with Daniel's visions of four beasts representing successive world rulers. If one studies world history the identity of the first three is readily apparent, with the fourth, future empire shrouded in mystery. These begin with the Babylonian Empire represented by a lion (Daniel 7:4). Next, the Medo/Persian Empire is represented by a bear (Daniel 7:5). The third empire is that of the Greeks and is represented by a leopard (Daniel 7:6). Finally, the fourth future empire is represented by a terrifying beast with ten horns but existing alongside another "little horn" which came about after the demise of three of the ten horns (or kingdoms / rulers). This future eschatological empire was at least partially fulfilled by the historical Roman Empire with its ruling city of Rome, the city on seven hills. It is apparent from studies of the biblical Books relating to the end times (the study of eschatology) that this last "Roman" empire will be much different from the one that preceded it. This final empire is the one displayed in the Book of Revelation. In a similar way that God exists as a Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this last world empire is represented by three leaders: The Beast, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet. The beast represents Satan, the filthy, unholy father of them all. The Antichrist is the world leader that will emerge in the end times falsely claiming to be the Messiah, and the Jews along with the whole world will be deceived. The third figure that will emerge at the conclusion of the present world is a figure known as the False Prophet. This person will function as a false "holy spirit" and will work to deceive and unite the world against God and His

believers (Christians and Jews).

Today's reading picks up in Chapter 7 at verse 9 following God's revelation of the four worldly empires represented by their rulers, each called "beasts." The focus of the reading is upon the events surrounding the judgment of the last empire, the fourth kingdom that is "different from all the kingdoms" (Daniel 7:23). The ruler of this final kingdom will "change the times (Daniel 7:25), perhaps to some arrangement consisting of a six day week (the Beast cannot have a Sunday rest day), sixty days in a month, and six months in a year (6-60-6) in such a way as to display the pattern of sixes spoken of in Revelation (Revelation 13:18).

As you read, the identity of God the Father will come into view (v.9, the Ancient of Days) along with the Son (v. 13, "one like a son of man."

First Reading: (Including Skipped Verses 11-12)

Daniel 7:9-14 NAS95 9 "I kept looking Until thrones were set up, And the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow And the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, Its wheels were a burning fire. 10 "A river of fire was flowing And coming out from before Him; Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him; The court sat, And the books were opened. 11 "Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire. 12 "As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time. 13 "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. 14 "And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed.

In the reading, Daniel relays God's message to people throughout the ages about a time when the True Ruler of the universe would judge the entire world including the "little horn," the future person of the AntiChrist. In the opening verse we see how the "Ancient of Days" sat down ("took His seat") to judge the world (v. 10). "The court sat, And the books were opened" for judgment.

The reading flows this way. Thrones were set up, notice the plural "thrones." Next, details were provided concerning the identity and characteristics of the Judge of the Universe, God the Father. The court proceedings were opened resulting in the slaying of the AntiChrist and deliverance to his eternal sentence in hell. This is the one spewing forth "boastful words" (v. 11) against God and His people. The reading closes with the return of the Lord Jesus, "One like a Son of Man" whose dominion "is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (v. 14).

The big idea and points of application of this reading are that the world in which we live will be judged and that the rightful Ruler, King Jesus, will reign forever. Evil rulers, whether existing in

heaven or on earth, will be judged and sentenced to eternal punishment away from God and His people. We are people who have received advance warning from God not to be deceived by false rulers claiming to be God (Matthew 24:24). As believers with hope in the promised return of the Lord Jesus, we can rest in the fact that God will satisfy our desire for evil to be judged and for right to win. This will happen when Jesus is given dominion by the Ancient of Days. The Son of Man will establish the original purpose of humankind, "to serve Him." In this way, Jesus who is called the second Adam will accomplish what the first Adam lost in the Garden of Eden.

In our day, a time of God's grace, it seems that evil people "get away with it." But in today's reading we learn that although they may do so for a time, we can rest in the fact that God will even the score at the end of the age. All of the "beasts" will be judged, and we can be confident during our trials with the "beasts" in our lives that they will face judgment before the Ancient of Day unless they repent of their sins and trust in the One and Only solution, Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross for their sins. When we put our trust in the Son of Man, Jesus, we are putting our lives into the hands of One who will reign in glory forever.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading from Saint Peter speaks to some of what we learned in the first reading regarding not being deceived while providing insights into the nature of Jesus, "One like a Son of Man" (Daniel 7:13). Peter wrote what is titled his second letter to Christians during a time of persecution under Nero. It was important for the early church to understand that they were not suffering for a made-up story, and that their suffering was not in vain. They were aligning themselves with the God-ordained Ruler of the earth, who was the verified and authentic Son of God. Though times were very difficult, Peter reassured them that they were on the right side.

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2 Peter 1:16-19 NAS95 16 For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. 17 For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased" — 18 and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. 19 So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

Peter's letter to suffering Christians came with an important message that would shore up their foundation of faith: Jesus is the real thing and He's worth it! Peter, who was a disciple (learner) of Jesus and, later, an apostle (meaning a "sent one") was a credible witness to the authenticity of the claims of Christ that had led these early believers to give up everything to follow Jesus. In the midst of persecution, it can be easy to question one's feelings and wonder if it's really worth it to suffer for someone you have never met. Peter's eyewitness account of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, created a reliable source for them to rest assured that their faith was not based on a fairy tale. Peter

points to an important incident that happened while Jesus was on earth, the Transfiguration. This will be discussed further in the Gospel reading.

Peter uses a multi-sensory approach to convince the suffering saints that Jesus was authentically the Son of God. He not only saw Jesus' majesty revealed on the Mount of Transfiguration, he also heard the voice of God the Father (the Majestic Glory). The Father verified that Jesus was truly His Son and that the Son pleased the Father. This meant that even though Christ would suffer, which would make him look shameful in the eyes of humankind, He was actually honored for His obedience to the Father. No matter how things looked on the surface, Jesus' life was a success in the Father's eyes.

In the midst of suffering and persecution, one can imagine how this testimony would have been a huge source of comfort to those who had not been able to see the transfiguration nor heard this voice from heaven. They were admonished to stand strong in their faith and to focus their attention on truth, rejecting the lies that the enemy was trying to sow into their hearts. Faith of this nature requires active engagement and vigilance on the part of the believer.

In our day, the message of this passage can bring comfort and encouragement for us to stand firm in our faith, knowing that Jesus is worthy of our worship and obedience. He is the real thing, authenticated by the very voice of God the Father, who made it known that Jesus was His Son. Jesus' life pleased the Father, which in turn, becomes the basis for our own righteousness. What was seen as a shameful death (death on a cross based on Galatians 3:13) actually was reversed by the Father's testimony of Jesus' righteousness. Jesus' ability to please the Father can now be applied to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21), setting us free from the penalty and shame of sin.

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Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading:

1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a

high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John 18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence in the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry with the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centered around the Father's message to Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the Father said, "**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!** (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

"Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to have responded in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we

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My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded to Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v.5c). Peter, though well intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the love of the Father for Him (which by the way is the same love Jesus has for us based on John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own three-point plan.

Reflection Questions

1. Jesus is highlighted in various ways in each of these three passages of Scripture. List out all of the descriptions and identify what these descriptions mean about who He is and who you are in Him. How can these truths shore up your own faith and help you to rest more solidly in times of difficulty?

2. In what ways are you challenged by the testimony of Peter and the story of Jesus' transfiguration? Are there ways that Peter's impulsivity to try to tell God what to do resonated with you? How does the reliability of Peter's testimony speak to the issues of your own faith journey?

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will learn about the final world empire in the first reading from the Prophet Daniel. Then we will learn about suffering from Saint Peter and the importance of listening to God from the Gospel of Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading from the Prophet Daniel follows the incident in Chapter 6 when Daniel was thrown into the lion's den but safely delivered through the divine providence of God. Chapter 7 opens with Daniel's visions of four beasts representing successive world rulers. If one studies world history the identity of the first three is readily apparent, with the fourth, future empire shrouded in mystery.

These begin with the Babylonian Empire represented by a lion (Daniel 7:4). Next, the Medo/Persian Empire is represented by a bear (Daniel 7:5). The third empire is that of the Greeks and is represented by a leopard (Daniel 7:6). Finally, the fourth future empire is represented by a terrifying beast with ten horns but existing alongside another "little horn" which came about after the demise of three of the ten horns (or kingdoms / rulers). This future eschatological empire was at least partially fulfilled by the historical Roman Empire with its ruling city of Rome, the city on seven hills. It is apparent from studies of the biblical Books relating to the end times (the study of eschatology) that this last "Roman" empire will be much different from the one that preceded it. This final empire is the one displayed in the Book of Revelation. In a similar way that God exists as a Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this last world empire is represented by three leaders: The Beast, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet. The beast represents Satan, the filthy, unholy father of them all. The Antichrist is the world leader that will emerge in the end times falsely claiming to be the Messiah, and the Jews along with the whole world will be deceived. The third figure that will emerge at the conclusion of the present world is a figure known as the False Prophet. This person will function as a false "holy spirit" and will work to deceive and unite the world against God and His believers (Christians and Jews).

Today's reading picks up in Chapter 7 at verse 9 following God's revelation of the four worldly empires represented by their rulers, each called "beasts." The focus of the reading is upon the events surrounding the judgment of the last empire, the fourth kingdom that is "different from all the kingdoms" (Daniel 7:23). The ruler of this final kingdom will "change the times (Daniel 7:25), perhaps to some arrangement consisting of a six day week (the Beast cannot have a Sunday rest day), sixty days in a month, and six months in a year (6-60-6) in such a way as to display the pattern of sixes spoken of in Revelation (Revelation 13:18).

As you read, the identity of God the Father will come into view (v.9, the Ancient of Days) along with the Son (v. 13, "one like a son of man."

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How can these truths shore up your own faith and help you to rest more solidly in times of difficulty?

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Keywords: Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, Lectionary 614

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-30-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the Old Testament reading that describes King Solomon's prayer for wisdom. Our New Testament reading describes God's vision for each follower to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus. This is truly wise living. In the Gospel lesson, we continue with more of Jesus' teaching on parables from last week. He provides short stories of wise people who valued the Kingdom of Heaven above all else and inherited life eternal.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context for this story is after the death of King David. Israel was in its "golden era" having subdued its enemies and established itself as a nation. Solomon was David's son by Bathsheba and succeeded David on the throne. We catch a glimpse of his heart as he begins his reign over Israel.

First Reading:

5 In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you." 6 Then Solomon said, "You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7 Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. 9 So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" 10 It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. 11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to

understand justice, 12 behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. (1 Kings 3:5-12)

These verses show us the beginning steps of King Solomon. Some important observations include:

- God came to Solomon in a dream
- God invited Solomon to ask Him for whatever he wished
- Solomon recognized God's great loving-kindness (fiercely loyal love) before answering
- Solomon also recognized his finiteness and sense of inadequacy for the important role that he was being placed in
- Solomon asked for an understanding heart to judge the people of Israel and to discern between good and evil
- God granted this request and blessed him with wisdom

If you know the rest of the story, you may be confused with how a person could be granted a wise and discerning heart and yet end up being led astray by all of the women (700 of them) he was married to (1 Kings 11:3). I wonder if his great wisdom came through the school of hard knocks. For at the end of his life he confesses: "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). No matter how much wealth, power and status, the wisest man on earth concludes that fearing God is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

You may not be a king, but we can all come to God and ask Him for wisdom. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." We all have roles in life that are challenging. We can follow Solomon's lead and recognize God's fiercely loyal love and our inadequacy. This should lead us with humility and desperation before the true King of kings as we ask our Heavenly Father for what we really need: wisdom.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the New Testament, Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, which is a continuation of what we read last week. Paul is in the middle of declaring the victory that believers have through Christ. But the victory comes through the back door of recognizing our weakness as humans. This echoes King Solomon's prayer for wisdom in the earlier reading. For it is in our weakness that we find help from the Holy Spirit, who is interceding for us according to the will of God the Father (Romans 8:27).

Second Reading:

28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among

many brethren; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

This passage, in its context, casts an inspiring and hopeful vision for followers of Christ. For it declares that God uses all things for His good purposes. While not all things that happen in this life are good, God is able to use every circumstance (pleasurable and painful) to accomplish His predestined will: to conform us to image of His Son. He wants us to look like Christ. That's what this life is all about. That is God's vision for us as His followers. The question for us is, how badly do we want His vision for our lives? Are we willing to let God conform us to the image of His Son and work all things together for good, or are we wanting to just "get enough of God" in order to go to heaven when we die? There is a foundational condition for having all things work together for good: this comes to one who loves God and allows Him to work out His good purposes in his or her life. What this implies is trust and surrender to God's bigger purposes. He knows what is best for us. Someday we will agree wholeheartedly with Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel lesson this week we continue with Jesus' teaching to His disciples through parables that we looked at the past two weeks.

Gospel Reading:

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, 46 and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48 and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes." 52 And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old." (Matthew 13:44-52)

Jesus is away from the crowds (Matthew 13:36) and now teaches His disciples in parables, something which He previously did only when the crowds were present. The main subject is the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus paints a few broad brush strokes to entice His followers to continue their costly pursuit of being a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price. In the parable of the hidden treasure the man isn't searching for it, in contrast the man in the parable of the pearl is on an active search to locate valuable peals. Both parables, though, require a sacrifice on the part of the would-be owners of the precious goods. But the sacrifice is insignificant for the joy of obtaining the truly valuable treasure. Jesus is helping us to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is worth every

seeming sacrifice that is made in order to walk with Him in this world. Jesus' kingdom is only partially here, and these parables illustrate the great value of this down payment on the full kingdom, the mystery of life eternal.

The apostle Paul understood clearly the surpassing value of a discipleship relationship to Jesus: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Phil. 3:8).

The last illustration of the Kingdom of Heaven is very striking. It is that of a dragnet that is tossed out to catch fish. In the end of the age, the fish will be sorted out. The good will go to containers and the bad will be thrown out. Jesus gives the explanation clearly. The wicked will be sorted out from the righteous and will be thrown into the furnace of fire (referring to a literal Hell). The prospects of an eternity with weeping and gnashing of teeth is almost too much to fathom. But Jesus, in His kindness, gives us insight into eternity. In this life we have a lot of choices to make, but the most important one is where we will spend eternity. Based on our sin, we have only one label that we can claim: wicked. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). We cannot claim the label "righteous," no matter how good we try to be. But Jesus, who was righteous came to give us the label and identity of "righteous" by taking the punishment of our wickedness on the cross and giving us His righteousness. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). So while we don't deserve the label of righteous, we can choose to have it, if we will receive God's gift of eternal life. It's a gift, though. It doesn't count until you receive it. Have you placed your faith in God's gift of eternal life through Christ? Are you counting on this for your salvation?

If so, you are a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said that each one who is following Him into His Kingdom brings out treasures that are new and old. This means that we have a growing testimony of God's valuable work in our lives. We can speak of the current work that He is doing and the past work that He has done. We are cooperating with His vision to conform us into the image of His Son, for we know that the Son is our most valuable treasure indeed.

Reflection Questions

1. What does it really mean to be a disciple of the "Kingdom of Heaven?" What are one or two ways in which this played out in your life this week?

2. What "sacrifices" have you made to be a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven? How do these parables help you to know that it is worth it?

3. How does the story of Solomon asking for wisdom illustrate the parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price? In what areas do you want God to help you become wise and

discerning about your own life and pursuits? Spend some time in prayer, asking Him for His perspective and wisdom for your life. Let Him know that you want to surrender to His vision for conforming you to the image of His Son.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-23-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open by briefly looking at the responsorial Psalm from the first reading and then move onto the second reading in which we study some deep truths from Paul's Letter to the Romans. Finally, we move to the Gospel lesson in which we continue Jesus' teaching of the parables in Matthew 13 that we looked at last week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha; you can read and study that for yourself at the link provided at the end of this study (we don't have permission to reprint that text due to copyright protection). The main idea from that is given in the responsorial Psalm that follows this reading. This is from Psalm Chapter 86 and we have included verses 5-7:

First Reading (Responsorial Psalm):

5 For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

6 Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; And give heed to the voice of my supplications!

7 In the day of my trouble I shall call upon You, For You will answer me. (Psalm 86:5-7)

God forgives those who call upon Him (v. 5), listen to their prayers (v. 6), and answers them during times of distress (v. 7). It is good to know that God is above our problems (He is not wringing His hands in worry), yet He is not aloof to us in our neediness. There are two terms that help us to understand these important facets of God's character: transcendence (God is above His creation and rules over it) and immanence (God draws near to His creation and desires to be with us). These few verses teach us that He not only has the power to help us, He is interested in answering us; God's transcendence and immanence. What an amazing God who is powerful and uses His power in good and loving ways. His loving power is most clearly seen in the cross, as He gave His Son as a sacrifice for our sin debt.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading also has a theme of prayer, only this passage teaches that the Holy Spirit Himself is praying for us. This passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans reinforces God's transcendence and immanence as well.

Second Reading:

26 In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; 27 and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27).

In this reading, Saint Paul revealed a marvelous mystery about God the Holy Spirit. He said that God the Holy Spirit prays on our behalf (v. 26), and intercedes for us (v. 27). God is transcendent above the believer, knowing what our real needs are and working towards His end goal of glorifying Himself in our transformation. Yet, He also comes alongside us as the Helper who lives inside of us (John 14:6), praying with "groanings" too deep for words. He is not a cosmic policeman trying to enforce the rules. Instead this passage teaches that God the Holy Spirit is moved by our helpless

estate and He desires to accomplish the Father's will in our lives. He prays for things that we ourselves may not value yet and may not see need to be accomplished in our lives. Maybe one important take away is to begin to listen to God's heart for our lives as we read the Bible and see if He may be answering His prayers for us when we don't see Him answering our prayers the way we desire. God's vision for our lives is much bigger than our small hopes and dreams. Saint John of the Cross said it well:

How will a person

Brought to birth and nurtured in a world of small horizons,

Rise up to you Lord

If you do not raise him by your hand which made him?

The text doesn't say whether or not God changes our existing prayers to coincide with His will, or if He makes new petitions for us. Regardless, each person of the Holy Trinity intercedes with the other on our behalf. This is extremely important because Paul said, "we do not know how to pray as we should" (v. 27). We know from Jesus' prayer in John Chapter 17 that He prays for us. Because this prayer is recorded in Scripture, we can be certain that Jesus continues ministering on our behalf. Later on in Romans 8:34, Paul assures us that "Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us." Again, God's transcendence (knowing what we need) and immanence (being with us in our need) are important truths that should warm our hearts in our daily lives. We are not alone. God is with us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson this week includes three parables from the continuing study in Matthew 13. The first is the parable of the weeds and the tares and this provides some extremely important insights into the nature of the kingdom, both in the near term and looking on into eternity. It also gives important insight into those who will be locked out of the kingdom. Like the parable of the sower we looked at last week, Jesus went on to explain the meaning to His disciples. The second parable is the parable of the mustard seed, and the final one covered this week is the parable of the leaven.

Some specific cautions are in order about the interpretation of these particular parables as well as that genre in general. First, each parable must not be construed in such a way as to make it "walk on all fours" by taking terms literally when used within without fully considering the context. For example, though the word "leaven" (Matthew 13:33) is almost universally a negative term in the Bible, for example the "leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6), it is also a very good thing when used in the context of baking bread. A second word in the reading today about which we take note of is the word "birds." In the Old Testament many, but not all birds were unclean animals and therefore bad in the Jewish context. John, the author of Revelation, used this association when he described the future religious and civil empire of the Antichrist Mystery Babylon as the home for every

"unclean and hateful bird" (Revelation 18:2). However, as we will read in a moment, Jesus used this word to describe the rapid growth and size of His kingdom, not necessarily the nature of the kingdom (although some will debate this point). A large and fast growing kingdom is a good thing, though we need to take caution in believing that everyone who appears to be inside the kingdom may not be what they appear, as we will see in the parable of the wheat and the tares. We have to focus upon the main point of the parable and lay aside the word studies unless they change the meaning of the main point.

Taking the example of a modern parable, in our day and age we know what we mean when we say, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." We would never say this means that people should literally not throw stones while living inside that type of house, whether or not that was true. Instead, what we mean is that people should not criticize others for having the same faults that they have. That is the main point of this modern parable, which brings us to a second caution about interpreting parables. Parables in the First Century Jewish context were used to prove one (or sometimes two) main ideas by "laying alongside" a story that was easy for the hearers in an oral culture to grasp. Although there is usually only one main **meaning** in a parable there are multiple **applications**. With these things in mind let's read the Gospel lesson.

Gospel Reading:

24 Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. 26 But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. 27 The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' 28 "And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' 29 "But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 'Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"31 He presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; 32 and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR come and NEST IN ITS BRANCHES." 33 He spoke another parable to them, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened." 34 All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. 35 This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: "I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES; I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD." 36 Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." 37 And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, 38 and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. 40 "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send forth His

angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, 42 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:24-43)

Jesus taught the crowds and the disciples by giving them three parables. First, let's examine the parable of the wheat and the tares. This is a very important parable that provides essential insights both into the nature of Jesus' holy kingdom as well as some into the nature of the place where those excluded from it will be assigned for eternity. Many points arise from Jesus' teaching, here are a few.

- The picture provided of the separation of the wheat and the tares is what will occur in Revelation Chapter 17 at the end of the Great Tribulation when believers will be welcomed into Jesus' kingdom reign on earth and all unbelievers will be removed.
- There are two literal destinations, heaven and hell. Hell is a real, literal place which is eternal and everyone that doesn't go to heaven goes there. Jesus taught more about hell than He did about heaven. In Matthew 13 he clarifies by saying, "The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (vv. 41-42).
  The author of Hebrews said, "And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this to face judgment" (Heb. 9:27).
- The weed plants grow, seemingly out of control, alongside the wheat during their natural lives. But when the weeds die they are subjected to the control of the Master who rounds them up to be burned. It is at this point that their true nature becomes evident. Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21).
- The nature of the seeds is different. Only God knows which one will grow into a wheat plant, and another into a weed. The doctrine of predestination is tied directly to God's foreknowledge. Romans 8:29 says, "For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified." God wishes that none would perish but all would come to the knowledge of eternal life (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9).
- Angels serve God in a unique ministry of gathering souls, bringing them to their rightful eternal destinations. The destination of the person's soul being transported is known to the angels at this point, even before God affords them justice through a trial. (Revelation 20:12). For "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27).
- The "church age" is a mystery, one not seen even by the disciples and Old Testament Prophets (Ephesians 5:32).

Second, Jesus told the parable of the mustard seed (vv. 31-32). Anyone that has ever seen a mustard

seed knows of its tiny size, but how could a mustard seed grow into a tree and what does that have to do with the kingdom of heaven? The plant becomes so large that even birds can lodge in it, something that no normal mustard plant could ever hope to achieve. The kingdom of heaven is **like** a mustard seed, and when it is full grown it becomes so large that it brings refuge to people in the entire world.

Finally, Jesus told the parable of the leaven. As we said in the introduction, although leaven was equivalent to sin in the minds of a Jewish audience, the context makes it clear that this wasn't the meaning that Jesus intended. Instead, what Jesus said was that His kingdom would grow and expand in a mysterious way **like** leaven (v. 33) placed in dough. The leaven is hidden in the bread and its work is a mystery. In the same way, the church is a mystery hidden in the world (Ephesians 5:32), and unseen by the Prophets and even the disciples.

What do these parables mean for us today, what are some possible applications? First, since the weeds are not uprooted we are called to be discerning. We must know the Word of God and be willing to provide our testimony, the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15). Second, Christians are called to provide salt and light in their workplaces consisting of a mix of believers and nonbelievers including a variety of other faith groups. Finally, we can take courage in the fact that God will continue to build His kingdom into a large web, regardless of persecution and the political happenings of the age. The Word will spread as leaven through dough, and the tiny seed will become as large as a gigantic tree.

Reflection Questions

1. The parables in Matthew 13 give us teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven. Since Jesus was from heaven, He speaks with authority of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. His goal was to transform people from being citizens of earth to citizens of heaven, even while living here on earth. How does Jesus' vision for Kingdom living compare and contrast with your present vision for life? Where is your life in line with His vision and where is your life out of line with His vision? Spend some time talking to Him about what you would like to see Him do to move you closer to His vision.

2. The first two readings pointed out God's transcendence (He is above creation) and immanence (He draws near to His creation). What difference does God's transcendence and immanence make in our everyday lives? How might you (and others) know that you are growing in internalizing these truths?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-16-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah in which we will see a calling to respond to the Lord message before it's too late. Then we will move onto the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans and then close with an important Gospel lesson called the parable of the soils.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 55. The chapter opens with an invitation for everyone, even Gentiles (Isaiah 55:5) to partake of the benefits earned by the Suffering Servant in chapter 53 whom we know was the Lord Jesus. Isaiah said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost" (v. 1). Isaiah then went on to say some of the most often quoted verses from the Old Testament. In the verses immediately preceding today's reading, Isaiah explained God's invitation to salvation to everyone as well as an important insight into the nature of God.

6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 "For My thoughts are not your

thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

The Prophet emphasized the need for a person in the Old Testament to see the Lord before it was too late (v. 6), repent of their sin (v. 7a), trust in God's ability to forgive sin (v. 7), and recognize their insufficiency and sovereignty of the Lord (vv. 8-9). Now let us move onto the reading that begins at verse 10.

First Reading:

10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, And do not return there without watering the earth And making it bear and sprout, And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; 11 So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Isaiah said that in the same way that the seasons are regular and reliable (v. 10) so it is that God's Word is regular and reliable (v. 11). The rain and snow water the seeds and make them fruitful. Therefore, God's Word operates in the hearts of His people through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-13) in order to make them fruitful. Later in the Gospel lesson, the importance of this principle will become evident in Jesus' parable of the soils.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Before we move onto the Gospel lesson and continue to learn the importance of listening to the Word of God and the operating upon what is says, we will move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this section, Paul emphasized the fallen condition of God's creation in which both the creation itself and humanity are crying out for reversal of the curse brought on as a result of Adam's sin.

Second Reading:

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. 23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. (Romans 8:18-23)

Paul said that the "creation is groaning and [suffering]" (v.22) in labor pains along with our groaning while awaiting redemption (v. 23). The reward for our faithfulness in bearing fruit in our response to

the Gospel message won't be evident until our bodies are redeemed when we die and go to be with the Lord (v. 23). Until then our spirits groan (v. 23) and so does the fallen creation (v. 22).

Have you ever noticed how the sound of wind whistling through the trees is a way in which the creation groans as it awaits redemption? I remember one particular evening when I was deer hunting in the woods on my parents farm back when I was a teenager. As the sun was getting ready to set I crept along through the pine forest being careful to move upwind in order to surprise any deer that may be wandering about in the woods that windy evening. As I continued to move through the woods, I stopped for a long time and just listened to the eerie sound of the wind moving through the trees. Although I had heard the wind moving through the trees before for some reason that evening it took on a special significance. The sounds in the trees worked in an opposite way of a chord, they clashed in such a way as to leave a lasting impression upon me that evening. I was glad I was carrying a gun. "The whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now" (v.22).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, pause for a moment and imagine what it would have been like to sit at the feet of Jesus and not only hear his teaching but also have it privately explained to you. That is what happened in the Gospel lesson from Matthew 13 in Jesus' famous parable of the soils. The context is just after the Pharisees scolded Jesus' because his disciples had picked and eaten from standing grain on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:2). Jesus used this occasion to proclaim his Lordship, saying, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (v. 8). He then went on to offend the Pharisees even more by healing a man with a withered hand, an action that caused them to "[conspire] against Him, as to how they might destroy Him" (v. 14).

The parable of the soils in the reading today from Saint Matthew is also found in a parallel account in chapter 8 of Luke. This parable is unique from many of the others because in both accounts Jesus went on to explain the meaning to his disciples privately away from the crowds.

Gospel Reading:

1 That day Jesus went out of the house and was sitting by the sea. 2 And large crowds gathered to Him, so He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach. 3 And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying, "Behold, the sower went out to sow; 4 and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Others fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. 7 Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. 8 And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. 9 He who has ears, let him hear." 10 And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" 11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. 12 For whoever has, to him more shall

be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. 13 Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. 14 In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND; YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; 15 FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL, WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR, AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES, OTHERWISE THEY WOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES, HEAR WITH THEIR EARS, AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN, AND I WOULD HEAL THEM.' 16 But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. 17 For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. 18 Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road. 20 The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away. 22 And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. 23 And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty." (Matthew 13:1-23)

This parable focused upon the Gospel and the impact of it upon people's lives. Jesus explained the parable to His disciples and then told them how they were blessed because their eyes were open and their ears have heard (vv. 14, 16). They were blessed because they had heard things for which the prophets waited. Saint Peter said about them that they were, "seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1Peter 1:11).

Some people may ask one of two questions. First, why did Jesus guard the truth by speaking in parables? Jesus answered this in verse 13, "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." Saint Peter shed additional light on this in his Epistle when he was teaching about the false teachers that he prophesied would come into the church and had been troubling the church:

For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire'" (2 Peter 2:21-22).

Peter said that that it "would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them" (v. 21). Jesus taught in parables as a means of grace by reducing the amount of light given to those that would **not**

respond to His Gospel message. On the Day of Judgment, everyone will be accountable to God for how they responded to and used the information that they had. Paul said, "So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). A half dozen other verses in the Bible say that we are judged according to our deeds, meaning the fruit which we bore with the knowledge we were granted. [For further information see the following: Job 34:11; Ps 62:12; Pr 24:12; Jer 17:10; Jer 32:19; Mt 16:27; 1Co 3:8; 2Co 5:10; Re 2:23; Rev 20:12; and Rev 22:12.] This is the meaning of the parable of the soils; we are accountable to what we have heard although only one of the soils produced any fruit. Three of them are what Jesus called the "broad road" (Matthew 7:13). Only the seed that fell on the good soil produced any fruit, and then the production was in different measures. Additionally, note that fruit bearing is **evidence** of salvation, not the cause of it (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Second, some have asked the question, What about the heathen in far off places that have never heard the Gospel, how will they be judged? [Hint: See Romans 1:19.] In this case, we need to set back, reconsider the question, and ask a different one. The question we should ask is what about us, what have we heard and what fruit have we born in response to the testimony of God's Word in the Bible?

Saint John wrote about the differences between the unfruitful hearers and those whom responded to the Gospel by producing good works for the Lord Jesus:

9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son. 10 The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. 11 And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:9-13)

Even though we work alongside the other types of soil, as believers in Jesus Christ we can rest assured that God will accomplish the good works that He began within us (Philippians 1:6). Our good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ. Though some will produce more than others (as we saw in the parable), each believer **will** produce something precious in the eyes of the Lord. As we saw in the first reading it's important to act upon the information that we have been provided before it's too late.

Reflection Questions

1. We read in the Gospel lesson the subject of fruit bearing of the four different types of soils. What would you understand "fruit" to represent? What are some worries or other distractions that make

you unfruitful in your Christian life?

2. What are some fields in which you have the opportunity to sow seed?

3. Some have untaken the challenge of going about their lives as "soil testers" or "fruit inspectors." Based upon what you have learned today why is such a "ministry" ungodly?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-9-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The first reading highlights a prophecy of Jesus who came humbly the first time riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. However, He will return a second time in justice and power to claim victory over a world entrenched in war against Him and His people. In the second reading, we encounter the contrast between those who had Jesus' Spirit living inside of them and those who are driven purely by their carnal, spiritually dead natures. As we move to the Gospel lesson, we will learn about how Jesus relied upon prayer to God the Father for His spiritual victory. The last reading gives us insight into the communication that occurred between these two

Persons of the Godhead, which is a pattern for the type of communion that God wants with all of us (John 17:20-21).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah was one of the twelve Minor Prophets, a term that indicates the size of their writings in contrast to the larger Books written by the Major Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Zechariah wrote during the exile of the Jews to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem with Zerrubbabel, also known as Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:8) the leader of the tribe of Judah. One of the things for which Zechariah is known is the prophecy of the flying scroll (Zechariah 5:1-11). This message symbolized the Word of God that had been disobeyed by Israel and the moral components which were also broken by the entire world. The message called for judgment according to God's righteous rule. The context of the reading for today is during the reign of the Persian King Darius some two years before the Jews rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. In Chapter 8 Zechariah had prophesied about what we know today as the return of the Lord Jesus to Jerusalem. He said, "Thus says the LORD, 'I will return to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts will be called the Holy Mountain'" (Zechariah 8:3). Chapter 9 opens with a prophecy against the nations surrounding Israel followed by a pronouncement that God would deliver His people. "But I will camp around My house because of an army, Because of him who passes by and returns; And no oppressor will pass over them anymore, For now I have seen with My eyes" (Zechariah 9:8).

As you study the reading take careful note of the prophecy of the Coming King and remember Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the day we call Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11).

First Reading:

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; and the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

In this prophecy, we see both advents of Jesus compressed into three short verses. Verse 9 contains Zechariah's prophecy that was fulfilled on the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey on Palm Sunday. In verse 10, the tenor suddenly changed from one of a triumphal celebration of the coming Messiah to one of war. At Christ's Second Advent, He will cut off the world war (v. 10a) and "He will speak peace to the nations" (v.10b). Finally, Zechariah said that the territory under the reign of the king would range from the Euphrates River all the way around the earth.

The war about which Zechariah was speaking is the war that will come with the appearance of the man known in Scripture as the Antichrist. Saint Paul said, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed,

the son of perdition" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This "man of sin" will fill the world's vacuum for a leader and will seize power by intrigue (Daniel 11:21). We can take comfort in knowing that one day Jesus will return to the earth to usher in worldwide peace and bring in an era of justice. When we see wars and rumors of war all around us, this does not take God by surprise. He is waiting for the perfect timing to bring His Son back to rule and reign on the earth. Second, we can rest in the fact that although Zechariah probably didn't understand the prophecy that he wrote, he faithfully recorded it in the Scriptures. We can trust that the prophecies such as this one from Zechariah provide important, after-the-fact, confirmation of the accuracy of God's Word, even if they are hard to understand before the events have played out. This gives us confidence to follow God's Word, because we know that it is not manmade, it is supernatural.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul opened Chapter 8 in Romans by explaining the difference between a person that was born again through the Spirit of God and the one whose heart was set on the flesh (Romans 8:6). The believer, whose righteousness is found through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, is in a right relationship with God. Paul said, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1). Next, he explained the significant contrast of the heart of the unbeliever. "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:6-8). This context is helpful in understanding the word "however" which serves as a contrast and opens today's reading beginning in verse 9. We included verse ten although it didn't appear in the reading.

Second Reading:

9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. 12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh– 13 for 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. (Romans 8:9-13)

Paul said that a person must have the Spirit of God dwelling in them in order to belong to Him. This is the same thing that Jesus explained to the Jewish ruler Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night, which I like to call "Nick at night." Jesus told him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3b-ff). Jesus and Paul taught the same very important scriptural truth, a person must be indwelled by the Holy Spirit of God in order to be one of His children. This indwelling happens the moment a person surrenders his or her life to Christ for

salvation. Whether or not they sense anything tangibly, this is when the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of a believer. It is a mystery of God (John 3:8), but something we can be assured happens because of the reliability of God's Word.

Paul further explained that although the believer's body would die because of sin, their spirit was made alive (quickened) because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ imparted to them through faith (v. 10). Next, Paul gave words of hope for believers by saying that since Christ was raised from the dead someday our bodies will also be given eternal life (v. 11). Finally, Paul called believers to put to death the carnal, fleshly behaviors inherent in our sinful nature through the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

It is important for us to pause here and contemplate what Paul said regarding the calling of believers towards holy living. "[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" (v. 13). His teaching on this matter took the form of a set of "if then" conditional statements. **If** a person who doesn't have the Spirit of God lives according to the natural flesh, which of course is the only direction they know to take, **then** they will die. But **if** you who are indwelled by the Holy Spirit (are born from again, born from above by the Holy Spirit, John 3:3) **then** you will have empowerment from God's Holy Spirit to live according to the purposes of the Spirit, who inherently has life. Jesus is the empowering force that lives within us through God's Holy Spirit, enabling us to turn from the natural inclinations of our sinful flesh and towards the things of the Spirit. It's not so much that God doesn't like unholy living and punishes it with death, it's more about the natural course of consequences that are inherent in the universe that God designed. He pleads with people to choose life, but often times we choose death (Deuteronomy 30:19). Paul makes a striking case for the ongoing growth of believers to become more and more like Christ, from the inside out, because we have a new relationship of grace with His Spirit who "teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness" and calls us to righteous living (Titus 2:12).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The context of the lesson is when Jesus was traveling from city to city with the disciples (Matthew 11:1) to preach and teach. Jesus had some not-so-nice things to say about His experiences there. "Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent" (Mt 11:20). Jesus used several examples of the cities to which He had visited, then spoke about Capernaum, a town located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, a town that possibly was the location of Saint Peter's home. "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day" (Matthew 11:23). We pick up with the reading in verse 25.

Gospel Reading:

25 At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden

these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. 26 Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. 27 All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. 28 Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:25-30)

Here we see a prayer between God the Son and God the Father, given by Jesus in a public setting so as to provide the hearers with certain important spiritual insights. Remember that Jesus had just finished speaking about the urgent need for the people to repent. In His ministry, Jesus had taken over where John the Baptist had left off with this urgent call of repentance. Frequently the "wise and intelligent" (v. 25c) find it quite difficult to humble themselves and become like infants (v. 25c). God asks us to come to him humbly (Matthew 5:5) and rewards those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

Jesus revealed several very important spiritual truths in this passage:

- God has given Jesus complete sovereign control over the earth.
- The only Person with a true understanding of God the Father is God the Son AND those to whom God the Son has revealed Himself.
- Jesus has provided the believer a position of rest. We not only do not have to earn our salvation but we also may rest and trust in our righteous standing with God. We saw this in the second reading today from Romans 8 as well.
- The way of Jesus is easy compared to the way of the religious. In those days, the religious leaders were called Pharisees and they thought they earned their salvation by doing many religious things. In contrast, the believer's burden is light because the hard work that Jesus did in earning our salvation is already completed. Nothing can be added to it no matter how hard we work. Therefore, being yoked to Jesus provides freedom from the burdensome labor of religion.

Jesus' calling is to the humble people, like Himself, not proud ones who are "carnally minded" (Romans 8:6) as we saw in the second reading. In the same way that Jesus pronounced curses upon the nations that did not repent, God will one day pronounce judgment upon each unbelieving person who doesn't repent. "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Romans 8:13). We can rest in our faith in Jesus for He said, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Mathew 11:29-30).

Have a great week being happily "yoked" to Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. We read about the difference between a person who is "carnally minded" and one who is motivated by the Spirit of God. How can a person know that they are saved? Read the following verses and write down a few ways in which a person can know they are in a right relationship with God.

Romans 8:16-17: 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.

1 John 2:3-11: 3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: 6 the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. 7 Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard. 8 On the other hand, I am writing a new commandment to you, which is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining. 9 The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. 10 The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. 11 But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

2. Pride is one of the things that keeps people from entering into a righteous relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Read the verses that follow and answer the questions below.

Proverbs 6:16-19: 16 There are six things which the LORD hates, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: 17 Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, And hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises evil schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

James 4:13-15: 13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." 14 Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. 15 Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that."

A. Why do you think that pride was first on the list of things which the LORD hates? How are all the rest of the evil things on that list connected to and/or generated by pride? In what ways does pride blind people to the scriptural truths of salvation through faith in Jesus?

B. In what ways do you identify with what did James said about the self-confident person? In light of

your answer, how could you pray to look at things differently this week?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-02-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we a little bit about the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. We will see how God empowers us by resting in His omnipotent power as well as providing us with reminders of His marvelous grace by looking back to our baptism.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is more strange and mysterious goings on of Elijah's replacement, Elisha. Today's reading is just after Elisha's miraculous replenishment of the widow's oil (2 Kings 4:1 – 7). In the reading, we see yet another of Elijah's great miracles, the birth of a child to a childless Shunammite woman whose husband was very old. This was in repayment to her for the many kindnesses that she had done for him (2 Kings 4:1 – 13). We know from the text that follows, this miracle child would later die and be miraculously resurrected through another miracle (2 Kings 4:32

– 35).

First Reading:

2 Kings 4:8-11 NAS95 8 Now there came a day when Elisha passed over to Shunem, where there was a prominent woman, and she persuaded him to eat food. And so it was, as often as he passed by, he turned in there to eat food. 9 She said to her husband, "Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God passing by us continually. 10 "Please, let us make a little walled upper chamber and let us set a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; and it shall be, when he comes to us, that he can turn in there." 11 One day he came there and turned in to the upper chamber and rested.

2 Kings 4:14-16 NAS95 14 So he said, "What then is to be done for her?" And Gehazi answered, "Truly she has no son and her husband is old." 15 He said, "Call her." When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. 16 Then he said, "At this season next year you will embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant."

Omitted: 2Ki 4:17 The woman conceived and bore a son at that season the next year, as Elisha had said to her.

Gehazi was Elisha's attendant, although his motives may not have been entirely pure towards the Shunammite woman, pointed out to Elijah her desire for a son. Perhaps Gehazi though that he would supplant the woman's elderly husband. Instead, God brought about a miracle reminiscent of the birth of Isaac to Abraham.

Th big idea here is that God is a God of miracles. God sees the larger picture and fills people's needs even without their asking. Although God does desire for us to ask to fill our needs (James 4:2), He is able to go above and beyond to provide even the things which we don't ask for because we think that they are too big for God to provide. This helps us to persist through times of persecution and suffering. We can be thankful to God for giving us these vivid reminders through the scriptural writings of those believers who went before us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Romans in Paul's teaching on a believer's unity with God through Christ.

Second Reading:

Romans 6:3-4 NAS95 3 Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might

walk in newness of life.

Omitted: Romans 6:5-7 NAS95 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; 7 for he who has died is freed from sin.

Romans 6:8-11 NAS95 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. 10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. 11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

In the reading, we learn much about the Christian life. We identify with Christ through our water baptism (v. 3). We see a contrast between the old self (v. 6), and our new self who is no longer a slave to sin (v. 6b). This fundamental transformation is brought about through the conversion of our soul. Our dead soul was symbolically buried with Christ at our baptism (v. 3), while our new self came to life when we became united to Christ through faith (v. 8, Ephesians 2:8-9). The big idea is that as believers we are united with Jesus. Our lost souls were united in Jesus' death for us. Then we were united with Jesus and given a new soul through His resurrection from the dead. These truths are vividly expressed through the act of water baptism which symbolizes a believer's death to the world and resurrection to the newness of life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understand our identity in Christ, and holding to it helps us to persist during times when we are persecuted for our faith. As we move to the Gospel reading we will learn more about the promised persecution of believers in Jesus. We can hold onto God's promises and remember that He is a God of miracles even while facing challenges brought about by our faith.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the reading from Matthew is Jesus' private message to the twelve disciples named individually by name (Matthew 10:2-4). The chapter opened with Jesus sending the disciples on a missionary journey with very specific instruction to bring nothing with them and to expect persecution. This first mission was specifically to the Jews, they were to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (vv. 5-6). Jesus sent them out as "sheep among wolves," to be "wise as serpents," "innocent as doves," and to "beware of men" who would persecute them (vv. 16 – 21). They were not to fear them and Jesus reminded them that "even the hairs of the head were numbered" (vv. 26, 30). Jesus' instruction in this preface to today's reading extended not only to the immediate context of His disciple's immediate journey, but also as instructions for all believers going out into the world to spread the

Gospel message. "I say to you, you will not have gone through all of the towns of Israel before the Son on Man comes" (v. 23).

All our longtime readers will understand, the addition of the two verses before today's reading is to provide the fuller context of the reading. As you read, take special note of repeated words, phrases, and patterns in the text.

Gospel Reading:

Verses before today's reading:

Matthew 10:34-36 NAS95 34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; 36 and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD.

Today's Reading Matthew 10:37-42 NAS95 37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it. 40 He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. 41 He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. 42 And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

The reading is filled with multiple repeats of certain phrases, and the use of a literary technique called parallelism. In the first case, we see the phrase "not worthy of Me" or just the word "Me" repeated multiple times in verses 37 – 40. I counted a total of eight repeats of the word "Me" and three of the phrase "not worthy of Me." The latter condition, literary parallelism, occurs throughout the reading. Both literary techniques are used to bring attention to the big ideas in the text, the conflict arising from one's choice to follow Jesus and the rewards of doing so. We see,

"Jesus brought not peace / but a sword."

"Jesus pits man / against father."

And, "Daughter / against mother," "daughter in law against mother" (imagine that!).

"He who loves their father or mother more than Me / is not worthy of Me."

And, "Loves son or daughter more than Me / not worthy of Me."

A person "Not willing to carry one's cross / is not worthy of Me."

"People receive your Gospel message / receives Me."

The reward for persisting in all the conflicts that Jesus warned us about, are the rewards of a prophet (meaning anyone who carries Jesus' message), and a righteous man (meaning all believers) "vv. 41 – 42), eternal rewards which shall never be taken away "v. 42c).

What does it mean to take up one's cross, follow Jesus and persist during persecution (v. 38)? I remember back in my childhood while attending catechism classes how I was taught about the burden of carrying one's cross. The context of this teaching, as I remember it, was more about continuing a grueling journey of self-sacrifice rather than the big idea presented by Jesus in the reading. Here Jesus presented the concept of making hard choices through God's empowerment of us to oppose the worldly kingdom in favor of following Him and presenting His message to a God rejecting universe. Jesus is clear that these choices could even include forsaking one's own family in order to follow what Jesus is calling one to do. As followers of Jesus we understand that carrying one's cross for Christ is joyful, not the drudgery I imagined from the picture portrayed in my catechism classes. Jesus said just a few verses later, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. Mt 11:30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). The bottom line of the reading is that as believers in Jesus we must expect persecution and make the hard choices that God calls us to do.

There is a popular song from the 70's by Rupert Holmes named "Him" in which the chorus line says, "Him him him, what's she gonna do about him?" The meaning of the song is **far** different than our spiritual relationship with God. However, if you are someone like me whose mind is often filled with repeating chorus lines, we do have to ask ourselves the question. Him him him, what are **we** going to do about him? Jesus calls us to decide what to do about **Him**. It's Him or it's me. Serving God or serving self. This is a conscious step of faith one must make. As believers, we rejoice in the fact that regardless of how we may feel from day to day, our final judgment is not guilty. Jesus has borne our sins on the cross forever. He bore the penalty of our sin by suffering in our place, something that only the perfect sinless Son of God could do. We cannot increase the burden of personal cross and add anything to what Jesus completed for us through His carrying of the cross once and for all.

Reflection Questions

1. As you contemplate the story of Elijah's miracle from the first reading, what are one or two things for which you would like to ask God? Share these with a another believer and ask them to pray that God would bring them about or a change in circumstances.

2. What is your perspective on carrying your cross? In what ways does understanding Jesus'

promise of persecution help you in this regard?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-18-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The focus of the readings this week is on the background and importance of communion. We open with a reading from Exodus in which Moses recounted God's provision of manna to the Hebrew people during their desert wanderings. Then we move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians with some teaching on the communion meal and then conclude with the Gospel lesson from John in which Jesus taught the people that He was the "bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). As you study this week keep in mind Saint Paul's admonition to examine ourselves before we partake of communion that will be covered in the reflection questions.

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Deuteronomy 8. The context is God's giving of the Law to Moses after they had escaped from the wrath of the Pharaoh and struggled for forty years in the desert. The main audience whom Moses addressed were those who were either born during this 40-year period or those who were under twenty when it began. This was because all of the adults where were 20 years and older at the time of the Exodus perished except for Moses, Joshua, and Caleb (Numbers 14:29). The context of the reading today is Moses final address to the people about to enter the Promised Land. "Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: 'Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully'" (Deuteronomy 5:1). He continued in the next chapter, "Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it (Deuteronomy 6:1). He then proceed to recount the main points of the Law.

The reading that follows includes all of the verses that were skipped in order to provide the full context and to illuminate the complete meaning of the text.

First Reading:

2 You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. 4 Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. 7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. 11 Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 15 He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. 16 "In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. (Deuteronomy 8:2-16)

Moses' purpose of this address was to remind the people of God's miraculous provision and protection of them during their desert wanderings (v. 2). First, Moses recounted God's provision of clothing that did not wear out (v. 4a) as well as protection from injury (v. 4b). Second, Moses reminded the people that they were disciplined by a loving God in the same way that a father disciplines his child (v. 5). He reminded them of the manna that God provided (v. 2) a food that pointed to God's supernatural provision as well as to looking forward to His coming Son the Lord Jesus who called Himself the "Bread of Life" (John 6:35) that we will talk about later in this study. Next, Moses gave the people some insights into the nature of the Promised Land that they were about to enter (vv. 7-9) and warned them about the dangers of forgetting the Lord and His commandments (v.11). He said that if they forget the Lord by not keeping His commandments their hearts would become proud in spite of His supernatural provision (v. 14). Finally, he reminded them of how God had delivered them from the fiery serpents (v. 15) provided water for them in the desert (v. 15), and fed them manna from heaven (v.16). Both the manna and the incident of the people with the fiery serpents prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ. The latter incident was recorded in Numbers 21 in which Moses instructed the people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sin and given eternal life as a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we saw in the first reading, the Old Testament provided many important parallels for the disciples and first Christians to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of God's predictions concerning the Savior. As we move to the second reading, we will see how Saint Paul spoke against the idolatry that was prevalent among the people of Corinth in the First Century. Paul reminded the people about the curse that was placed on God's people for grumbling against God as recorded in the Book of Exodus. Paul said, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction" (1 Corinthians 10:11) and urged the people to flee from idolatry (v. 14), "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." The issue that he was confronting here was the objection that some had to eating food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 10:18-33). The reading today is sandwiched right in the middle of this important discussion.

It is important to understand the context of the Book of 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote this Letter to church filled with disharmony and division. This particular passage is part of how he sought to unite the weak and immature Corinthian church. He focused upon the fact that they were all one through Jesus' sacrificial death, something that leveled the playing field because all are equal because of the cross.

Second Reading:

16 Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Paul said is that in order to partake of the communion service we must be in unity together and in fellowship with God. Matthew Henry said it this way. "By partaking of one broken loaf, the emblem of our Savior's broken body, who is the only true bread that came down from heaven, we coalesce into one body, become members of him and one another." Unlike the pagan sacrifices which were repeated and never brought redemption to those participating, Jesus' single sacrifice resulted in salvation for all those who believe (1 Peter 3:18). Also, unlike the continual sacrifices offered by the Jews that looked forward to Jesus, Jesus can never be sacrificed again because after he made one sacrifice for sins forever He sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12). "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). When we celebrate communion we remember the single, final sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross (Luke 22:19). We celebrate the fact that when we share in the communion cup and the bread we unite in the belief that Jesus poured out His blood and allowed His body to be broken to pay the penalty for our sin.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from John Chapter 6. The context of the reading is after Jesus went from Jerusalem where He had healed a paralyzed man, to the "other side of the Sea of Galilee" (John 6:1). It was here on the east coast of the lake that Jesus went up on the mountain near Bethsaida to teach His disciples and was followed by a large crowd (v. 2). He evidently ended up teaching this discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum (John 6:59). Jesus opened this section of teaching with a bold statement regarding His deity. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). This is the core of the Gospel message, the Good News, that anyone who believes in Jesus as his or her Savior has eternal life. Next, Jesus made another of His bold statements that He was God in the flesh, the manna sent from heaven when He said, "I am the bread of life" (v. 48). The Jews would have clearly understood His use of the Greek phrase "ego eimi," translated in English "I am." Jesus is the eternal God, the preexistent One, the "bread of life" sent from God the Father (John 6:46) as the supreme and final sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:12).

As you read, notice Jesus additional use of the "I am" phrase, and how Jesus used this to confirm His identity as God in the flesh.

Gospel Reading:

51 "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh." 52 Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" 53 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. 54 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life,

and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 "For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. 56 "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. 57 "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. 58 "This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:51-58)

Jesus again affirmed His divinity when he said, "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven" (v. 51a). Next, He said that the way to eternal life was by partaking of His body (v. 51b), something which was a stumbling stone to the religious Jews and Pharisees (v. 52b). Jesus answered their objection by telling them that although their forefathers ate the bread of God (manna, see Exodus 16:1-36) and later died (v. 58b), anyone that partook of belief in Jesus would have eternal life. Jesus said, "he who eats this bread will live forever" (v. 58c). In the Jewish world, there was a high emphasis given upon the value of community that occurred around a meal. What Jesus said was that in order to partake of Jesus, the bread of life, you must commune with Him. One of the ways that we as believers commune with Jesus is through the communion meal.

This reading follows a train of thought where Jesus is explaining and defending His deity to both seeking and skeptical people. The disgruntled and skeptical Jewish leaders ask Jesus in John 6:42 how He could claim to be the contemporary version of God's "bread of heaven" when they knew both of his parents and had seen Him grow up as any normal boy and become a carpenter like his dad. Jesus therefore refers back to their common knowledge about how God worked in the Old Testament when he provided food from heaven called "manna." Instead of being physical bread, which had to be eaten regularly in order to live, Jesus referred to Himself as spiritual or "living" bread that came down uniquely from heaven. Jesus invited them to "eat of this bread" in order to live forever.

What does it mean to eat of His flesh and to drink His blood? We often focus on the communion service as the answer to this question. While participating in communion is a righteous, sacred ritual, we must not replace the ritual with the intended outcome. A better question is, what is the intended outcome of communion? Jesus partially answered these questions in the text of the reading. "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:56). Abiding in Jesus, relating to Him, doing life with Him is the end goal of communion. So, if we are not being drawn closer to daily trust and mindful awareness of Jesus' presence in our lives, something is wrong with how we are participating in the Lord's Supper.

What do the teachings from the readings and Gospel lesson mean for our lives? First, God calls us not to forsake the assembly together in the communion service (Hebrews 10:25). As we celebrate communion from now until the day the Lord Jesus returns we look back to the one sacrifice that He made for our sins. Second, we can recognize that we are saved by grace through faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9) the same as Moses and the other believers in the Old Testament. They looked forward to Jesus through the symbols of God's supernatural provision through manna and the healing by faith in God by humbly kneeling before the bronze serpent. The elements of communion

are the way in which we remember Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed to pay the debts for our sin. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

Reflection Questions

1. In First Corinthians 11 beyond what we read in the second reading today, Saint Paul called for believers to make a serious self-examination before the partook in communion. "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). He warned, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" (v. 27) and even went so far as to say that "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep" (v. 30).

If you take communion this week, as yourself the following question. What does it mean to "examine yourself" before communion? What are two or three things that you could bring before God in prayer this week prior to communion?

2. Read the following quote from Jesus that He said in the Sermon on the Mount.

"Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Matthew 5:23-24).

What are some ways in which this verse speaks to the practice of examining ourselves before communion?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-11-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the narrative of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai. This is where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, which are still guiding lawmakers today. Then we move to the New Testament where we will see the outworking of a higher law, the law of Love. It is God's love for us that allows a new way of living to emerge in us.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus 34. The backdrop to this story includes shame and glory, for this is Moses' second time to receive the law from God on Mount Sinai. The first time ended in shame, for he came down from the mountain to find the people of God worshiping a golden calf (see Exodus 32). The second time ended in glory, for Moses asked to see God's glory and this is what God revealed. The new stone tablets and God's patience with His people are an indication of His character, which this passage describes.

First Reading:

4 So he [Moses] cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. 9 He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take

us as Your own possession." (Exodus 34:4-9)

The importance of this passage may be missed by its brevity and simplicity. But let us not underestimate the foundational nature of this revelation of the character of God to His people. Remember, the newly released Hebrew people had just been delivered from being ruled by the Egyptians as slaves. You can take the slave out of Egypt, but something internal has to happen in order to take the mentality of a slave out of the person of God. A revelation of God's true nature would be the antidote to the slave mentality. Here is what we learn about God from this passage:

- God is a self-disclosing, self-revealing God. He desires to make Himself known to His people. Without God first revealing Himself to people, humans would have no way of knowing Him. The Hebrew people were his special chosen people to reveal His character. How would they reveal His character without knowing Him? The self-revealing nature of God is the foundation of relationship with God to all people. This is His grace.
- The word "LORD" which is used as His special covenantal name for the Jewish people, means "I AM". This reveals that God is ever-present and absolutely existent. The Hebrew people needed to know that the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was also their ever-present Father as well.
- God is compassionate and gracious. These words are packed with depth and the rest of the Bible should be understood in light of God's character of compassion and grace. Here are some helpful definitions. **Compassionate:** refers to deep love (usually of a superior for an inferior) rooted in some natural bond (i.e. Mother to child; Father to child). Compassion is the deep feeling one for another who is totally helpless, and usually results in providing aid to the one who is in need. Mercy and forgiveness go hand in hand with compassion.

Gracious: unmerited favor, the root word depicts a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need; it is an adjective that describes the generous acts of Yahweh. It is generous in the sense that it is not deserved. Mercy is when you don't get the bad that you deserve; Grace is when you get the good that you don't deserve. God demonstrates both compassion and grace toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).
- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out! The word for love used here means loving-kindness. The two characteristics put together mean that God is fiercely loyal to His children. We can count on Him to love and to forgive.
- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

In this passage we also learn some things about people and the proper response to God as seen in

Moses:

- When God's glory is revealed, the only appropriate place for humans to be is bowed to the ground, worshiping.
- When God's glory is revealed, Moses wanted God to go with him and the people. He could not envision being alone in this world. God's presence is appealing, we do not have to protect ourselves from getting "too much of God."
- When God's glory is revealed, Moses recognized the sinful state of himself and the people. God's glory makes us more self-aware of our own short-comings. Our shabby excuses don't really hold up in God's presence, therefore we must rely on God's grace in order to stand in His presence.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians Chapter 13. This is the close of Saint Paul's letter and serves as a reminder of the sort of people that God calls us to be now that we have entered into relationship with Him. Since we know Him to be compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, we can be people who are growing to look more and more like Him.

Second Reading:

11 Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints greet you. (2 Corinthians 13:11-13)

Paul has had a tenuous relationship with the Corinthian believers, with multiple visits and multiple letters used to try to point them to what it looks like to live differently than the pagans. The relationship one has with Christ as Savior ushers us into a new way of life that does not operate according to the world's system. Therefore, he summarizes his message with instruction on how to live out the Christian life.

- "Brethren": shows that those who are in Christ are in a family relationship. The laws that govern a family are higher than a governmentally enforced system. Family relationships are governed by the higher law of love.
- "Rejoice": why must Paul command the Corinthians to rejoice? He must know that it is easier for humans to be critical and despair over life than it is to rejoice. We must be reminded that we have a lot to be thankful for.
- "Be made complete": reminds us of the believer's status in Christ. We are positionally complete in Christ (for Jesus cried "It is finished" from the cross), but it takes some effort on our part to live out the reality of this new status.
- "Be comforted": Paul started this letter telling the Corinthians that the God of all comfort will comfort them in their troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). He closes it by encouraging them to appropriate the comfort that only God can give.

- "Be like-minded and live in peace": means that Christians should seek to live in an understanding way with each other, allowing the Truth to unite us.
- "and the God of love and peace will be with you": Is He not with us when we are living contrary to these commands. Well, in a way, yes. It is true that God is omnipresent. His love and peace is available to all people at all times. But the difference between having God's love and peace and not having God's love and peace is the choice we as humans make to accept or reject who God is in our lives. If we live contrary to His ways, His love and peace will not be in us. If we want to have the God of love and peace making His presence known to us, we have simply to ask and receive, making room for Him to manifest Himself in us and through us. We can't have His love and peace without having Him.
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss": this actual practice may not be common in our churches anymore, but we have similar expressions of fellowship by shaking hands, giving a hug or smiling across the aisle at someone. The idea behind this is to be welcoming and inclusive with others who are in fellowship with us in our local places of worship.
- "All the saints greet you": this closing phrase gives Saint Paul's theology of sainthood. He frequently uses the word "saint" to describe genuine believers in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1; Philippians 1:1). He opened the letter to the Ephesians by saying: "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 1:1). God gives the status of saint to all who have bowed their knee to Jesus as Lord, for now Christ's righteousness is credited to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is what makes us a saint before God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3. Verse 16 is the famous verse which is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin that is the Jewish ruling council. Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews so he met secretly with Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:16-18)

We see in this passage once again that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connation of being unique. So, to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's

Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So, what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. But if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save. Have you entered into the life of Christ by putting your faith in His atoning death on the cross and receiving His resurrection power for daily living? If you want to do so, you can make that decision right now and talk to God about wanting to put your faith in Christ. The following prayer may help you to express your heart to God:

Dear God, your word says that you loved the world, and I trust that that includes me. In your love you gave your one and only Son, Jesus, to bring me eternal life. I realize that without the gift of Your Son, my life will end in eternal death, it will perish. I need Jesus to be my Savior. I want to believe in Him. And even though I don't know exactly what that means or entails, I trust that you will show me how to enter into His life and be saved. I trust in Jesus to save me from the eternal consequences of my sin. I believe in You, Jesus, and receive your free gift of eternal life. Now please help me to walk in light of your Truth and love. Change me into the saint that the New Testament declares your people to be. I am Yours, Lord. Amen.

If you made a decision either now or some time ago to put your belief in Jesus, would you ask God to give you an opportunity to share this good news with someone else? It may be with someone who already knows Jesus, but needs encouragement that God loves them. Or it may be to someone who has never heard of God loving the world so much that He would send His one and only Son to save them from the consequences of their sin. Perhaps you would even be willing to share your testimony on the Christians for Christ website. The good news is so good, we can't keep it to ourselves!

Reflection Questions

1. We saw God's love in a myriad of ways in this week's reading. Go back through each passage and write out in your own words below some of the ways that you see God's love.

Exodus 34

2 Corinthians 13

John 3

2. How does the description of God's love in His Word differ from your own understanding of God? What false notions do you need to reject and what truths do you need to ask God to help you keep in mind?

3. How is God calling you to live in light of His love? Choose one of the points of application below or write out your own:

- To receive His free gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus
- To receive His forgiveness for a particular sin that you previously thoughts was too big for God to forgive
- To treat another Christian as a brother/sister
- To recognize your identity as a saint and make choices based on this
- To be "like-minded" with other Christians over the truth
- To be comforted by the God of all comfort
- To let God's compassion and grace be your interpretive framework for the circumstances of your life

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