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 Lectionary 81 – 02-23-2025



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

which were omitted since it made the story clearer.

First Reading:

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

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

> *servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand? 19 "Now therefore, please let my lord the king listen to the words of his servant. If the LORD has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering; but if it is men, cursed are they before the LORD, for they have driven me out today so that I would have no attachment with the inheritance of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 "Now then, do not let my blood fall to the ground away from the presence of the LORD; for the king of Israel has come out to search for a single flea, just as one hunts a partridge in the mountains." 21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have committed a serious error." 22 David replied, "Behold the spear of the king! Now let one of the young men come over and take it. 23 "The LORD will repay each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the LORD delivered you into my hand today, but I refused to stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed. 24 "Now behold, as your life was highly valued in my sight this day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the LORD, and may He deliver me from all distress." 25 Then Saul said to David, "Blessed are you, my son David; you will both accomplish much and surely prevail." So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place.*

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

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

In the context of the theocratic kingdom, the king of Israel served not only as an all-powerful civil ruler but also held a defacto religious position through their direct appointment by God. There is a clear distinction between the former kings of Israel in the rulers of our day because the religious and civil powers are more clearly separated. In terms of application, in our day, which of us hasn't seen

the evil goings on of our civil rulers and wished that we could take advantage of some easy opportunity to remove these rulers from power, even if by recounting or a recall election? Which of us hasn't looked upon a religious leader with disgust because of abuse of their position and some moral failures? Yet, even today God has made it clear that we are called to respect those people who are placed in positions of authority while not approving their wickedness. Saint Paul said in Romans,

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

> *heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.*

The reading opened with Paul's quotation of Genesis, the creation account of how God created man. "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The central idea in the reading was the continuation of the concept of the spiritual seed we mentioned in the introduction. The natural body is planted as a spiritual seed to accomplish God's work on the soil of the world. It is only after the seed dies in the course of the world that it then blossoms into a spiritual one and bears much fruit by bringing others to do so.

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:27-38 NAS95 27 "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. 30 Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. 31 Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. 32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. 37 Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. 38 Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure–pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."*

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

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

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount isn't as much a calling to behave better, to become a better person by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Rather, he is challenging us to maximize our production of

spiritual fruit by setting aside our earthly rights to things like responding to unfair criticism. Instead, He calls us to hold our words in the hope that our behavior may be so counter-cultural that the offending party will seek to find out what is so different about us. In this way, our quiet behavior may result in the worldly parties seeking the truth of the Gospel for themselves.

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 78 – 02-16-2025



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

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

second picture of the flourishing tree and avoid the forlornness of the first picture of the scroungy bush?

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading drops us in the middle of a heated discussion that was being tossed around in Paul's day and was affecting the Corinthian church. Some were heretically saying that resurrection from the dead was emphatically an impossibility. But instead of divorcing themselves totally from the message of Christianity, they were trying to syncretize this belief into the Gospel (Good News). Paul starts this chapter by clarifying the message of the Gospel. In verses 1-4 of chapter 15, he states the heart of the Gospel: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third

day. All of this happened according to what Scripture had predicted and what had been recorded by eyewitnesses. Paul himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus. God's Word was trustworthy on this point, which meant it was trustworthy on other points as well.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:12-20 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*
> *Omitted: (vv. 13-15)*
> *13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.*

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

- The resurrection of Christ and those who follow Him is a fundamental part of the Gospel (Good News). For if the resurrection is impossible, then Christ was not raised, and cannot raise us.

- IF the resurrection did not happen, then
    - Paul's preaching (and suffering) was in vain and he was a false witness,
    - their faith was in vain, worthless, and, in fact, they were still in their sins,
    - those who had already died in Christ were completely lost—without hope and never to rise again, and

    - Hoping in Christ for this life only is a fool's game—not at all a smart move.

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:17-26 NAS95 17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon,*
> *Omitted: (vv. 18-19) 18 who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. 19 And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all.*
> *20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.*

> *Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. 23 Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.*

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

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

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

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

- Using your wealth as an end in itself; thinking that material goods can fill the cavernous hole in your soul.

- Satisfying your hunger now with finite things, leaving no room for spiritual hunger to drive you to pursue eternal satisfaction.

- Seek to always be amused, for there is a somber reality of this life that is designed to bring us to a place of contemplating the meaning and purpose of human existence.

- Find approval from others as the organizing principle of your life, for you will never find the truth. Instead, you will be willing to accept what is false to impress others and fit in with the crowd's worldview.

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

Reflection Questions

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

2. In the Gospel reading we learned how Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Review the four points of blessing. With which of these can you identify and what spiritual circumstance brought (or is bringing) this about?

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 75 – 02-09-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Once or twice in a lifetime, God allows events to occur in the life of a person for reasons that they may not understand at the moment, but later see how God used them to reveal their pride and sinfulness and need for salvation through faith in Jesus. Some time ago one of those things happened to me. Back in the day, I was an engineer at one of the Big Three automotive companies (Blue Oval!). I wore a suit and tie to work each day and had a pass to access the test track across the street. I drove a brand-new truck and, in my mind, I guess I kind of saw myself as important in the overall scheme of things in the automotive world. One day as I was getting dressed, I examined the pattern of stitching on my underwear and how the tag was placed on the opposite side of the seams and overlapping seams that joined the panels together. As an engineer, I thought, isn't that strange how they placed the tag on the wrong side so that it faced outwards? Then it hit me, I had, for my entire life mind you, worn my underwear inside out with the tag facing out and the finished seams facing in (which even today still seems very illogical to me!). I thought that I was such an important engineer and yet I had worn my underwear backwards during my entire career. As my grandma would have said, good thing I didn't have an accident. Pride gets the best of us, but God has His ways of revealing our pride to help us to be released to worship Him.

This week we open with a reading from the Prophet Isaiah in which we learn about our need for cleansing from our sins as well as a vision of God on His throne. Then we move to the second reading from the next to last chapter of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where we learn about how he corrected an important misunderstanding regarding the crucially important doctrine of the resurrection. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Luke in which we see how Jesus performed a great miracle among a group of common fishermen to gather His catch of men. We are going to see today how when God places a unique calling upon a person such as a prophet or disciple of Christ, he often brings those people to the point of understanding their sinfulness and need for a Savior. A. W. Tozer said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." Such is the case that we will see today when we encounter two men whom God deeply convicted of their sins. As we study you may wish to check the direction in which your underwear is facing.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 6. The context of the reading is just after the pronouncement of woes upon the people of Israel for their sins in the previous chapter. His messages follow the pattern "Woe to those who." "Therefore," Isaiah said, "My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge" (Isaiah 5:13b). Isaiah continued his song of woes, saying, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). The prophet's words are eerily reminiscent of Saint Paul's warnings about what was to come upon the world in the last days, a period that began the moment Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. Paul said, "But realize this, that in the last days, difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Isaiah's pronouncement of woes serves as a warning for all generations about the deceitfulness and danger of sin. We shouldn't be surprised by events happening in Isaiah's day as if the Israelites were somehow worse sinners than the people of our age.

From this context, we begin the readings. You'll see a huge contrast between the wickedness of the people and the holiness of God.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 6:1-8 NAS95 1 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

The first insight that jumps out of the reading requires some careful insight into the background of King Uzziah mentioned in the first verse. Isaiah provides the date of his vision as "In the year of King Uzziah's death" (v. 1a), meaning sometime after the date of King Uzziah as recorded in 2 Chronicles 26:23. King Uzziah was one of the good kings of Judah, although sometime during the end of his reign pride got the better of him when he attempted to usurp the function of a priest by burning incense to the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:16). Afterwards, because of his pride God inflicted him with leprosy that likely hastened his death. Isaiah is using this mention of Uzziah's death as a warning about the danger of pride because as he continues in the reading, he shows how God convicted him of his pride. Upon seeing some minuscule portion of the glory of the Lord, Isaiah was deeply convicted of his sinful nature and said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips" (v. 5). Pride is something that anyone exposed to direct revelation from God would most likely struggle with. Their vision and special role left them vulnerable to the assumption that they were superior. Add to this the fact that once the prophets began to experience God's message, they would have been called to live much holier lives than the surrounding people did. Even Saint Paul wasn't immune from pride because we know that God inflicted him with a "thorn in the flesh." Paul said, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself!" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Isaiah was no different and as we see in the reading, he required conviction of his sin and subsequent forgiveness (v. 7). The ministry of forgiveness was delivered by none other than the seraphim, a special type of angel who use two of their wings to cover their face (v. 2). Interestingly, although the angels cover their faces, Isaiah is allowed to see the glory of God. God allows this to reveal Isaiah's uncleanness and compelling need for forgiveness. We see through the reading that forgiveness came from the altar of God, as only God can forgive sin.

Sometimes as I'm reading the Bible as I study the text and the related passages I come to an "aha moment." During my study for this reading, I had one of those moments as I remembered how Saint John had said something about Isaiah. When we read the Gospels, we need to take careful notice when either the writers or Jesus Himself quotes from the Bible (what we now call the Old Testament). In this case, Saint John indicated that Jesus was the Person on the throne about whom Isaiah spoke. As proof, first, we know that no one can see God in His fullness and live (Exodus 33:20). However, Scripture says that the prophets saw varying manifestations of God, as Saint John made clear in the following verse:

> 39 For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 40 "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM." 41 These things Isaiah said **because he saw His glor**y, and he spoke of Him. (John 12:39 -41, emphasis added, note that the capital letters indicate quotations from the Old Testament.)

Had we read past verse 8 in Isaiah where today's reading ended we would have seen these verses:

> *Isaiah 6:9-10 NAS95 9 He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.' 10 "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed."*

Do you see the correlation between John's writing in the Gospel and the verses he quoted from the Old Testament in Isaiah? Aha, what John was saying was that it was **Jesus'** glory that Isaiah was seeing, the glory of God on His throne!

For additional evidence that the One that Isaiah saw high and lifted up to the throne was Jesus, Isaiah used the same language about this Person in today's reading as compared to his writings about the coming Messiah in the Servant Songs later in chapters 52-53. Isaiah spoke of the Lord "sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted" (v. 1). Later in the Servant Songs, Isaiah said about the coming Servant Messiah Jesus: "Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). What Saint John was explaining by drawing from Isaiah was that Jesus is God spoken of in the Old Testament. Jesus said. "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

We can celebrate how Jesus revealed His glory to the world in both the Old and New Testaments.

We can have confidence that even though Isaiah may not have completely understood his visions and writings, he faithfully recorded them in the Scriptures such that some seven hundred years later Jesus could come along and fulfill them. In the same way, we can trust that when we read the prophetic verses in the **New** Testament, they too will be fulfilled in exquisite detail in ways that we cannot understand. Although we don't have a perfect understanding of how things will play out, we can trust that God has enlightened our understanding to the extent necessary for us to accomplish the work that He has for us to accomplish.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the next to last chapter of First Corinthians and contains an early creedal statement in the first half dozen verses. Paul had just finished his instruction on the necessity of order in worship, so it's appropriate that this section opens with the statement of one of the earliest creeds of the church.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:1-11 NAS95 1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; 8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

One of the problems in the Corinthian church was that some of them didn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is made clear from the verses immediately following today's reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:12-19 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.*

This context is extremely important in understanding Paul's purpose in including such deep creedal statements before he addresses the Corinthian's unbelief. You may have heard how those in the government have taught that the best way to spot a counterfeit bill is not to study the counterfeits, but instead to become intimately familiar first with the genuine articles. This is exactly what Paul did by leading with the truth and then addressing the Corinthian's unbelief as a means of providing a bridge to those confused about the resurrection of Christ. Paul taught many deep spiritual truths in the first seven verses, including things that we, as believers, take for granted with our more extensive understanding of faith and more extensive creeds such as the one recited each week during Sunday Mass. Paul taught:

- People are saved by receiving, standing and holding fast to the Gospel (v. 1).
- Christ died for our sins, that this was in fulfillment of the Scriptures, and that He was buried and raised on the third day again as predicted by the Bible (v. 3). This provided confirmation of the truthfulness of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus.
- The resurrected Jesus appeared to more than five hundred believers, some of whom were still alive at the time of his writing (v. 6). This was important because as live witnesses they would have been able to challenge these writings about the resurrection of Jesus.

The reading also relates to what we learned about Isaiah in the first reading in terms of the necessity of prophets to have a humble heart. Paul said that he was the "least of the apostles," one

who had persecuted the church (v. 9), yet labored harder than all the others because the grace of God was with him (v. 10). Yet, as an apostle of Christ, he had a unique calling in that when he was formerly a persecutor of the church (v. 9), and that the resurrected Lord had appeared to him (v. 8). Finally, he exclaimed that regardless of who preached the good news, the result was that the people believed (v. 11). He said something very similar to this in Philippians:

> *Philippians 1:15-18 NAS95 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from goodwill; 16 the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,*

We see in this reading Saint Paul's heart for ministry. We saw how he provided the Corinthians with both truth and evidence of the truth, an "apologetic." The defense of the truth is very important in our day to a culture that denies the existence of absolute truth, yet does so absolutely. Although there is plenty of room for discussion and even error on various Christian doctrines, the resurrection is one of the central, defining doctrines of our Christian faith. We saw this in Paul's own words. "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we transition to the Gospel lesson, we will return to a very similar theme that we saw in the first reading from Isaiah. Here we will see the calling of the disciples of Christ and how the Holy Spirit convicted Peter of his sinfulness and need for a Savior.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 5:1-11 NAS95 1 Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; 2 and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 3 And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. 4 When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and*

> *caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets. 6 When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; 7 so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" 9 For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." 11 When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.*

In the reading, we see the occurrence of several miracles. We see the Lord's miracle of gathering the fish in the particular spot in which to be caught (v. 4). Next, we see how Simon Peter followed Jesus' instruction (vv. 5-6), a miracle in itself. Then we see the miracle of the gigantic catch (v. 6). However, perhaps the greatest miracle of all was how God enlightened Simon Peter's heart to reveal his sinfulness and frail humanity (v. 8). Yet another miracle was how this group of disciples (Peter, James, and John) were willing to forsake their livelihood and instead become "fishers of men" (v. 10). All of these miracles are significant in that they helped bring about the specific calling for a discrete small group of disciples eventually numbering just twelve select people, each with unique skills and gift mix.

One of the significant things in the reading concerns how God requires humility in His servants. Just like we saw how Isaiah responded to seeing the glory of Jesus on His throne, Saint Peter responded in a very similar way when he experienced the miraculous catch of fish. Any sport fisherman who has ever endured a slow fishing season may understand that even a nominal catch is a miracle. However, in the case of Peter, James and John these were professional fishermen who made their living at fishing. Peter's reaction indicated that there was much more going on than just the miraculous catch, God was working in his heart to convict him of his sinfulness as well as using the miracle to prove that Jesus was able to fulfill His words.

What are some ways that we can apply what we have learned today? In the first reading, we saw how God exposed Isaiah's sinfulness and need for cleansing from his sin. In the Gospel lesson, we saw how Saint Peter was convicted of his sinfulness and need for a Savior. In our lives, we must be aware of our pride and our need for God's forgiveness, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). God in His grace brings to mind our sinfulness so that we may repent of our sin and be healed (see Acts 3:19). Without God Himself bearing the penalty for **our** sin the ultimate end for us is death (Romans 6:23). He did this for us through His grace while we were hopelessly trapped in our sin with no hope of escape. Paul said, "But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Our receipt of the

free gift of forgiveness comes through our faith in the Lord Jesus and not any of our perceived good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Saint Paul said that we need to receive this gift:

"9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 13 for 'WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED'" (Romans 10:9-13).

God tells us not to take this for granted, but rather to test ourselves. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you–unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). The stakes are very high, each of us should examine our hearts and see whether we are trusting only in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for us, because in terms of earning our salvation God said through Isaiah, "Our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord" (Proverbs 14:12). Let us take to heart the Gospel message: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). It is not enough to just know the Gospel, we must respond to the message and live in light of this good news.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading Saint Paul provides several proofs regarding the resurrection. A. How do these proofs provide you with comfort today?

2. Why is the resurrection of **our** bodies important to you and how can this doctrine help you in light of the things with which you are suffering?

3. What areas of pride has God revealed to you? How has He used these times of "breaking" to usher you into new places of trust and intimacy with Him?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 525 – 02-02-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Study Notes. This week we look at the Old Testament Prophet Malachi as well as the New Testament Book of Hebrews. We will look at the exciting provisions of the New Covenant. Then we move onto the continuing story of the early life of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Malachi Chapter 3. Malachi is the last of the Old Testament Prophets, and he wrote about the era just after the temple's restoration in Jerusalem. The story of the rebuilding of the temple of God and the re-establishment of the people of God of God after exile is chronicled in the Prophet Nehemiah, a Prophet contemporary with Malachi. Malachi also saw near-term and distant events "telescoped" together, like Isaiah who we discussed last week. As you read, see if you can determine the identity of the messenger referred to in the first verse.

First Reading:

> *1 "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. 2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. 3 And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years." (Malachi 3:1-4)*

Malachi said that God would send His messenger to prepare the way for God the Messiah, designated by "Me" in verse 1. In other words, Malachi said that God would send someone to announce the coming of the Messiah Jesus Christ. No human can stand before the Messiah, because He is the ultimate in holiness. God said that the Messiah would purify the Levitical Priesthood, in the same way that the dross was burned away during the refining process of gold and silver (v.3). The stated purpose of the refinement of the Priesthood was so that they could once again present sacrifices to the Lord (v.4). While this may seem distant to those of us reading who are not of the Levitical Priesthood, the New Testament informs us that all Christians are "a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). So, the Messiah has already begun this purifying work in the hearts of his followers, as we surrender ourselves to Him and allow Him to be Lord of our lives.

It's interesting to note that in the original language the word that was translated as "messenger" was "malak," meaning "angel or messenger," the root of the name of Malachi. Therefore, as a prophet, Malachi was a messenger of God. But, to whom was he referring as the messenger in verse 1? We know from the Gospel of Saint Matthew that the "messenger" (v.1a) was John the Baptist. Jesus said, "This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU'" (Matthew 11:10). The coming of this messenger was also predicted by the Prophet Isaiah who said, "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for

the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3). John the Baptist, the greatest man that ever lived until that time (Matthew 11:11), had a very important mission. John's mission was to announce the coming of yet another messenger, the Lord Himself, spoken of by Malachi as the Messenger of the Covenant (Malachi 3:1). Jesus was the Messenger of the Covenant people we know as the Jews. The Messenger of the New Covenant, none other than Jesus Christ Himself, will as Malachi said, "sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness" (Malachi 3:3). What do we mean by the New Covenant, and by calling the Jews a "covenant people?" Let's explore those concepts below.

The Jews were a covenant people, meaning that God had sworn various covenants with them. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible. First, was the Noahic Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7). The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant from Genesis Chapter 12. In this God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v.1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v.3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law (Exodus 19). The promises of the Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The fourth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b) and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v.34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

We read in Hebrews Chapter 8, the same book we will look at in the second reading, that Jesus was the fulfillment of the New Covenant promises.

> *7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. 8 For finding fault with them, He says, "BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL EFFECT A NEW COVENANT WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND WITH THE HOUSE OF JUDAH; 9 NOT LIKE THE COVENANT WHICH I MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS ON THE DAY WHEN I TOOK THEM BY THE HAND TO LEAD THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT; FOR THEY DID NOT CONTINUE IN MY COVENANT, AND I DID NOT CARE FOR THEM, SAYS THE LORD. 10 "FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH*

> *THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. 11 AND THEY SHALL NOT TEACH EVERYONE HIS FELLOW CITIZEN, AND EVERYONE HIS BROTHER, SAYING, 'KNOW THE LORD,' FOR ALL WILL KNOW ME, FROM THE LEAST TO THE GREATEST OF THEM. 12 FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE." 13 When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. (Hebrews 8:7-13)*

The life of Jesus is manifested in believers through the Person of the Holy Spirit Who indwells us at the moment of our spiritual birth (John 3:3). Paul said, "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" (Romans 8:11). We celebrate our new life by being obedient to the things which Jesus calls us to accomplish. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews, Chapter 2. As you read keep in mind the verses that we just read from Chapter 8, and ask yourself the question: how is Jesus able to come to our aid when *we* are tempted? *Note: The second reading included only verses 14 – 18, verses 11-13 were added to provide the necessary context).*

Second Reading:

> *11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, 12 saying, "I WILL PROCLAIM THY NAME TO MY BRETHREN, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL SING THY PRAISE." 13 And again, "I WILL PUT MY TRUST IN HIM." And again, "BEHOLD, I AND THE CHILDREN WHOM GOD HAS GIVEN ME." 14 Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; 15 and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. 16 For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. 17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren*

> *in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. 18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:11-18*)

God helps us, as believers in Jesus and descendants of Abraham (v.16) to resist temptation. Jesus knows about temptation, having suffered terribly in temptations that we cannot comprehend. "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (v.18). Saint James told how temptation comes about. "14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:14-15). How does God provide deliverance for us from temptation (Matthew 6:13)? Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1Corinthians 10:13). God helps us to endure our temptation when we turn to Him *before* we yield to the sin (James 1:15a) and stand firm in His promises that we will be delivered. Knowing that Jesus is an empathetic high priest is an important component of being able to turn to Him in the midst of temptation. Since He has experienced temptation and has conquered it, we can ask Him for strength and wisdom to also resist and conquer. While this sense of victory may not happen overnight, we will steadily grow in our ability to receive His help in our times of need. In the meantime, we are growing in our relationship of trust with Jesus when we turn to Him and not to our own strength or willpower.

Here's an illustration about counting on the promises of God to deliver us from temptation. On certain days, very bad weather arose during the times that I wanted to fly my airplane. Since my airplane was a very well-equipped machine that possessed most of the bells and whistles including weather radar, it was fairly easy to launch into weather conditions that were overly challenging. I remember staring up at the overcast sky one day as the ragged clouds almost reached down to the tops of the trees at the airport from which I wanted to "depart," pun intended. I remember thinking of a promise that I had made to myself some years before. All I had to do was to be patient and wait and at some future date, the miserable gray sky would be replaced with a perfect blue (and safe) atmosphere in which I wouldn't kill myself (at least so easily). If I would just wait a few days, the very same patch of sky that held nothing but clouds and rain would one day soon hold beautiful clear sky and sunshine. All that I had to do to keep from getting in trouble in that miserable overcast weather was to keep remembering my promise. All we must do when we find ourselves in a position of temptation is to remember the promises of God. He will make the gray skies of temptation clear for us if we will stand on His promises and trust Him to deliver us.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson today is from Luke Chapter 2. This passage tells us about when Jesus was brought to the Temple to be dedicated to the LORD as a baby. As you read, make a list of all of the different people mentioned along with the roles.

Gospel Reading:

> *22 And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, "A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS." 25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, 29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation, 31 which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel." 33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed– 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul–to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." 36 And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. 38 At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth. 40 The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him (Luke 2:22-40).*

Joseph and Mary went to the temple to fulfill the requirements of the Law as specified in Leviticus Chapter 12. The requirements were as follows. After the circumcision on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3) Mary was to wait thirty-three days, then present the Baby Jesus to the priests in the temple

and make a sin offering. "When the days of her purification are completed, for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting a one-year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering" (v.6). "But if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, the one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean" (v.8). Mary and Joseph fulfilled the requirements of the Law by making the offering to God through their intercessor, the priest in the temple.

After a prophetic silence of four hundred years, God revealed to Simeon and Anna the identity of the much-awaited Messiah. The identity of the Messiah was confirmed by two witnesses as was required by Old Testament Law, per the principle in Deuteronomy 19:15. Simeon knew that the Messiah would appear during his lifetime and when He did appear, he made a prophecy about His ministry. Simeon revealed more about the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah, that the plan of salvation would be unfolded through Jesus to include the Gentiles (v. 31). He also said to Mary that "a sword would pierce her soul" and a general prophecy about how the Messiah would be received. He said, "This Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed." We know that this was indeed the case; many of Jesus' own people rejected Him. Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were **unwilling**" (Matthew 23:37, emphasis added). Though God was silent for four hundred years He spoke powerfully through the birth of the Messiah Jesus.

Looking back to our discussion on the covenants it's important to note that although Jesus' parents obeyed the Jewish Law, after Jesus' death and resurrection the Levitical priesthood was set aside. This provision in the New Covenant ushered in something that many may not have expected by the Old Testament Prophets – the era of the priesthood of all believers, which was mentioned earlier. Christ our High Priest has made one sacrifice for sin for all time (Hebrews 10:12), and there is no more sacrifice for sin that can be made (Hebrews 10:26). But as priests once offered other kinds of sacrifices in the temple, so it is clear from 1 Peter 2:5,9 that God has chosen Christians "to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). We play a vital role in representing God to the world by living lives that are consistent with His holiness.

While the Levitical priesthood was set aside and the New Covenant era of the priesthood of all believers was begun, this setting aside was only temporary. Paul explained this in the following

verses from Romans.

> *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; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 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; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, (Romans 11:25-30)*

We can rejoice that although God used the disobedience of the Jews to bring many Christians to trust in Jesus, He has not abandoned His plan for Israel. Paul said that in the end times, "all Israel will be saved" (v.26). We can also celebrate that God was patient with us, not wanting any of us to perish and all to come to the knowledge of everlasting life (2 Peter 3:9). Jeremiah prophesied that God would give us a new heart, something that Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 as being born from above (John 3:3). Paul explained that this new birth came from believing that we are sinners (Romans 3:23), accepting that our due payment for sin was eternal separation from God to pay the debt we owe (Romans 6:23), and then placing our trust in Jesus as a free gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). Praise God for His eternal provision for us!

Reflection Questions

1. How can we lean upon the promises of God if we don't know the promises of God? Read the following verses and in your journal begin memorizing these so you have them in your mental toolkit.

Philippians 4:19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 11:28-29 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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.

Romans 8:37-39 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

2. To continue understanding your role as a New Testament believer and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, look up the following Scripture to see what your proper response is to this high calling:

(Editor's Note: Reading this online make is easy because viewers can just mouse over the verses to read them.)

- 1 Peter 2:5-9
- 1 Peter 3:15
- Hebrews 13:9-17
- Ephesians 2:10
- Titus 2:11-14
- Romans 12:1-2

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- 1 Cor. 6:9-12
- Rev. 1:6
- Rev. 22:3-4

Talk to God about where you need His help prompted by the reading of any of the above passages.

Keywords: Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, Lectionary 525

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 69 – 1-26-2025

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the Book of Nehemiah in which we learn about rebuilding of the people of God through their learning of the Word of God. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul in which we learn about spiritual gifts distributed among members of the church. Finally, we close with a reading from Luke in which we see Jesus quoting from the Prophet Isaiah in fulfillment of this Old Testament prophet's writing about Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Nehemiah which concerns itself with the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the people following their exile to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. During their 70-year exile from the land, there was a change of world powers from Babylon to Medo/Persia under the reign of King Cyrus. The return to Jerusalem happened in three waves beginning with Zerubbabel as chronicled in Ezra chapters 1–6. The second wave was led by Ezra as described in Ezra 7–10. The third and final wave was led by Nehemiah as described in Nehemiah chapters 1–3. Nehemiah was concerned primarily with the rapid rebuilding of the wall of the city which he accomplished against the greatest of odds in just 52 days. We have to remember that in the ancient Near East, the city wall formed an extremely important physical barrier in the city but also

an important cultural and psychological foundation. The city gate was where information was passed to the people, judgments were held, and various goods moved in and out of the city. These city gates were the choke points through which every important thing passed into the city, whether food, information, or important (or not) people.

There are three topics to keep in mind while reading the chronicles of Nehemiah (and Ezra). First is the city of God, meaning Jerusalem. Second is the people of God, the Jews. Third is the Word of God. Today's reading is concerning that last topic, as the context of the reading is the restoration of the Scriptures to the people after the restoration of the wall of Jerusalem. At this early stage of the restoration of the people of the city, the spiritual lives of the people were in shambles after an entire generation had passed since their captivity in Babylon. As the next generation prepared to resume their lives in the Promised Land, they found the homeland physically broken and spiritually void. Nehemiah, the man of God, after successfully directing the people in the rebuilding the city walls, gathered the people together to hear Ezra cast a vision for the spiritual rebuilding of the people (Nehemiah 7:5). Ezra was a priest who returned with Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 12:1).

First Reading:

> *Nehemiah 8:1-10 NAS95 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. 4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. 8 They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. 9 Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or*

> *weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

After the rebuilding of the wall around the city of God, Nehemiah gathered the people of God to learn from the reading of the Word of God. During their seventy-year captivity, the reading of the Word was scarce. As Ezra began the reading of the Word, the people instinctively responded in unison by worshiping the LORD "with their faces to the ground" (v. 6). As the Levites (priests of God) read the Word they also explained it to the people (v. 8). The people began weeping during the preaching of the Word of God (v. 9) to which the leaders responded by declaring the day as a celebration and one on which they were not to be grieved for "the joy of the LORD is [their] strength" (v. 10).

The people experienced conviction brought about by the Word of God as the priests and Levites explained it to them. This was a very good sign that after their long stay in Babylon, the Word still had this effect upon their hearts. The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is time for everything, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven– A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted," and on it goes (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). There was indeed a time for mourning as God convicted the people of their sins, and it was a good sign that this indeed happened during the reading and explanation of the Word. However, as the day progressed the leaders realized that the time for mourning had ended and instead called the people to celebrate the victory that God had given them.

In the introduction, we mentioned how there were three themes in the Ezra / Nehemiah chronicles including the City of God, the people of God, and the Word of God. As Christians, our identity isn't tied to the City of God (Jerusalem) as was (and is) to the Jews. Instead, our identity as the people of God is closely tied to our relationship with the incarnate Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus told us that He went aware to "prepare a place for us" (John 14:3). The Book of Revelation describes this place as the New Jerusalem, a heavenly city built by God that will one day descend from heaven and be presented to the people of God. John said, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). This eternal city, with gates that will never be destroyed is what Jesus is preparing for us now. At the closing of the age, the people of God will inherit the City of God prepared by the Word of God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul opened this chapter with a clear explanation of his purpose by saying, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware" (1 Corinthians 12:1). First Paul explained there the variety of spiritual gifts that God distributed among the people, next he moved in today's reading to explain their **purpose**.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 12:12-31 NAS95 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

The big idea in the reading is that God distributes spiritual gifts among the members of the church, the body of Christ, in diverse ways to accomplish His purposes. Each of the members of the church is to use their diverse gifts for the building up of the church, the body of Christ. Christians are not to boast about their particular gifts but rather are to cooperate in the body of Christ much in the way that the parts of the body work together. Since each person's abilities are gifts given by God, they are not to boast about the gift that was given to them as if it were somehow superior to the gifts given to another church member. For example, the gift of "helps" is in no way inferior to someone having the gift of hospitality.

The second concept in the reading beginning in verse 28 is the organization of the church by God to take maximum advantage of the "gift mix" in the church. God has ordained specific gifts within the organization of the local church in such a way as to make the church more effective. When Paul describes the gift of tongues in the church this was most likely what we call a "sign gift" operative in the early church in which certain people were given divine, prophetic utterances which could only be understood by someone with the corresponding gift of interpretation. "Prophecy" in the early church included both foretelling (telling the future) as well as forth telling (exclaiming existing prophecy or Scripture), although the former seems to have gradually ceased in the ages since the beginning of the church age. Some possibly had both the gift of tongues and of interpretation. Additionally, we know that during Pentecost in Acts 2:6 when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the first group of church members, they spoke in tongues which the people heard in their languages. Regardless of the nature of the gift being described by Paul here in First Corinthians, the gift enriched the church and helped it to accomplish God's specific purposes in the particular era. It should not be surprising to us to find God giving modern believers different gift mixes to accomplish His purposes in our era.

A proper understanding of today's reading is paramount to a properly functioning church today. Although God distributes spiritual gifts as He sees fit, each person is to utilize their gifts to the maximum advantage **of the church**. They are not to boast about the superiority of their gift either vocally or in their hearts as to think of themselves as superior. As Paul closed the reading in verse 31 he mentioned "*And I show you a still more excellent way*" just before he launched into his teaching of the superiority of love over all of the gifts. He said, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). If we maintain the bond of love at the center of having hearts of service for the Lord, we will automatically use our spiritual gifts for the maximum advantage of the church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel reading is from the Book of Luke. It opens with a statement of Luke's purpose and then moves to chapter four in which we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue in His home village of Nazareth north of Jerusalem not far from the Sea of Galilee.

When Isaiah wrote his Book, all of the events concerning Jesus were yet future. Yet in this section in Saint Luke, Jesus quoted from Isaiah and said that a portion of it was being fulfilled at that very instant. However, Jesus stopped his quote exactly at that point at which the prophetic timetable turned to the events concerning His Second Coming.

The context of the reading today from Luke Chapter 4 is that Jesus is just beginning His ministry and He has returned to His hometown of Nazareth. This reading is just after Jesus' baptism. Read the text from Saint Luke and carefully note Jesus' quotation from Isaiah that is marked in all CAPITAL LETTERS.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 1:1-4 NAS95 1 In as much as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.*
> *Luke 4:15-21 NAS95 15 And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. 16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

In this section of Luke, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1-2a but stopped short of the concluding portion

of Isaiah 61:2. Verse two, with the section highlighted that Jesus omitted from Isaiah, said: "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, **And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn**." Jesus said in verse 21b of Luke 4, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21b). It's very significant that Jesus stopped where he did when he was quoting from Isaiah because it is important to understand the distinction between the purpose of His First Coming and of His second coming. We live in the "pause" between the First and Second Coming of Christ. This era allows us time to choose to embrace the favor of the Lord's grace through faith. The next era, though, will usher in the day of "vengeance of our God." Who can stand in the midst of Him setting the record straight? None of us has a chance outside of God's wonderful provision through the death of His Son, Jesus at His first coming. Understanding this distinction will make it possible to properly understand the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. It also helps to interpret the future events in the Book of Revelation including the purpose of the Great Tribulation period that we discussed in a previous issue.

What's the importance of the Gospel reading for your life as a believer in Jesus Christ? First, we can trust the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus' First Coming because we can read about the facts of their fulfillment in the New Testament. Second, since we can trust the prophecies about Jesus' First Advent we can trust those about His Second Coming. Jesus' Second coming is when the believing world will realize the wonderful promises from God including restoration of the world to its pre-fallen, sinless condition. The Prophet Isaiah said, "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We have hope that Jesus' Millennial Kingdom will be a world of universal peace. This promise should motivate us to reach out to those in our community who don't know Jesus Christ personally.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Paul provided a list of spiritual gifts distributed among the body of Christ. Read the following two verses from the reading.

28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

Do you find any of the unique abilities that God has given you listed on this list? In what ways do you serve the body of Christ with your gift? If your spiritual gift is not on the list, what is it? In what ways do you serve the church (meaning all believers, not just the local church) through the use of your gift?

2. In what ways do you feel yourself inclined to see your spiritual gifts as superior to the gifts of another person? How does having a proper understanding of the reading from Corinthians help you to reevaluate this belief?

Keywords: Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 69

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 66 – 1-19-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with an Old Testament reading from

the prophecy of Isaiah, speaking about the future restoration of Israel. Then we move to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. In this portion, he writes about the variety of spiritual gifts that God has given the people of the church. We conclude with a reading from the fourth Gospel, John, and the story of Jesus' first recorded miracle, turning water into wine. These passages should give the Christian great confidence in the blessed provision that God has made for those who trust and follow Him.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The prophet Isaiah lived and ministered for 40 years in the last half of the eighth century BC. In that day Israel was rampant with sin, and she pretty much ignored God's Word. Interspersed with the prophet's preaching against sin and declaring God's holiness and justice is an emphasis on the salvation God offers His people. The word salvation appears in Isaiah more than any other book of the Bible except the Psalms. Thus, he writes and speaks of the love of God and the salvation to come with the Messiah. Perhaps, it is of special note that Isaiah's name means "the salvation of Jehovah." As you read the assigned passage, note the expression "the mouth of the LORD" which appears throughout the book but is unique to Isaiah.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 62:1-5 NAS95 1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, And for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, Until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, And her salvation like a torch that is burning. 2 The nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name Which the mouth of the LORD will designate. 3 You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, And a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 4 It will no longer be said to you, "Forsaken," Nor to your land will it any longer be said, "Desolate"; But you will be called, "My delight is in her," And your land, "Married"; For the LORD delights in you, And to Him your land will be married. 5 For as a young man marries a virgin, So your sons will marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So your God will rejoice over you.*

The subject of chapter 62 of Isaiah is the restoration of Israel. Despite her sinfulness and disobedience, God has a wonderful plan for His people, and Isaiah writes these words of encouragement. Zion is another name for Israel's capital, Jerusalem, the city of David. When she is restored, her righteousness and salvation will be a bright light ("a torch that is burning") so that all the nations of the world will recognize her as God's holy people. Israel will be seen as "a crown of beauty" and "a royal diadem" in God's hand.

Israel will have a new name; "Forsaken" and "Desolate" will be replaced by "My delight is in her" and "Married." This may remind us of the New Testament teaching regarding the Church as the Bride of Christ. Later in the chapter (verse 12), Israel is described as "The Holy People," "The Redeemed of the LORD," and "Sought Out." God's chosen people will have a universal reputation and other nations will seek her out, recognizing her unique relationship with God.

Verse 5 uses poetic imagery to illustrate that the inhabitants of Jerusalem will delight in their dwelling place. The picture, as one writer has said, "leaves an overwhelming impression of joy, delight, righteousness, beauty, safety, and peace." Moreover, God is said to "rejoice over you," like a groom delights in his bride. God's wonderful plan of redemption not only delivers His people from sin and depravity, but, more than that, restores them to a place of righteousness, exalting them above all other nations, and making them a blessing to the nations.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians deals with several problems, disagreements, and even divisions in the church body. Paul writes to answer questions, to correct misunderstandings, and to give clear instructions. Chapters 12-14 deal with spiritual gifts, a topic of great importance, because these gifts are given by God to His people for the express purpose of enabling them to do His work in building up the church and evangelizing a lost world. Chapter 12's emphasis is on the giving of the gifts and what they are essentially. Paul begins the chapter by pointing out that no one is a true Christian (one who says, "Jesus is Lord") unless the Holy Spirit has done His miraculous work of grace in bringing him to faith. Then the writer launches his significant teaching regarding spiritual gifts.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 12:4-11 NAS95 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.*

First, note that while Paul acknowledges the variety of God's endowments, he uses significantly different terms to describe them: "gifts," "ministries," effects." He also attributes the giving of these endowments to the Trinity: "the same Spirit," the same Lord," and "the same God." It is abundantly clear that whatever the gifts are and however they are to be used, they are the gifts of an almighty, all-knowing God who does all things right. We must understand how Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, uses these terms.

"Gifts" given by the Spirit, v. 4, suggests abilities, equipping, endowments, an actual skill or capability to do something. "Ministries" given by the Lord, v. 5, have to do with opportunities, appointments, assignments, and the particular tasks that the gifted one is to pursue. "Effects" given by God, v. 6, represent the work, the results, or accomplishments. Several important conclusions should be noted right away. First, spiritual gifts are not self-created; they are given by God. Second, the place or task given to the individual Christian is not of his choosing; it is assigned in God's wisdom. Third, the results are because of God working through the gifted believer; He is the one "who works all things in all persons."

One of the most important factors to understand regarding gifts is that they are not given primarily for the benefit of the gifted person. Paul makes it clear that they are given "for the common good," v. 8. The gifted Christian, then, has no basis for pride in his gift. It isn't for his own gain (although he undoubtedly does benefit when he obediently exercises his gift as God directs him); it is for the spiritual growth of the body of Christ, the church.

Paul lists several spiritual gifts in this passage, but the list is neither restricted nor exhaustive. Other passages mention gifts (e.g. Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11), and it is likely that the sum of them is representative of the enabling, opportunities, and results that God alone can give. It is

important to remember that it is all of God, both to the distribution of the gifts and their results. It is the "one and the same Spirit [who] works all these things."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

John's Gospel is different from the other three, often called "the synoptic Gospels," meaning that they write from a similar viewpoint. John's is unique; for example, he doesn't include anything about the birth, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, or the ascension of Jesus. He includes only ten miracles (while the others have 18-20) and one parable (the others have from 5-20). But there are many important issues that only John includes. His purpose is expressed in chapter 20, verse 31: *These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

Gospel Reading:

> *John 2:1-11 NAS95 1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; 2 and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus *said to Him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." 6 Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. 8 And He said to them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it to him. 9 When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, 10 and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." 11 This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.*

We don't know who the bride and groom were at this wedding, but John tells us about some of the noted guests: Jesus, His disciples, and most notably, "the mother of Jesus." The story is familiar to most Bible readers: they ran out of wine at the wedding reception. Mary reports the need to Jesus as if to ask Him to do something about it. What was she really asking of Him? After all, she knew who

He really was and had pondered the events of His life (Luke 2:38, 51). She had seen His remarkable demonstration in the Jerusalem Temple with the scholars (Luke 2:51). She no doubt longed to be relieved of the stigma attached to His birth (cf. John 8:41). And she probably thought that this occasion would be an ideal opportunity for Him to declare His origin and identity. Jesus' answer sounds rather harsh to us, but what he said to her probably was intended to inform her that what He would do would not achieve what she had in mind. It wasn't yet time for a full disclosure of His purposes.

Nonetheless, Jesus did perform the first of His public miracles, and the head waiter was amazed at the better quality of this new wine compared to what had been served earlier. When Jesus exercises His power, it always produces the very best results! Verse 11 indicates that this miracle clearly demonstrated His glory and, as a result, His disciples "believed Him." The wonders that Jesus performed from this point on confirmed to His followers that He was more than a mere mortal. He was God in the flesh, as John taught in chapter 1. The writer makes a most significant statement when he identifies this miracle as the "beginning of His signs." John includes seven signs in his Gospel, which are performed as verification of His identity as Messiah, the promised anointed one.

Reflection Questions

1. List two ways in which you are anticipating with joyful expectation the fulfillment of God's promise to restore His people.

2. List two or three of the special gifts God has given you. In what ways are you using it to serve God's church?

3. Discuss your understanding of how Jesus is the living "Word of God." How is a living person also the "word"?

Keywords: Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 66

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Tags:81, Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-29-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at the readings from First Samuel, then Colossians, and finally the Gospel reading from Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The optional first reading is from the Apocrypha and won't be covered in Mass Notes today. The first reading is from the Book of 1 Samuel. In our day, gender reveal parties have become a popular way for expecting couples to reveal the gender of their baby to family and friends. It is a fun excuse for a

party, but the truth is, in our society, most people are thrilled and thankful no matter what the outcome of the medical test showing the gender of the expected baby.

In Old Testament times, If the medical technology had been available, perhaps a gender reveal party would have made more sense because of the great importance among the Hebrew people to have children. Barrenness was seen as a curse and children as a blessing from the Lord. It was an even greater blessing to have a boy because the family name, inheritance, and headship were passed down through the son.

Elkanah, a man who lived during the time of the Old Testament judges, had two wives—Peninnah and Hannah. There was a rivalry between the two, and Peninnah, who had several sons and daughters, would regularly provoke Hannah because she was barren. This caused Hannah great sorrow.

Yearly, Elkanah would go up to the temple in Shiloh to worship the Lord there. On one of these trips, Hannah poured out her sorrow in the form of a prayer and vow to God. She promised that if God would give her a son, she would in turn give him back to the Lord to serve Him all the days of his life. God heard her prayer and gave her a son whom she named Samuel.

In today's reading, we see Hannah fulfilling her vow to God. How hard it must have been for her to relinquish her only son to the Lord. Once the child was weaned, she took him to Eli, the priest at Shiloh, and presented him for service to God. What a great demonstration of faith this was. Sometime later, but while Samuel was still a young boy, God called him to be a prophet in Israel and used him in a powerful way to reveal God's direction and will to God's people. Samuel faithfully spoke the word of the Lord concerning Israel all the days of his life. At God's direction, he anointed David to rule as king over Israel. Eventually, another king would come from the house and line of David who would save His people from their sins and reign in righteousness. This king is Jesus.

First Reading:

1 Samuel 1:20-28 NAS95 20 It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD." 21

Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. 22 But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever." 23 Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. 24 Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. 25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. 26 She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. 27 "For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. 28 "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

Like Samuel, our children are a gift from God. We don't have to turn them over to full-time service in the church in order to dedicate them to Him. Teach them to serve God whole-heartedly no matter what profession they choose, knowing that God can do much with a man or woman whose heart is fully devoted to Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading

In many of the Apostle Paul's letters, he presents a tragic picture of us in our sinful, fallen state and contrasts us with Christ in his holiness and perfection. In addition, he recounts what God has done for us in His grace, when we deserved only wrath. Once we understand the depth of our sin and the riches of His grace toward us, only then does he ask us to live a life that properly honors God and reflects His glory.

In the book of Colossians, St. Paul tells us that we were enemies of God, alienated from Him and living in spiritual and moral darkness (Col.1:13, 21). Jesus on the other hand, is the perfect image of the invisible God and supreme over all creation (1: 15-18). By His death He rescued us from the dominion of darkness and reconciled us to God, presenting us free from blemish and accusation (1:13, 22). Because of this, St. Paul says we are to live a life displaying His virtues and being thankful.

Second Reading:

Colossians 3:12-21 NAS95 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

To display these virtues, we must cooperate with God's work of transformation. If you read all of Ch. 3, you will notice how this passage is interspersed with action verbs that indicate there is something God wants us to do. Col. 3: 2 tells us to *set* our mind on things above—that is, to think about what we possess in the spiritual realm—salvation from our sin, peace with God, and eternal life, to name a few. Verse 5 tells us to *consider* ourselves deadto evil desires. Verse 9 tells us we are to *put aside* the old self and *put on* the new self. That means to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with our old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of our new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit.

In the Second Reading, we are told to *put on* the virtues of compassion, forgiveness, peace, and love. We are to *let* the Word of Christ dwell in our hearts, living its wisdom and teaching its precepts to others. Wives are to *submit* to husbands, husbands are to *love t*heir wives, and children are to *obey* parents. God is transforming us into Christ's likeness and calling us to intentionally live out those virtues for the benefit of others and the glory of God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is from the second chapter of Luke. The first 20 verses of this are some of the most well-known of the New Testament. This is the story of Jesus' birth in a humble stable and the angels' glorious announcement to the shepherds that a Savior has been born.

This Savior was God the Son who took on human flesh and was born as a baby—fully God and fully man. And just like other human babies, Jesus grew from an infant to a boy to a man, increasing in physical stature but also in wisdom and favor with God and men (Luke 2:40, 52). While much of his growth was typical, Jesus also developed in ways that astounded those around Him. Today's reading recounts an occasion when Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, amazed the seasoned teachers in the temple with the depth of His understanding of the things of God.

The background is as follows. Jesus had come to Jerusalem in a caravan with his parents to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. A day into the return trip, Mary and Joseph discovered their son was not with them. They quickly returned to Jerusalem, and after an anxious three-day search, found Jesus in the temple, interacting with the Jewish teachers.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:41-52 NAS95 41 Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; 43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, 44 but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him. 46 Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. 48 When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." 49 And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. 51 And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Mothers everywhere can identify with Mary's response to Jesus upon locating Him, which was likely a mixture of relief and consternation: *"Why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you."* Jesus' response must have sounded impudent to those who didn't fully understand who He was. He asked, *"Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know I had to be in My Father's house?* No, Mary didn't know. It seems neither she nor Joseph fully

understood the implications of the statement their son had made to them. They didn't understand that Jesus was under the authority of another Father, a Heavenly One, and Jesus would soon follow that Father's will all the way to the cross. All would be revealed in the fullness of time. Until then, Jesus continued to live in subjection to His earthly parents, and Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

Mary tried to make sense out of the events as they unfolded. We, on the other hand, have the whole written record of Jesus in the Bible. We know the rest of His story: He entered into the ministry, performed miracles, claimed to be Son of God, and proclaimed that He was (and is) the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Him (Gospel of St John 14:6). He purchased our salvation through His death and resurrection, and someday He is coming again to rule and reign in righteousness. This Christmas season we can celebrate our Savior's birth and share the rest of this glorious story with all who come to celebrate with us.

Reflection Questions

1. What can you do this week to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with your old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of your new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit?

2. On Christmas a Savior was born. What can you do to help others around you know Jesus as their Savior?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-22-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Micah where we learn about a prediction God gave concerning the Messiah. Then we learn about Jesus' high priestly ministry in the second reading from the Book of Hebrews. We close this week's study with the Gospel reading from Luke in which Mary visits Elizabeth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events.

Today's reading opens with a summary of the former sieges possibly under the direction of either

King Sennacherib (of the Syrian Empire) or Nebuchadnezzar (of Babylon), then provides an astounding prophecy about the coming ruler Jesus. Micah wrote during the reign of Kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Micah 1:1), some eight centuries before the birth of Jesus.

First Reading:

Micah 5:1-4 NAS95 1 "Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; They have laid siege against us; With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek. 2 "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." 3 Therefore He will give them up until the time When she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel. 4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth.

Micah said that their enemies would so disparage them that even their own king would be humiliated, or "With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek" (v. 1c). Throughout their history Israel has frequently been the subject of attacks and invasions, and in this case, Micah was likely referring either to an attack by the Assyrians or the Babylonians. While this prophecy came true in Micah's day, they also pointed to the Messiah. Jesus was struck in the face at the time leading up to His crucifixion (John 18:22, Matthew 26:67). From there, the prophet moved on to reveal more about the coming Messiah we now know as Jesus. He said, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (v. 2). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem in Israel, he differentiated between the one in the north and the one near Jerusalem in which the new King would be born. One would assume that a powerful leader would come from the capital city, Jerusalem. However, Micah's prophecy revealed that this would not be the case, instead the ruler would come from the tiny insignificant town of Bethlehem. (We sing the song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," as a reminder of God's unusual way of exalting the lowliest of cities for His purposes). From this insignificant city, God would bring forth a ruler who ushers in spiritual deliverance from the ultimate enemy Satan. Micah brought forth the idea that the Messiah was from eternity (v. 2). This corresponds to what the Prophet Daniel said about the Messiah being the "Ancient of Days" (Daniel 7:22). He is not a created being, rather He existed in eternity past as part of the Godhead (John 1:1-2). It is difficult to understand what the prophet meant when he said, "He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child" (v. 3). It is safe to say that the Israelites were subject to a 400-year period of prophetic silence where they might have felt abandoned by God

and wondered if He would ever bring forth the promised Messiah. The prophet goes on to foretell the ingrafting of the Gentiles into the family of God by saying, "Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel" (v. 3, see Romans 11:17). Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus. During Jesus' First Advent, He came as a shepherd leader where He declared Himself to be the Good Shepherd (verse 4, John 10:11). His true leadership is yet to be realized after He returns at the end of the age "Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth" (v. 4).

It's amazing when you compare Micah's prophecy to the life of Jesus and recognize the precision of the fulfillment by Jesus. As we move towards Christmas, may we be reminded of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and His coming rulership over all the earth when He comes again so that our lives reflect this reality.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Jesus fulfilled other prophecies besides what we just read in Micah. Our New Testament reading in Hebrews points out another important way that Jesus completed the requirements of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Through His perfect sacrifice, Jesus ushered in a new era of relating to God the Father. This passage helps us to see why it is necessary for us to place our faith in Jesus, Who perfectly executed the will of the Father on our behalf.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 10:5-10 NAS95 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME; 6 IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE. 7 "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" 8 After saying above, "SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS AND WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, NOR HAVE YOU TAKEN PLEASURE in them" (which are offered according to the Law), 9 then He said, "BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." He takes away the first in order to establish the second. 10 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The author of Hebrews quoted from several Old Testament passages to show how Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Law and brought an end to the need for the sacrificial system. The first Old Testament passage is from Psalm 40:6 that explains how God was fed up with their dead religion which involved ritualistic sacrifice. The Psalmist explains how the One that will come to fulfil these prophecies will perfectly obey the will of God, "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). Because Jesus perfectly fulfilled the will of God, we can be counted righteous based upon His merit (2 Corinthians 5:21). The reading closes with an important point about how Jesus took away the first covenant of the Law and brought in the second one of grace. The author said, "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (v. 10). We are sanctified or made holy through a one-time sacrifice that can never be repeated.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading this week tells the story of Mary the mother of Jesus' visit to Elizabeth who was to be the mother of John the Baptist. The context of the reading is that Mary had just been visited by the Angel Gabriel and told how she would be the mother of God's Son Jesus, the Messiah. This reading is very important for Mary because she had just been told this incredible news about how God was going to bring the Messiah into the world through a supernatural, virgin birth. You can imagine that Mary's heart was both elated and confused. Her visit to Elizabeth would have been a comforting and confirming experience to establish her faith in God's unusual method of bringing the Messiah into the world.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 1:39-45 NAS95 39 Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

When Mary arrived at her relatives' home, Elizabeth was six months pregnant even though she was advanced in age and barren up until that point (Luke 1:36). Elizabeth's greeting would have been confirmation to Mary that God was up to something and her appearance by the Angel Gabriel was not a figment of her imagination. We see a contrast in this passage regarding the response to the Angel Gabriel's messages. Zacharias had not believed Gabriel but instead had asked for a sign (Luke 1:18). Elizabeth said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Mary had immediately believed, "And blessed is she who believed" (v. 45a). She was able to encourage Mary's tender heart of belief that God could do the impossible, especially in light of the fact that she herself was pregnant with her own miracle child.

Elizabeth used this opportunity through the power of the Holy Spirit, to pronounce blessing upon Mary. She said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (v. 42). She also blessed her for believing what God had spoken to her through Gabriel. You can imagine that these pronouncements of blessing would have been important to Mary as she endured much opposition and suspicion over her unusual pregnancy. Mary may have even questioned whether this was a blessing or a curse when she was almost divorced from Joseph and when they had to travel to Bethlehem when she was great with child. The Christmas story is full of difficulties, but this passage reminds us that being in the center of God's will is to be blessed. Circumstances do not determine our favor from the Lord.

Reflection Questions

1. As Christmas is very near, take a moment to conduct an inventory of thankfulness. Write down five things for which you are thankful this Christmas holiday.

2. List two major challenges that came your way during the past year. How has God helped you through your challenges this year? What Scripture verses helped you during these difficult times?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-15-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Zephaniah, one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," largely because their 12 prophecies are shorter than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we move to one of the Epistles of St. Paul, Philippians, a letter likely written from a prison cell in Rome, making its theme of joy even more significant. Finally, we conclude with a reading from Luke's Gospel, which includes some interesting instructions for the people of Jesus' day.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Zephaniah has been called "the Royal Prophet," probably because he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He was the last of the prophets before the captivity of Judah and ministered during the reign of Josiah, who tried to restore proper worship practices which had been pretty much abandoned in Judah. His message centers on "the Day of the LORD," which is seen from two perspectives: 1) a time of judgment against sinners, and 2) a time of blessing for those who follow God.

First Reading:

Zephaniah 3:14-18 NAS95 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You will fear disaster no more. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. 18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts–They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

The first two-thirds of the prophecy deal with God's judgment of sin and apostasy. Someone has said that the book is an out-working of the text, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). God's people must worship Him and Him alone. Otherwise, judgment will come, and in this case it is to be the captivity of the nation by Babylonia, which did occur in 732 BC and 586 BC.

Today's reading, however, is in a concluding portion of the book that looks forward—beyond the captivity—to a time, yet future, when Israel will rejoice in the promised Kingdom blessing, chapter 3:9-20). Such a blessed future will be an occasion to "shout for joy… shout in triumph… rejoice and exult." Why? Because God has "taken away His judgments against you" and "He has cleared away your enemies." What causes for joy and rejoicing? But, even more astounding, the promise is that God Himself will be among them. The phrase is repeated: "The LORD is in your midst" (vv. 15, 17).

As in other Old Testament prophecies, Zephaniah warns his people that judgment is certain; it will come on the Day of the Lord's wrath. But he admonishes them in chapter 2:1-3 to "Seek the Lord … seek righteousness; seek humility." There will be a restoration, as we see in chapter 3; a remnant will be saved.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Zephaniah had promised a time of future joy and rejoicing after severe judgment and captivity. In

this epistle, Paul encourages Christians to find their joy and peace in God in the midst of trials and difficult circumstances. He himself had suffered to even get to Philippi some years before (see Acts 16), and he understands how stressful life can be. But, as in Zephaniah, it's the promised presence of God that enables the Christian to live above life's stresses and rejoice in God's goodness.

Second Reading:

Philippians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Chapter four of this power-packed letter emphasizes the power that Jesus provides for the Christian's life. There is strength in unity, vv. 1-3; strength of God's peace, vv. 4-7; strength of God's presence, vv. 8-9; and strength of God's provision, vv. 10-19. We look today at the significant words from verses 4-7.

Paul instructs the Philippians with emphasis, "rejoice." That joy is possible, of course, only because it is "in the Lord." Outside of one's personal trust in the all-sufficient grace and the mercy of God, there is no lasting source of joy. He encourages the believer to be gentle. Though translated a variety of ways ("forbearing," "moderation"), its meaning in the original language if "sweet reasonableness." Wouldn't life be so much more pleasant if we lived in a continue environment of sweet reasonableness? How is that possible? Well, believers in Jesus must be constantly aware that "The Lord is near." Not merely that He is watching judgmentally, but that He is near to help, to keep us sweet and reasonable. The indwelling Christ does that for us when we cannot by ourselves.

The next admonition is so difficult for many of us. He writes, "Be anxious for nothing." Didn't Paul realize the many anxieties those first-century Christians were facing? How could it tell them not to worry? He is likely saying that Christians should not be distracted by the affairs of life that they forget the real source of life, peace, and joy. It's good to remember that he was living in circumstances that may have been far more difficult than the Philippians at that time. But, more importantly, he provides the antidote for anxiety: prayer and thanksgiving. Nothing in life is beyond the realm of prayer. We may and should take everything to God in prayer; He should be our first resort, not the last. We should approach God with confidence that He is both able and willing to

relieve our fears.

The result is the incomprehensible peace that only God can provide. Peace is not just the absence of fear or stress. It is, as the Hebrews say, "Shalom." The term implies wholeness, harmony, completeness. Those attributes can be found only in the God of Peace. Here are Paul's words from another of his epistles: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels all cover the life and ministry of Jesus, each from a different perspective with somewhat different purposes in mind. Luke's telling emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. His audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the Gospel is for both Jews and Gentles.

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title He frequently uses to speak of Himself).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:10-18 NAS95 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is

mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

Today's reading reports on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. John's words just prior to this reading were rather scathing. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He had been prophesied that that the Lord would come to straighten the crooked places and make level the rough ways. "All flesh," he said,"shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

It is in response to that teaching that the crowd asked, "Then what shall we do?" John the Baptist lists a number of practices that his listeners could pursue that would demonstrate a genuine change of heart that he has been calling for. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1). A man with two coats could show his heart change by giving one to someone who had not. Likewise, with someone who has enough food; he can share.

When the tax collectors (usually men who collected more than the tax due to enlarge their own pockets) indicated they wanted to enter the waters of baptism for repentance, John tells them to collect only what is the proper tax. Soldiers also asked about their responsibility, and John pointed out what, apparently, were the illegal practices of some: taking money by force, falsely accusing people, complaining about their wages. They are to discontinue such practices.

All of this had the people conjecturing about who this prophet really was. Could he be the Messiah? John responds to clarify his role by noting his inferiority to the One he is preparing the way for. John's baptism was with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (was was to be fulfilled in Acts 2). It's interesting to note the final words of this reading, "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Yet, the preceding words are words of judgment ("winnowing fork," "burn up the chaff"). You see, the gospel has two facets. It offers the free grace of God in response to faith in the work of Jesus, but it promised judgment to those who reject Jesus.

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Reflection Questions

1. In light of the second reading, list the ways in which you daily lay down your anxieties to God. Do I have the unexplainable joy and peace of God because I pray with thanksgiving and give my anxieties to Him?

2. In the Gospel reading the crowd asked John, "Then what shall we do?" To which John responded with a list of practices believers in God exhibited as evidence of their change of heart. List two ways in which your life provides this evidence of turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to living out your life for God.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-08-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week's reading begins with a passage from the Apocrypha. We begin our exposition with the second reading, which then from Paul's letter to the

church in Philippi concludes with the Gospel reading from the third chapter of Luke. The Philippians passage allows us to see into the heart of the Apostle Paul and the mutual affection he shared with the believers in Philippi. The Gospel account introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. The reading includes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which foretells something about both John's ministry and the work of the one whom he introduced. [By Jesse Deloe]

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus.

First Reading:

Baruch 5:1-9 Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery;
put on the splendor of glory from God forever:
wrapped in the cloak of justice from God,
bear on your head the mitre
that displays the glory of the eternal name.
For God will show all the earth your splendor:
you will be named by God forever
the peace of justice, the glory of God's worship.
Up, Jerusalem! stand upon the heights;
look to the east and see your children
gathered from the east and the west
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that they are remembered by God.
Led away on foot by their enemies they left you:
but God will bring them back to you
borne aloft in glory as on royal thrones.
For God has commanded
that every lofty mountain be made low,
and that the age-old depths and gorges
be filled to level ground,

that Israel may advance secure in the glory of God.
The forests and every fragrant kind of tree
have overshadowed Israel at God's command;
for God is leading Israel in joy
by the light of his glory,
with his mercy and justice for company.

The writer of this reading from Baruch reminds the student of the Bible of how God will one day exalt Jerusalem and His people the Jews above every city, nation, and people. God's plan for Israel will not be frustrated, and His Holy City, Jerusalem, will become the center point of the spiritual world. We see this clearly through the writings of the Prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 2:1-4 NAS95 1 The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 Now it will come about that In the last days The mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it. 3 And many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; That He may teach us concerning His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For the law will go forth from Zion And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 And He will judge between the nations, And will render decisions for many peoples; And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The beginning of Paul's ministry in Philippi is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 16, beginning at verse 11. Philippi was a leading city in the Roman colony of Macedonia, and became the location of the first Christian church in Europe. While there, Paul and his companions were mistreated because of their preaching and were imprisoned. Paul and Silas were miraculously released during an earthquake and had the opportunity to bring about the conversion of the jailer and his family as a result. The missionary team departed the city and continued what is regarded as Paul's second missionary journey.

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. What did you learn today about having confidence that God has begun a good work in you and will complete it? That is possible only if you have put your personal trust in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to atone for your sin.

2. In what ways are you filling your mind with the "excellent" things of life that will honor God and build your Christian character?

3. During the past year, what are some specific circumstances when you acknowledged your sin before God, and change your mind and behavior so that you can live a life of holiness?