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 139: 10/04/2026



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we reverse the usual order and begin with the second reading, examining Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Then we look at the first reading from Isaiah and close with the Gospel lesson from Matthew.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the New Testament reading, we find how obedient believers can have a clear conscience and live without worry. This reading continues our study of the Book of Philippians from past weeks. As a reminder, Paul was in prison for his faithfulness to God in preaching the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In the previous verses, Paul admonishes two specific women in the church to resolve a certain unmentioned conflict. You can imagine that hearing of this conflict while he was in prison would have been discouraging to Paul. In the verse leading up to today's reading, Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). Before you read

the text, ask yourself: what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord, especially given Paul's unpleasant conditions and his admonition to resolve interpersonal conflict?

Second Reading:

> *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. 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:6-9)*

In the reading, Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions, which he said would bring peace to a believer's heart. As we saw in the context leading up to the reading, Paul said first to rejoice in the Lord. This means that, as believers, we can rest in the finished work of the Lord Jesus in securing our salvation and rejoice that, regardless of our circumstances, we can never be taken away from our relationship with the Lord (John 10:28-29). Paul said in the reading that we do not have to suffer anxiety if we turn our anxiety into a prayer request (v. 6). The word "supplication" is even stronger, as it connotes urgency, desperation, and humility. This is the attitude with which we can approach the throne of grace.

This is the same message that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples in His great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told them,
"And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:7-9).
In Jesus' model prayer, He instructed His disciples to first begin with adoration of God and thanksgiving. Jesus continued, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

(Matthew 6:10-12). After adoring God and thanking Him for His provisions, we should remember to confess our sins before we ask Him for the help we need. One of the things we can confess (which literally means "to say the same thing," which implies we agree with God) is our limited perspective, which is causing our anxiety in the first place. We can approach God with confidence (Hebrews 4:16), which should produce thankfulness in our hearts, no matter the circumstances we face. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

Finally, Paul called the believers in Philippi not only to pray when tempted to worry, but to think about the right things as a second way to combat worry. Paul told the believers to think about those things that were pure, lovely, of good repute, things of excellence and worthy of praise (v. 8) as well as the Scriptures that they had received from Paul (v. 9). Not only were they to concentrate their thoughts on the correct things, but they were also to practice the things which they had learned from Paul (v. 9). Many people have discovered that one way of forgetting their own troubles is to help others with their troubles. After they did all these things, the peace of God would be with them (v. 9c).

To summarize, Paul said that instead of worrying, we should pray, being thankful that God hears us and that we are not alone in our trials. He also directed believers to focus their thoughts on the right things, including a list of good things worthy of praise. In addition, we should practice what Paul taught: walking by faith in the truth of Scripture rather than by sight (or our feelings). Finally, we can only expect and look forward to experiencing God's peace after we do these things connected to living in the truth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Old Testament reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. He prophesied to Judah during the reigns of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1). His prophetic view often extended far beyond Judah's immediate circumstances, even as it faced a threat from Babylon. Isaiah prophesied about a distant day when the Lord's temple and holy city of Jerusalem would be exalted, and the world would be at peace. The following biblical text provides a hopeful backdrop amid Judah's impending exile.

The events Isaiah spoke of were often "telescoped" together, so distant events were seen as happening alongside near-term ones. This is sometimes called the "mountain peaks of prophecy" or

"prophetic foreshortening." The "last days" Isaiah spoke of in verse two above is the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) that John chronicles in Revelation. At this time, the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to usher in His kingdom, reign over the world, and finally bring an era of peace (Revelation 19:11-16).

But before peace could come, Judah must face the consequences of her disregard for the relational covenant God made with her. Judah repeatedly rejected God's overtures of loving provision, and His desire for relational loyalty was continually met with spiritual adultery. As you read, listen to God's heart as He faced the disappointment of unmet relational expectations with His chosen people.

First Reading:

> *1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. 3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress. (Isaiah 5:1-7)*

In today's reading, Isaiah sings a song about God, Isaiah's beloved. God planted a vineyard with a choice vine. Isaiah explained the vineyard metaphor as the house of Israel (v. 7). This metaphor of Israel as the vine appears throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. After tending it and building a tower to protect it, the vineyard produced "worthless" grapes (connoting wild or sour grapes). God had no other choice but to remove the hedge of protection that He placed around

Jerusalem and Judah and allow it to become a wasteland because of their rejection of the covenant relationship with God (v. 5). This prophecy of physical destruction was fulfilled through the invasion of the Babylonian forces in successive waves, with the last one in 586 BC resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (2 Kings 25:1-10). The final destruction of Jerusalem will occur in the future, when God allows a person called the Antichrist to establish his kingdom rule in Jerusalem (Revelation 13). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see that a second part of the destruction of Jerusalem was the spiritual element that came when the Messiah, Jesus, whom God sent, was rejected by the Jews.

This passage teaches about God's heart and the fallen human condition. God provided everything for his chosen people to thrive and be fruitful. The passage shows God's great care in establishing and tending His vineyard, the house of Israel (v. 7). "He dug it, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine" (v. 2). This parallels the creation account of what He did for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was part of the original design for humans to be God's image-bearers and to be fruitful on Earth (Genesis 1:27-28).

The consistent nature of human beings, as seen in Adam and Eve and in His people Israel, has been to break God's heart and to not live up to their noble identity as image-bearers. "Then I expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (v. 4). Isaiah repeats God's unmet expectation: "Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold a cry of distress" (v. 7). These verses reveal the systemic human condition of "fallenness" (or depravity). Even under the best conditions, humans show their tendency to reject God and choose self-reliance.

Therefore, God's response to these choices of autonomy and independence is not justified or necessary. It's almost as if God is saying, "What else can I do? They have rejected Me, so I will honor their choice." But their choice to live in autonomy from God has dire consequences. "I will remove its hedge, and it will be consumed . . ." (v. 5). Israel was free to live outside the covenant relationship God established, but she would also forfeit the benefits of this loving, protective relationship. They would reap the natural consequences of life apart from God. Rejecting God had dire consequences for the nation of Judah, as it continues to have for us today.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues the theme of God's vineyard as Jesus teaches using a parable. Context

is extremely important this week to understand Jesus' intended meaning. Jesus' message was clearly addressed directly to the Jewish religious authorities. This group had just witnessed Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matthew 21:7), something a king would do in that culture. As Jesus rode past the crowds, they cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (v. 9b). Immediately afterwards, Jesus escalated the tense situation even more as Matthew recorded that Jesus "entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of those who were selling doves" (v. 12). Next, while still in the temple He healed the blind and lame (v. 14). All of this inflamed the Jewish leaders and further exposed their hatred of Jesus. Matthew recorded what happened next. "But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant and said to Him, 'Do You hear what these children are saying?'" (vv. 15-16a). Jesus responded, "Yes; have you never read, 'OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF'" (v. 16b). The next day, Jesus returned to the temple (v. 23) after staying overnight in Bethany (v. 17). After cursing the fig tree in front of His disciples (v. 20), He was confronted by the chief priests and elders in the temple who questioned His authority (v. 23). Finally, in the verses leading up to today's reading He told the authorities in the temple the parable of the Sons in the Vineyard that we studied previously. That particular lesson, directed squarely at the hearts of the Jewish leaders, revealed that even though a person may outwardly act in a religious manner, they could be spiritually dead on the inside (Matthew 7:13). Jesus had taught the crowds earlier about this as recorded in Matthew:

> *21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)*

The religious leaders were not pleased with what Jesus told them. Later in the chapter, Matthew recorded, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet" (Matthew 21:45-46). How insightful of them; they were afraid to seize Him, at least then, because the people considered Him a prophet!

Now that we understand the context of the Gospel lesson, as you read the Gospel text, take special note of the identity of each character in the story. *Note: Verse 44 was included for context.*

Gospel Reading:

> *33 Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT AND DUG A WINE PRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 "The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers? 41 They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons." 42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'? 43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. 44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:33-46)*

This parable shows God's goodness and the reasonable expectation that His people would respond to that goodness by being obedient workers on God's behalf and producing fruit in His vineyard.

The story starts with a landowner who planted a vineyard. The all-caps text in verse 33 references Isaiah 5:1, which we read in the first reading. It is also very similar to the wording that God said about Israel being a "choice vine" in Jeremiah 2:21. The vine growers rejected their role as laborers on behalf of the landowner by abusing and killing the landowner's servants who came to collect the

produce (v. 35). The escalation continued to the point that the vine growers killed the landowner's son (vv. 37-39). In this context, Jesus is clearly referring to Himself. Jesus then let the Jewish leaders dig their own graves, so to speak, by asking them what they would do in such a situation. They said, "He [would] bring those wretches to a wretched end, and [would] rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who [would] pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons" (v. 42). In other words, the landowner would entrust the vineyard to other people who **would** be trustworthy. Jesus then seized the opportunity to teach them from their own Holy Scriptures by quoting a verse from Psalm 118, which they would have known. Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders that He was the stone they (the builders) were about to reject. But their rejection of Him as Messiah did not deter God's plan, for Jesus would become the cornerstone of real faith for past and future generations.

Below is a summary of the characters and subjects along with their meaning in the story:

1. The landowner represents God the Father. The landowner made a huge investment in the vineyard and then entrusted it to the vine growers. In the same way, God invests in people and entrusts His ministry to them to bear fruit.

2. The vineyard represents Israel. It had a tower and walls, protective measures the landowner took to preserve his valuable investment in the vineyard.

3. The vine growers represent the Jewish religious leaders.

4. The slaves are the prophets that God sent to the Old Testament Jews to remind them of their covenantal relationship with God.

5. The landowner's son represents God's Son, Jesus Christ.

6. The "other tenants" are the future church, which would consist primarily of Gentiles, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecies.

Some insights about the parable are as follows. First, this parable provided a key insight into the hearts of the religious leaders. The priests and elders claimed to belong to God's kingdom but did not obey God the Father. Instead, they obeyed a different father: the devil (John 8:44).

Second, the implication of this parable is that the disobedience of the Jewish people throughout history up until that time was actually a **conspiracy** against God. In verse 38, Jesus said, "they said among themselves," meaning they conspired to kill the landowner's son. Conspiracy has always been regarded as a greater crime than manslaughter in the legal system. In modern times, each of the vine growers would have been charged with both murder **and** conspiracy to commit murder. Jesus knew that the Jewish leaders had murder in their hearts. We see later on in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, who killed the prophets (Matthew 23:23), the greatest of whom was John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11), who had just been killed by King Herod (Matthew 14:10). This meant that a rejection of God's prophet John was a rejection of God Himself. In general, the prophets were frequently persecuted by their own people. Some were stoned (2 Chronicles 24:21), and some, like Jeremiah, were persecuted and killed in other ways (Jeremiah 26:7-11, 38:1-28).

Finally, the parable prophesies that the leaders of the Jewish community would reject Jesus. Jesus is the stone the builders rejected, but after His exaltation, He became the Chief Cornerstone of the church (v. 42). Jesus told them clearly about the penalty for their rejection: the loss of their kingdom. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." In the end, God gave the kingdom to the universal church, made up primarily of Gentiles. This mystery of God's grace wasn't revealed or understood until after it happened, though in hindsight God provided clues like this.

In His grace, God gave one final warning to the Jewish leaders in verse 44. "And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust," Jesus says that rejecting Him is fatal. Falling or stumbling upon the Rock will break those who reject the Messiah, for the 2nd advent of the Messiah will be that of a Judge who will pronounce everlasting judgment. Anyone who has ever dropped a dish onto a ceramic floor knows the peril of a hard surface. Jesus is the Rock over which the Jewish leaders stumbled. By application, we can see that anyone's rejection of Jesus is a fatal mistake that cannot be forgiven. Rejecting God's provision for the forgiveness of sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the only unforgivable sin (Matthew 12:22-32).

Reflection Questions

1. What is your response to God's claim of ownership of your life? Would you describe yourself like the vine growers who rejected the Son who came to seek payment or would you describe yourself as one who has surrendered to God's rightful ownership of your life? How would others describe you, based on your words, your attitudes, your values, and your lifestyle?

2. In the last two readings, we saw God's reasonable expectation that His people bear fruit for Him. We also saw Paul modeling this fulfillment: though he was in very unpleasant circumstances, he pointed the way to peace with God by connecting with Him in prayer. In what ways is God calling you to be His image-bearer in the world, despite your less-than-ideal circumstances? How can depending on God through prayer be a lifeline that helps you fulfill your God-given purpose?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-06-2023



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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

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

First Reading: (Including Skipped Verses 11-12)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate actions. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v. 21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v. 222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v. 23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

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

Gospel Reading:

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

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John

18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence on the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry to the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

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

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

Which of us would not have wanted to respond in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we should proceed. As I moved on to the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon, the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong, I was only trying to help? What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and to listen.

My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-28-2023

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Pentecost Sunday. We open with the first reading from Acts that chronicled the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in the early church. Then we move on to the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and discuss the gifts of the Spirit. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint John where we will examine what it means when Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

The theme of the readings this week goes like this: In the first reading, we see God's sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the second reading, we see the revelation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we find the commissioning by the Holy Spirit for all believers to spread the Gospel message. Let's begin with the first reading from the Book of Acts. This is the record of the momentous day on which God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (John 14:17). This event occurred fifty days after Jesus had risen from the dead and ten days after Jesus returned to heaven.

First Reading

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. 5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs–we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (Acts 2:1-11)

God's sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18). The Holy Spirit is the Person who empowered the disciples to turn from hiding in the upper room to being bold speakers in the name of Jesus. Notice how the first ministry of the Holy Spirit was to cause the disciples to speak in various languages in such a way that the Jews from around the world heard them in their own language (v. 6). It's not known whether each of the disciples spoke a different foreign language or if they spoke some sort of holy tongue that the foreigners were able to understand. Jesus had earlier told the disciples, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). This first ministry of the Spirit was to spread the Gospel to the foreign Jews gathered for Pentecost by allowing them to hear the Gospel message in their own language. Their testimony was that "we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God" (v. 11).

We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. His ministry through the believers in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. As we move to the second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we see some of the gifts sent to us by the Holy Spirit.

Second Reading

3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. 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. 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. (1 Corinthians 12:3-13)

In this reading, Paul cataloged some of the gifts of the Spirit and said that the purpose of the gifts was "for the common good" (v. 7). Although this was not an exhaustive list of the gifts (see also Ephesians 4:7-13 and Romans 12:3-8), they included wisdom and knowledge (v. 8), faith (v. 9a), healing (v. 9b), miracles (v. 10a), prophecy (v. 10b), discernment of spirits (v. 10c), speaking in tongues (v. 10d), and interpretation of those speaking in tongues (v. 10e). Later in the reading, Paul stated that although the gifts of the Spirit were diverse with everyone having a different gift, they were delivered by God in such a way as to work perfectly together in the whole body of the church (vv. 11-13). Even though not everyone would have the same gift, the diversity of gifts among the believers would accomplish God's purposes through the unity of the believers (v. 13). For example, only certain people were given the gift of prophecy, meaning either the ability to foretell future events or more prominently in the New Testament context to forth tell through the preaching of the Scriptures. In today's age, some of the gifts that Paul listed are more prevalent than other ones. During the early church immediately after God sent the Holy Spirit certain gifts such as tongues and healing were very important as "sign gifts" that greatly increased the spread of the Gospel to a culture thoroughly immersed in the worship of idols. God used these sign gifts in a powerful way as we can see in the first reading with the empowerment of the disciples to speak in various languages.

As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God the Holy Spirit commission the believers in the early church to spread the Gospel. The context of the reading from John Chapter 20 is the evening of the first Easter Sunday when Jesus' first appeared to the disciples who were gathered together in the upper room with the doors locked. This didn't stop Jesus, who was able to walk right through the wall or door by exercising His divine power with His new glorified body. Only ten of the disciples were present as Thomas "The Twin" didn't see Jesus until the next time the whole group was gathered together (John 20:26), and Judas had already given up hope and killed himself.

Before we read the text, since the central focus of the lesson will be on the concept of the forgiveness of sin let's review what God's Holy Word says about this crucially important subject. First, God says that everyone, except for Jesus, is a sinner. Paul said in Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Second, God says that because of our sin, we deserve the penalty of death; having sinned against a Holy God Who is completely separate from sin. Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). We can never enter into the presence of our Holy God because we are sinful. The only way that we can enter into a relationship with God and be in His presence when we die is to have our sin forgiven by God. Third, there is good news. Paul continued in Romans 6:23, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b-ff). Finally, only God can forgive sin. In Luke's Gospel Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees after he proclaimed the forgiveness of a paralyzed man's sin, and they challenged Jesus authority to forgive sin. In response Jesus said, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, –He said to the paralytic—'I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home'" (Luke 5:23-24). Though Scripture tells us to "confess our sins one to another" (James 5:16), only God can forgive sin. Jesus came to the earth as God in the flesh for the express purpose of dying on the cross for our sin (Romans 4:25). "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Paul explained later in Romans Chapter 10 how to receive the free gift of eternal life through the forgiveness of our sin:

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

We see that the forgiveness of our sin is the free gift of God that comes by believing the good news of the Gospel. Jesus gave the disciples, and by application every Christian, what is called the Great Commission to preach this message about the forgiveness of sin. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). This is the Gospel, meaning good news, that Jesus instructed his believers to preach to the world for the forgiveness of sin.

Now, with these things in mind let's read what happened that Sunday evening when Jesus made a surprise visit to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

Gospel Reading

19 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." (John 20:19-23)

What did Jesus mean when he said in verse 23, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained"? The key to understanding Jesus' teaching in verse 23 is found in the previous two verses. Jesus said, "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (v. 21b). Next, in verse 22 He promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. This "sending" or "commissioning" of the disciples (and all believers) is one of the main purposes of the church as expounded in the Great Commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus instructed these ten men that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved, just as we saw in Romans Chapter 10. The interpretation of Scripture must always be consistent with the whole counsel of God's Word.

What do the three themes we discovered in the readings today mean in our lives? First, God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His believers in order to accomplish His purposes. He sent a diversity of gifts to a diversity of people in such a way that it forces the Church to work together as the Body of Christ. Second, God commissioned all believers, not just the ten disciples that were gathered in the room at Pentecost, to fulfil His Great Commission. This means that everyone that believes is to work to spread the Gospel message and to disciple believers, recognizing that not everyone will be gifted in either of these two particular areas. Some will be called to teach, and some to evangelize. You can

rest assured that if you truly commit your heart to the Lord that you won't automatically be called by Him as a missionary in Africa. But you can be assured that God will call you to use whatever spiritual gift(s) that He has given you to your fullest ability.

Earlier this week I was driving home from the local lake after spending three hours windsurfing, which is one of my favorite pastimes. As I turned the corner on the road leading up to our house at around 7:00 pm, I recognized my neighbor as he drove by me on the way back to work at our local Christian college. Although he goes into work at 8:00 in the morning with his wife and returns with her sometime after 5:00 pm, he usually returns after dinner. Although God has gifted this man in a variety of ways, through it all is one of his preeminent qualities: faithfulness. This really inspired me to be faithful as well. Although God doesn't call everyone to work 10 plus hours each day on a fixed salary as my neighbor does, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The full list of spiritual gifts can be found in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11. We looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today. Read each of the other passages and see if you can locate the full list of spiritual gifts: Administration, Knowledge, Apostleship, Leadership, Discernment, Mercy, Evangelism, Miracles, Exhortation, Pastor/Shepherd, Faith, Prophecy, Giving, Serving/Ministering, Healing, Teaching, Interpretation of Tongues, Tongues, Wisdom

Romans 12:6-8 NAS95 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:28-30 NAS95 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?

Ephesians 4:11 NAS95 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

2. What is your spiritual gift? One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other believers. Another way it to use one of the variety of spiritual gift tests available online. See for example:

http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1

In what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-21-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of

Acts just after Jesus was taken up into heaven. Then we move to the continuing study on First Peter, and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 7, which is Jesus' prayer for Christian unity.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is forty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus had gathered the disciples together and they had just asked Him the question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6c). This was an honest question and indicated what was evident on all of their minds. Would Jesus now usher in His reign on earth as both a religious King *and* supreme civil ruler as foretold in the Scriptures? They would have been familiar with what the Prophet Micah had predicted regarding His future rulership. "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" (Micah 5:2). Jesus answered their question with something that they probably did not want to hear. He said, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). However, Jesus went on, "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Afterwards, Jesus was taken up into heaven leaving the disciples waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

With this context in mind, read the text and keep in your mind the flurry of events that the disciples had just experienced, including seeing a fully alive Man ascend into heaven followed by the appearance of two angels (Acts 1:10).

First Reading:

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of

James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)

Several points can be drawn from the reading and especially ones that relate to the Gospel lesson later in this study. First, the disciples of the early church were united in continual prayer. The Scriptures call all believers to pray with the example set by Jesus' first believers. Prayer is one of the ways in which the church is united in their purpose. Some years ago in seminary I took a course in prayer. I wondered how anyone could study prayer for an entire semester. One of the things that I was concerned about before I began the course was that the syllabus said that I had to locate a prayer partner and agree to pray with them for one hour each week throughout the term. Soon after the class began I was able to locate a suitable classmate with whom to each week. As the semester progressed I noticed for the first time in my life the value of joining in prayer with another Christian. Although I am certain that I didn't pray with the same fervor as did Saint Peter, I did obtain strength through persisting in meeting with my prayer partner which has led me to much stronger prayer life since the conclusion of the class.

Second, the unity of the church included women, who were people with very low status in the culture, not much more than property. Women were the first ones to testify of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, even though in this culture the testimony of women in civil court was often disregarded. Jesus turned society morays on its proverbial ear, he turned the world upside down by valuing women equally with men and even affording them a position of prominence by seeing to it that they were the first witnesses of the resurrection!

Third, note that John said "These all with one mind" (v. 14a). When all of the believers in a group have the same mind, they are united not only in their purpose but also work to align their will with the revealed will of God through the mutual understanding of His Word in the Scriptures. One of the practices that I did with my own prayer partner was that when we ran out of things to say we just read the Bible aloud. Having just experienced Jesus' last 40 days of ministry and also being fresh from the Emmaus Road experience the disciples must have studied the Old Testament Scriptures (as we call them) with a renewed fervor and understanding. This unity of thinking and mission would help the early church to persevere during the subsequent persecution that early on descended upon the Church.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading and continue with the teaching in First Peter, keep the theme of unity of all believers in your mind. In this message, Saint Peter taught the early church the importance of rejoicing in spite of persecution, as well as what actions to take during these difficulties.

Second Reading:

13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (1 Peter 4:13-16)

Peter said that if you "are reviled for the name of Christ" (v. 14a) you are blessed. How can someone be blessed if they are persecuted for Christ? Peter said we are blessed during persecution because "the Spirit of glory rests on you" (v.14c-ff). Jesus promised that He would not leave us as orphans (John 14:18), that His Spirit would rest upon the believers. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to help believers to persist in persecution for their faith. Peter called us to "glorify God in this name" and not to be ashamed because of persecution (v. 16). He contrasted this with someone who suffered for breaking a civil law, or even just being a "troublesome meddler," thing which the Spirit will not comfort us and for which we should expect persecution.

One of the common themes that frequently emerge from the testimony of Christians who experienced long periods of persecution for their faith is the comfort of the Holy Spirit that they found through the unity with other believers. We will see the importance of unity as revealed in Jesus' prayer to the Father as we move to the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson for today has to do with Jesus' call for unity in the Church. John opened the Gospel lesson today by saying, "Jesus spoke these things," and then he prayed to the Father. What were "these things" to which John was referring? If we look back to the previous two verses, we see

what John was referring to. Jesus said, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be **scattered**, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:32-33, emphasis added). Jesus knew that the disciples, with the exception of John, would scatter during his tribulation and death on the cross. He also knew that they would scatter because of the persecution that would come upon the young church after he went back to heaven.

Gospel Reading:

1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. 6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; 8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. 9 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; 10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. (John 17:1-11)

Notice how Jesus made a variety of affirmation while He was praying, and then proceeded to present to the Father his petitions. Jesus affirmed that He had authority over the entire world, "all flesh" (v. 1) and that the Father had given the believers eternal life for the purpose of knowing the "one true God and Jesus Christ" (v. 2). He affirmed that He had manifested the Name of the Father to the believers whom the Father had given to Him (v. 6), Next, Jesus prayed that the believers would become "one even as We are one" (v. 11). Jesus call to unity with Himself represented the core of the Gospel message, that believers become one with God through faith in Jesus Christ and the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

What does all of this mean for our lives? First, Jesus' call for us to be united with Himself and the Father comes about through the things we have seen in the lesson today. We are to be united by gathering together in prayer, by praying continually, even when we are by ourselves. We are called to submit ourselves to the will of the Father, and to learn His will by understanding His revelation through the Scriptures. Second, we can find unity with God by accepting persecution for our faith with the understanding that this glorifies God. When we are led by God to take up countercultural positions on certain moral issues including affirming the rights of all unborn children we can have courage that God will glorify His name through our obedience.

Reflection Questions

1. Throughout the lesson today we have seen how the disciples were unified in their mind to accomplish Jesus' mission for them. One of the ways in which they both expressed and achieved this unity was through their constant prayer with the group.

I challenge you this week to pray with another believer at least once during the upcoming week. Even if it is before a meal or over the telephone, ask the person if they would be willing to pray together. Be prepared to answer the most common objections such as not having enough time, my faith is a personal thing, this makes me uncomfortable, etc.

2. A few years ago I spent two weeks in France with a group of college students. The cultural differences took me some getting used to. I rejoiced at the fact that those in France still had a certain reverence for the people of God although they regarded people who claimed to be Christians with a bit of suspicion.

In light of your cultural experiences, how does your faith in Jesus Christ help you in overcoming the cultural differences that you experience in your own life and work? How does what you learned today help to inform you of some of the ways in which to attack these cultural challenges?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-02-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Palm Sunday. This week we open with the first reading, which is the procession of the palms. Then we move to the Old Testament reading that gives us a glimpse of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah. The New Testament reading shows the humility of Jesus, who came to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah having to suffer. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel account of Jesus' passion, our Messiah, Who paid the penalty for our sin.

Procession of the Palms:

The Gospel reading of the procession of the palms is from Matthew 21. This is Saint Matthew's telling of the preparation and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As you read, imagine that you were a believing Jew among the crowd and spread your own palm branches on the road for the King.

1 When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you

will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5 "SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, 'BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.'" 6 The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, 7 and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. 8 Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. 9 The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" 10 When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" 11 And the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11)

The time around Passover was a season of messianic expectancy, and there were many pilgrims in the city for the celebration. Certainly, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead that we read last week would have played into His sudden popularity and for the people's desire to see Him. In messianic form, Jesus directed His disciples with exact precision, and when they followed His orders, everything worked out exactly as Jesus had said. Jesus asserted His authority over Jerusalem by riding into the city on a donkey, not a mighty stallion as would have been done by kings. Notice how precisely Jesus fulfilled the Prophet Zechariah's prophecy, that called for both a donkey and the colt of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Evidently, according to Saint Matthew's narrative, Jesus rode on the colt and the donkey (its mother) walked alongside.

The procession of the palms dealt with Jesus' first coming. As we look forward to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday, let's study Jesus' second coming. The Book of Revelation revealed some of the details about Jesus' physical return to the earth at the end of the Great Tribulation period. Jesus entered Jerusalem during His First Advent on a donkey. Read what the Scripture says about how He will return the second time.

11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. 12 His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. 13 He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. 15 From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. 16 And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND

LORD OF LORDS." (Revelation 19:11-16).

Jesus came the first time as a humble, unblemished Lamb (Revelation 13:8). However, Jesus will return the second time as the glorious Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). He will return as the Almighty Warrior on a white horse, not a donkey as happened the first time. At His First Coming, many people missed His appearance. According to John, at His Second Coming He will not be missed. John said, "BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen" (Rev 1:7). When the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (v. 16b) returns, He will come in judgment to a people living "as in the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37) expecting things to continue as they always had in the past. Since God has given us this warning, we must ask ourselves "How now shall we live?" While ignorance seems to be bliss, it does not lead to eternal life.

This Sunday as we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entrance in Jerusalem at His First Advent, we can celebrate that we are among those that did, in a sense, welcome Jesus to Jerusalem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We can celebrate that we are not among those who missed His first coming. As we hold our palms, we can proudly celebrate our belief that King Jesus will one day return to the earth he created. In our waving of the palms, we can lift them up as white flags of surrender to the King who deserves our whole lives.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Old Testament reading at the Mass is from Isaiah 50. We see that God judged Israel's sinfulness, but then also provided a way for salvation in this prediction of the Messiah. *Note: Surrounding verses were included for the context.*

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD, "Where is the certificate of divorce By which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, And for your transgressions your mother was sent away. 2 Why was there no man when I came? When I called, why was there none to answer? Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom? Or have I no power to

deliver? Behold, I dry up the sea with My rebuke, I make the rivers a wilderness; Their fish stink for lack of water And die of thirst. 3 I clothe the heavens with blackness And make sackcloth their covering." 4 The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them. 10 Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. 11 Behold, all you who kindle a fire, Who encircle yourselves with firebrands, Walk in the light of your fire And among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: you will lie down in torment. (Isaiah 50:1-11)

The first section talks about God's discipline on the northern tribes of Israel (verses1-3). The picture that these verses paint is one of temporarily setting aside this group of God's chosen people until they come to believe in God's sending of the Messiah. The prophecy shifts to the personalization of the Messiah's suffering, which is known as Good Friday (verses 4-9). The proper response is seen in verse 10: "Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? **Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God**." This is the crux of the matter that all people will have to resolve. In what or in whom do we trust? Our own fires that we ourselves kindle or the fire that God sets in our heart to believe in Jesus the Messiah?

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will read about the fulfillment of the suffering of God's servant (Is. 50:6 "scourged" and "spat upon") in great detail. The predicted suffering from Isaiah is also the backdrop for the New Testament reading, which was probably sung as a hymn in the early Church about the great lengths that Jesus went to in order to fulfill the Father's plan for our salvation.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2:6-11 where we learn about how Jesus came the first time as a humble Servant.

Second Reading:

6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:6-11)

This passage continues the sharp contrast that the Bible portrays between Jesus' first Advent and His second coming. The first advent He came as a humble servant. In this act of the incarnation and His death, He not only served His Father, but he served us. Humankind was in desperate need of a Savior, owing a sin debt beyond the ability to repay. So He became the suffering Servant "for the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2), paying our debt on the cross. By being obedient to the Father, He will come again in exaltation and power (as we saw in Revelation earlier). The second coming will be very different from the first Advent. In addition to every eye seeing his second coming, this passage informs us that every knee will bow, voluntarily or involuntarily. The choice is ours to make. We can voluntarily bow our knee to the Messiah now, or we can harden our hearts against Him, only to involuntarily bow when He returns.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel Reading is Matthew's account of the passion, which includes the betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, humiliation, crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

14 Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?" And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him. 16 From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus. 17 Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do You want us to prepare for You

to eat the Passover?" 18 And He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is near; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples."'" 19 The disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. 20 Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. 21 As they were eating, He said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me." 22 Being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, "Surely not I, Lord?" 23 And He answered, "He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. 24 "The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." 25 And Judas, who was betraying Him, said, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself." 26 While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 27 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; 28 for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. 29 "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." 30 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.' 32 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." 33 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." 35 Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too. 36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. 38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." 39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." 40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? 41 "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." 43 Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. 45 Then He came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" 47 While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48 Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him." 49 Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. 50 And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword

back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. 53 "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 "How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?" 55 At that time Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. 56 "But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets." Then all the disciples left Him and fled. 57 Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. 58 But Peter was following Him at a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. 59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death. 60 They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, 61 and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 The high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" 63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN." 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; 66 what do you think?" They answered, "He deserves death!" 67 Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, 68 and said, "Prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?" 69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." 70 But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." 71 When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." 73 A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away." 74 Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. 1 Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; 2 and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. 3 Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" 5 And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. 6 The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." 7 And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. 8 For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "AND THEY TOOK THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET by the sons

of Israel; 10 AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME." 11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." 12 And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" 14 And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed. 15 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. 16 At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. 17 So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" 18 For he knew that because of envy they had handed Him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." 20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. 21 But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" 23 And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!" 24 When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves." 25 And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" 26 Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified. 27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. 28 They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. 29 And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. 31 After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. 32 As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, 34 they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. 35 And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. 37 And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." 38 At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. 39 And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, 42 "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. 43 "HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE Him now, IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words. 45 Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a

loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" 47 And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. 49 But the rest of them said, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him." 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" 55 Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. 56 Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. 57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. 58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61 And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. 62 Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, 63 and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' 64 "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." 66 And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (Matthew 26:14 – 27:66)

Let us pray. Dear God, as we move forward to the Holy Week, please pray that many would hear the message of the good news of the Gospel. Please pray that their hearts would be opened for them to be able to receive the gift of Jesus' sacrifice He made for them. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. The week before Jesus' crucifixion, the people applauded Him as their Messiah. They probably thought that Jesus was going to overthrow the Romans and set up His earthly Kingdom. When He was arrested and tried, the people rejected the concept of a Suffering Servant (Is. 53). They had no

idea the importance of His death as the payment for their sin. Instead, they wanted a Messiah who would give them political deliverance. We need to learn from their mistake, and ponder whether we want the real Messiah that God sent (the One who acts for our spiritual deliverance) or do we want a Messiah of our own making (a powerful ruler who makes our circumstances more comfortable)? He will one day set the record straight and deliver us from physical oppressors, but now He is working on our hearts to deliver us from spiritual oppressors.

The question is, will we let Him do this good work in us, or will we reject Him, as the people did before Pilate, not recognizing His rightful place in our lives?

2. What is one thing from these readings that helps you to trust in how Jesus is working in your life?

3. All of the readings from this week portray a running contrast between Jesus' first coming and His second coming. His first Advent already came, but His second coming is yet to happen. How can bowing your knee to King Jesus now prepare you for the Second coming?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-19-2023

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Notes. This week we read from the Book of Leviticus, continue our study in First Corinthians and finally conclude with further study from the Sermon on the Mount from Saint Matthew. There we will see a message that Jesus gave his disciples, which culminated with a statement to them that they were to be perfect. How can anyone be perfect, you may ask? We will address that and other things in the Mass Notes this week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

In the first reading this week, it's important for us to put our Old Testament hats back on and return to the culture of ancient Judaism. The first reading this week is from Leviticus Chapter 19. The Book of Leviticus is concerned with God's giving of the Law to Moses, and especially the ecclesiastical Law concerning sacrifices, offerings, and dietary Law. One of the overall purposes of the Law was to set the Hebrew people apart from the surrounding people. God said in the previous chapter, "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'I am the LORD your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; you shall not walk in their statutes'" (Leviticus 18:2-3). However, the most significant purpose of the Law was to point people to the perfect sacrifice that would occur through the Lamb of God (Jesus) who would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Let's pick up with the reading

today in Chapter 19.

First Reading:

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2 "Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. 17 You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.'" (Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18)

Several points arise from the reading. First, we see that God called the Hebrew Nation to be holy or set apart from sin and dedicated to the service of the LORD. Although we have all used and heard the word "holy" lots of times in our lives, it's easy to gloss over the rich meaning of the word. In the reading, God provided a simple reason why the Jews were to be holy when He said, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (v. 2b). This was God's appeal to His nature and a calling for the Hebrew nation to emulate his character. As we said above, one reason that God provided the Law was to set apart the Nation of Israel from the surrounding people. The word holy means to be set apart and the Jews were called to be a peculiar people, different from the idolaters in the pagan cultures that surrounded them. They were to be holy because they were God's chosen people and were to reflect His image of holiness to the world around them. As we saw two weeks ago in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, the concept of being "set apart" was to fulfil special purposes for God, not to live an ordinary existence. The Jews were set apart for the purpose to be salt and light to those around them.

Second, God set a high standard of love for one's neighbor. This standard would have been foreign to the people from the nations surrounding Israel. The Jews, and by application all believers including us, were not to hate our neighbor in their mind (v. 17a), but were instead called to love their neighbors as themselves (v. 18c), and were not to take vengeance against them (v. 18a). He didn't mean that we had to just love our literal neighbors, but everyone. God set this high standard of loving behavior in stone, in the Law of the land for the Hebrew people. Which of us hasn't hated our neighbor at one time or another?

Third, God said that the Jews were not to take vengeance against their neighbors. This wasn't directed to soldiers in battle because God provided clear direction to the Jews regarding those

matters (see for example Deuteronomy 2:34, 3:6, and especially Deuteronomy 20:16-18). This was directed to all of God's people who were given these specific examples of how to live out one's life in a status as "set apart." Saint Paul confirmed that the admonition against taking retribution in Romans and quoted the exact verse from Leviticus. "'Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Although we may feel like we want to get even with someone for hurting us, God has given us a universal calling not to act against a "neighbor" that has wronged us.

Back when I lived in a suburb in a large Midwestern city, I developed a strong dislike for the neighbor whose back yard adjoined the back of my own house. This neighbor had a dog that they used to let outside to do his business. This dog would then bark endlessly until the neighbor let him back inside. Their barking dog used to drive me crazy. As a result, I developed a strong dislike them, and I didn't even know them. One day out of the blue, I came up with a novel approach to solve the problem. The next time he let the dog out to bark (I mean to let him do his business!) I walked over to the fence and called to the dog, "here boy." I kept calling and sure enough, the dog came running over to the fence, jumped up wanted to be petted. I made friends with the dog that day and as a result found that I no longer disliked my neighbor either! In fact, after I moved away, I actually missed my doggy friend. Why did it take me so many years to figure that out? This was a case where love did truly conquer the conflict with my neighbor. Now if I could just make friends with my current neighbor's dog!

How about you? Do you have some difficult people in your life to whom God is calling you to love, even though you don't have feelings of love for them? If you are His child, He will give you the ability to grow in loving even your enemies. Pray to God and ask Him to change your heart.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading this week is a continuation of the study from last week in Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In this reading, Saint Paul explains the concept of personal holiness. As you read, try to imagine the sense that a First Century Jew would have had when Paul mentioned the phrase "temple of God" and how that would flavor their reading of this text.

Second Reading:

16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. 18 Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is THE ONE WHO CATCHES THE WISE IN THEIR CRAFTINESS"; 20 and again, "THE LORD KNOWS THE REASONINGS of the wise, THAT THEY ARE USELESS." 21 So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, 23 and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God. (1 Corinthians 3:16-23)

For a First Century Jew the temple in Jerusalem was the holiest and most sacred place on earth. We know from Jesus' ministry to the Jews that they had a difficult time understanding how the human body could be a temple (John 2:19). This was especially true not only because of the grandeur of the temple but also because the whole Jewish religious system revolved around the temple. But when Jesus ushered in the church age, He fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel. "And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). Our bodies are a holy temple, or shrine. Later in the same Letter Paul said, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"(1 Corinthians 6:19). We are called to be holy because our bodies are a living temple of God.

In the next section, Paul prescribed humility for healing the divisions that existed in the Corinthian Church. What Paul is saying is that a person must be humble in order to learn. Paul quoted from Job Chapter 5 and Psalm 94 to make his point. Verse 10 that he quoted from Psalm 94 was sandwiched between two verses that dealt with chastening. "*10 He who **chastens** the nations, will He not rebuke, Even He who teaches man knowledge? 11 The LORD knows the thoughts of man, That they are a mere breath. 12 Blessed is the man whom You **chasten**, O LORD, And whom You teach out of Your law*" (Psalms 94:10-12). Chastening can be God's way to bring us to a humble position. One of Paul's intents was to bring the chastening of the Lord to bear on the sin of division in the Corinthian church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

I want to include a story that will help you to understand holiness in light of biblical teachings so that you can better understand Jesus' words in the Gospel reading. One night I was attending a

dinner party at a friend's house in a nearby city. After dinner, we were sitting around talking and the doorbell rang. My friend left to answer the door and then suddenly called out, "Jim, it's for you!" Thoughts raced through my mind, who even knew that I was there, who could it be that wanted me while I was visiting someone else's house? I left the dining room and walked over to the front door only to be met by two young Mormon missionaries. These were of course not unique and matched the "cookie cutter" pattern with their nametags and backpacks. This was going to be an interesting night! After I introduced myself to the men, I prayed silently and asked God for the approach that I should take in order to introduce these boys to the *true* Gospel. As it turned out I had just completed a study of Mormon doctrine and it came to me that I should discuss the doctrine of perfection with them. I just so happened to have a Bible with me in my jacket and I asked them if they were familiar with Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. I don't remember their answer, but I pulled out my Bible and asked them if they had time for a little Bible study because "You do believe in the Bible, don't you?" Next, I asked them, "How good do you have to be to make it to heaven?"

They said something like, "We strive to be perfect." They were very nice boys, just a bit misguided.

I said that that was good because "Did you know that under the biblical Law Jesus taught that in order to be saved by being a good person you have to be perfect?" I opened the Bible to Matthew Chapter 5 and read, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). I asked them what was their standard of perfection, just how good did they have to be to make it to heaven, and how would they know when they had reached this standard? They weren't sure about that but said that they just had to keep on trying. The debate continued and I was able to show them God's true plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and not by good works. I explained to them how God emphasized the value of our good works, but that good works were not meritorious for salvation. I read to them Saint Paul's capstone statement on the matter:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Paul's statement about the only way that people are saved (v. 8a) is quite different from what is taught by the Mormon "church" that believes that they are saved by grace, but only *after all they can do*. This addendum is noticeably missing from the Word of God. Since salvation is a free gift from God that is obtained *only* through faith in the Lord Jesus, we don't have to strive to be perfect

in order to earn our salvation. Paul explained that the reason that God saved us was for the purpose of our good works. He didn't say that we were saved because of our good works. Although Christians are called to live holy lives through God's power, a good Mormon is expected to triumph over sin in their own power, and this in order to earn their salvation. We can rejoice in the victory that God has given us over such a false belief system.

With these things in mind, let's read the Gospel text.

Gospel Reading:

You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' 39 But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. 41 Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. 43 You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)

The opening quotation was from Exodus 21:24. As an interesting side note, this quotation in Exodus followed the warning from God about neglecting to honor your parents. The Jewish Law said, "He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 21:17). Even though Jesus came to fulfill the Jewish Law, and under the New Covenant the civil and ceremonial Law is no longer binding upon Christians, the principles found in the *moral* Law are behaviors which are upheld in the New Testament. This includes honoring our parents (Ephesians 6:2), though the penalty for disobeying this law is no longer the death penalty. Notice the word "but," a transitory (conjunction) term. Jesus said, in effect, "The Law prescribed this (you have heard it said), *but* I say do that." Jesus wasn't contradicting the Law but was instead calling His followers to obey a standard *higher* than the Law. We will see that this calling wasn't limited just to the Jewish Law, but to the laws of their entire society.

Jesus also called His followers to recognize a higher standard than their religious Law found in the Pentateuch (the first five Books of the Bible). His called extended to the Roman Civil law as well. This fact came out in verse 41 when Jesus spoke about being forced to go one mile. The First Century Jews were living under Roman occupation and as a result were under certain laws falling under the category of "impressment." Although they weren't under a requirement by the Romans to serve in a military function (conscription) they were required in certain circumstances to assist the Roman military. This could include being required to carry a Roman soldier's backpack 1,000 paces (a Roman mile). Jesus' outrageous call was to show the Roman soldier's generosity by going beyond the legal requirement. This principle of "going beyond the law" runs throughout today's Gospel reading.

Next, Jesus quoted from Leviticus 19, the text that we studied in the first reading. He said that you should love your neighbor (v. 43) but go beyond this and love your enemies and those who persecute you (v. 44). Jesus' mention of "enemies and those who persecute you" could be an allusion to the Romans and the impressment laws. The Romans were the enemies of the Jews, which was a condition that came to a head with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, then again in AD 132.

Who are the "Romans" in your life? How might you go beyond obligation and actually go the extra mile?

The culmination of Jesus' radical call to go beyond the requirements of the law to perfection was found in verse 48. Take careful note of the adverb "therefore," and ask yourself "what is it there for?" This word is "there for" because it linked Jesus call to a radical new behavior to the source of the empowerment for His people to achieve it. Jesus said, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). I asked the Mormon missionaries, how can anyone, even Jesus' own disciples be perfect? If we look further ahead in the Sermon on the Mount to Matthew Chapter 6, it seems apparent that by this point in Jesus' message, the crowds had begun to rejoin Him and were hearing His message. This is evident because of the way the tone changed when He introduced practices that were typical of the Pharisees in 6:1-2. He said to "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them" (6:1a) and "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets" (6:2a-b). Although Jesus' disciples may have had difficulties in controlling their personal behavior (as we do), they certainly didn't warrant Jesus' label of "hypocrites." No, Jesus reserved this label for His nemesis, the group known as the Pharisees. Now, with this context in mind let's read verse 48 in Chapter 5 again. How does Jesus love His "enemies" the Pharisees? Jesus said to the Pharisees and His disciples who were also listening, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your

heavenly Father is perfect." The Pharisees were hypocrites, and many evidently thought that they were already perfect through their strident observance of the Law (Matthew 23:5-7). The Scripture clearly states that nobody can be made perfect under the Law, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). What the Pharisees didn't understand was that perfection was only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. Saint Paul said, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2Corinthians 5:21). Jesus provided the Holy Spirit to live within us as the source of our *spiritual* perfection. This spiritual perfection manifests itself in our radical obedience to God in going above the prescription of the eternal moral laws and the prevailing civil laws of our society. It's not that we won't ever sin but that our ongoing intention is to accomplish the work of God by being salt and light even to our enemies, the "Roman soldiers" in our community.

In summary, as Christians Scripture calls us to go beyond the law. Christians are called not only to observe the civil law (Romans 13:1-3) but to follow a standard above this body of law as well as a higher standard than the moral law that God has written on our hearts (Romans 2:15). God has provided us with His empowerment to follow this higher standard through the gift of the Holy Spirit Who is given to every believer who obeys (Acts 5:32). "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we said that as believers our spiritual perfection manifests itself in radical obedience to God in going above the prescription of the eternal moral laws and the prevailing civil laws of our society. Answer the following questions.

A. Who are the "Roman soldiers" in your life? Is it your neighbor with their relentless barking dog? Has a city official ruled against you in a zoning dispute? Did a police officer nail you in a speed trap at the bottom of the hill in your village? Is your spouse eroding the feelings of love you once felt? Are you tired of changing an elderly person's diaper? Is your coworker stealing your joy in the workplace?

B. How does knowing that God lives in your heart change the way that you view your enemies?

2. If holiness (being set apart) is God's vision for created human beings, then how might you cooperate more fully with God's plan?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-08-2023



Although the gift-giving season of Christmas has just passed from our radar screens, the tradition of gift giving is found in each of the readings of the mass this week. In the Old Testament reading, we see that people will give gifts to Jesus, the King, who will reign on earth during His second advent. The New Testament reading shows us how St. Paul was God's gift to the Gentiles. And the Gospel reading recounts the story of the Wise Men who came from the East to give gifts to Jesus during His first advent.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week we are first going to examine the second reading from Saint Paul because the first reading from Isaiah and Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew must be studied together in light of the insights from Paul. The second reading is Ephesians Chapter Three where Paul unveiled a mystery that had been hidden throughout the ages until after Jesus' First Advent, what we just celebrated at Christmas. As you read this section of Ephesians try to select the single verse that Saint Paul provided which summarized this mystery.

Note: Verse 1 which was omitted from the reading is included below.

Second Reading:

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles– 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel, (Ephesians 3:1-6)

Even though Saint Paul did minister to the Jews (see for example, Acts 13:14) his *primary* ministry was to the Gentiles. In contrast, Peter's main ministry was to the Jews. Paul, through the providence of the Holy Spirit, said that God placed him into the position of stewardship over the Gentile believers in the Church (verses 1 – 2). He said elsewhere in Galatians, "But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7). God determined that the *primary* focus of his ministry was to give the Gospel to the Gentiles, the same way that He sent Saint Peter to bring the message to the Jews. Though God set Paul apart to concentrate his ministry on the Gentile people, his background was that of a devout Jew (Philippians 3:5) and his heart was set upon winning the Jews to the Kingdom of God.

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted (Romans 11:17) into the people of God through the Church. It is important to understand, at least from a high level, Paul's background while we discuss this mystery which was revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who from all accounts would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strict Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history, we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The quotation above from Isaiah brings us to the first reading, found in Chapter 60. As we said before, with the benefit of history and hindsight, we understand that this section of Isaiah refers to the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, namely when He returns in glory. With this context in mind, study the reading and take special note of the gifts that the Gentile believers will bring to the LORD.

First Reading:

1 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold,

darkness will cover the earth, And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you, And His glory will appear upon you. 3 And nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v. 2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v. 3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for 10/30/2022. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

Note the types of gifts that the future Gentile leaders will bring to King Jesus. "They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6d). Throughout history, gold has been the most valuable of all metals. It's a rare and valuable treasure, and the perfect commodity that never degrades – making it an excellent gift to bring to Jesus, who is reigning as LORD. Frankincense is something very familiar to any Catholic, as this material produces a most pleasant aroma when burned and has the smell of perfume in its native form. I was an altar boy for most of my younger years and was frequently near the priest burning this sweet swelling material. The burning of incense is symbolic of the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven (Revelation 5:8). The future world leaders will present their gifts of gold and incense directly to the Source of their salvation, the Lord Himself! What a joyous occasion this will be!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This brings us to the Gospel lesson from Matthew Chapter Two, in which we find the Magi presenting their gifts to the King of the Universe. Read the text and take particular note of their **three** gifts.

Gospel Reading:

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." 3 And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." 9 And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. 10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)

The context of this section is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, probably less than two years old as we see from Herod, who later in Matthew made a plan to kill all infants two years old or younger. The Magi were likely people from the Babylonian region along the Euphrates River in present day Iraq south of Baghdad. These mysterious scholars were highly educated people that were part pagan priest, part magician, and part scribe. They were also interested in astrology and this was woven into their mystical religious beliefs. Nowhere in the text does it say that there were three of them, as in the famous song about the three wise men. This designation comes from the three gifts they brought with them to present to the King. There was likely a small group of them, but they would have been accompanied by a large number of guards and servants. Thus, this would have made their arrival that much more disturbing to King Herod.

The Jewish priests and scribes told the Magi the prophecy from the Prophet Micah, which they evidently weren't aware of, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This must be the case, or they would have gone directly to Bethlehem in the first place and avoided King Herod. Verse 9 said, "And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they **had seen** in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was" (emphasis added). Then, the star reappeared! So, what did they do? Did they stop and ask for further directions? No, followed it and went to Bethlehem! Now they had both the prophetic word from the Jews, and the star to guide them. Therefore, they kept going on the journey, but had to BELIEVE God's revelation and follow it.

Finally, when they arrived in Bethlehem and located Jesus, they presented their *three* gifts to him. The Magi's gift of gold would have been very useful to the holy family during their subsequent flight to Egypt necessary to flee King Herod. Notice the similarity of their gifts mentioned in the first reading from Isaiah 60 but with one glaring addition: myrrh. Myrrh was something used throughout the eastern world as an embalming agent. These kings of the east presented Mary and Joseph with a precious gift that could be used for the future burial of their Son. Look at it this way. One day you attended the baptism of an infant in the church, and afterwards one of the guests presented the happy couple with a beautiful new coffin for the child. Yes, the coffin could be sold, and the money used to raise the child, but what kind of a message would the presentation of such a gift make to the parents? The magi, unbeknownst to themselves, predicted the death of the Messiah. Little did they know that His death was a necessary part of the redemptive story so that you and I might have eternal life. In a future age Gentile believers will present gifts of gold and incense to Jesus, the need for myrrh has been done away with because Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death for you and me.

The chain of ideas that emerged from the text is as follows. First, God gives revelation in order to find Jesus. Second, God calls us to believe his revelation and follow it. Finally, when we truly meet with God our response is joy, worship and giving! The bottom line is this. God calls us to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus and when we do our response is joy, worship and giving.

Reflection Questions

1. Think about the message that you send implicitly when you send someone a gift. A child gives his father a pair of gloves for Christmas. Another child gives his mother a box of candy. In light of the New Year and the idea of making resolutions for the next twelve months, what single gift could you

present to Jesus this year?

2. It is easy to criticize the Pharisees for judging the Gentiles, and for considering them "unworthy" of being saved. The definition of grace is that no one is worthy of it. It is God's unmerited favor. Think about your own attitude towards those who seem unlikely to become Christians. Is there someone who you can identify as unlikely to be a fellow heir, a fellow member of the body and a fellow partaker in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel? Commit to pray for this person and look for ways to be like St. Paul by loving them and speaking the truth of the Gospel to them.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-01-2023



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

In fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, Jesus was born. And Paul gives the reason for His coming: "that He might redeem those who were under the law." He came to be the sufficient sacrifice that God demanded as the penalty for our sin. But, there's more than that. Paul speaks of "the adoption as sons." In the culture of that day, a lad had no legal rights or standing until he reached a certain age. He was a real son of his father, but he was not entitled to an inheritance or

standing as an adult son until he reached that age, and then he was "adopted" legally as the heir of his father. God, in His grace, has given to the believer today the Holy Spirit ("Spirit of His Son"), and we can call God "Father" or "Papa." As the young men in Galatia, once they were adopted, they were no longer like slaves, they were legitimate sons, heirs. So are believers today; no longer slaves to sin and the law, but free, adopted sons of the Father. And it's all of God's doing out of His amazing love and grace.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

In our passage today we read that the shepherds, after hearing the announcement from the angels, "came in a hurry" to check out the story. Isn't it interesting that the announcement was made to men who were considered to be pretty low on society's register? But, it was to them that the announcement was made. We don't know all that they had been told, but they obviously believed the

angels' message. They came and saw, and then they left to spread the good news, all the while "glorifying and praising God." As a result, many heard the story and wondered about it.

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-25-202



These readings are for "The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Mass at Dawn."

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes and Merry Christmas to you. Today, as we celebrate Christmas, we look at some readings from Isaiah and Luke which reveal the blessings granted to us both today and in the future as believers in the Lord Jesus. Then we see Luke's telling of the story of the shepherds seeing Jesus for the first time.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading from Isaiah deals with what Bible commentators and theologians call the "Millennial Reign of Christ." This is the period of time during which Jesus returns to the earth to restore His

rightful rulership taken from him as a result of Satan's usurpation (refer to Genesis 3) and the subsequent crucifixion. Jesus willingly handed over His life as a Victor of sin, He is nowhere portrayed as a victim. Isaiah's prophecy deals with Jesus' future literal reign after the Great Tribulation period. During this time God reveals His special plan for the Nation of Israel with the capital city of Jerusalem along with the Gentiles ("nations") who believed in the name of the Lord Jesus. "*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*" (Isa 62:2).

First Reading:

Isaiah 62:11-12 NAS95 11 Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth, Say to the daughter of Zion, "Lo, your salvation comes; Behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him." 12 And they will call them, "The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD"; And you will be called, "Sought out, a city not forsaken."

God's message to Israel through Isaiah revealed that the salvation of the LORD comes from Him (v. 11) and not through human's good works or obedience to the Mosaic Law. At a future time, God's Holy people, Israel or the Jews, will be called "The redeemed of the LORD" (v. 12c). The capital city of God's chose people Israel will be called, "Sought out, a city not forsaken" (v. 12e).

When Isaiah wrote God's message the City of Jerusalem was under siege from the ungodly forces of the northern Jewish tribes and the Syrian Empire (Rezin the king of Aram, Isaiah 7:1). Although Jerusalem, the capital city of the southern tribes, was threatened, Isaiah saw both near term and far term prophecies for the beneficial treatment of God's ordained city. Isaiah saw in Chapter 7 (starting at verse 7) how God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies. Isaiah's visions often had both near term and long-term fulfillments such as seen in Isaiah 7:14 with the birth of Isaiah's own son but also in the prophecy of Jesus' birth. "Isa 7:14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." Today's reading reveals God's long-term plans for the Nation of Israel and the capital city of Jerusalem. The forsaken city of Jerusalem, which was sacked by the Babylonians in 586 BC (but saved from the Assyrian's in the early 700BC timeframe) would once again be exulted (v. 12). Jerusalem will be a city "Sought out, a city not forsaken" (v. 12e), a name which bears the reminder of the previous perils faced by the people (the Jews) in that city.

We too share in the exaltation of God's city as ingrafted believers into God's plan of salvation through the Jewish Messiah. Although we have gained an early share of this inheritance, God's people the Jews will ultimately be granted full acceptance by Him through their reception of their Messiah Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading from Paul's Letter to Titus was penned including instructions on godly living for leaders of the church, bondservants, and believers in general. Paul wrote to Titus who was located in Crete at the time (Titus 1:5) where he had departed from him with instructions to appoint elders in the cities (Titus 1:5). Chapter 3 continues the instructions regarding godly living, including being obedient to civil authorities (verse 1) and to show kind consideration to everyone (v. 2) as all of us were capable of as nonbelievers (v. 3).

Second Reading:

Titus 3:4-7 NAS95 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The opening word "But" connects the subsequent verses to the ideas presented in verse 3 which were to be kind to everyone because, "For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our lives in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another" (v. 3). This "Oh But God" introduction shows God renewed the hearts of believers by making them born from above (John 3:3) not upon the basis of their good works but according to God's mercy (v. 5) which is his free gift (see Ephesians 2:8-9). This salvation came only through faith in Jesus Christ which resulted in our regeneration (again, being "born from above as per John 3:3) and the renewal of our formerly evil hearts through the renewal by the Holy Spirit of God (v. 5). It is only through this unmerited favor (grace, v. 7) by which we as believers will be granted heirs of eternal life.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's Gospel reading from Saint Luke was after The Angel of the Lord had revealed that the Messiah had already been born in the City of David (Luke 2:11) and the appearance of a multitude of angels (v. 13).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:15-20 NAS95 15 When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. 17 When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Observant Jews would either have known about the prophecy of the Messiah's birth to be in the City of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) or perhaps the Angel of the Lord told them this during his visit. When the shepherds went to Bethlehem Judah they found the baby Jesus just as Luke had told them. "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:2). The shepherds then relayed all that the Angel had said to them. This provided validation to Mary and Joseph that Jesus was indeed to Messiah.

The birth of Jesus proceeded exactly as outlined by the Prophets right down to the details of timing and the exact location in which He would be born. Jesus' birth was an announcement of the outpouring of God's love upon the world, first through the Jews and later through the Gentile believers including you and me. This outpouring of God's love foreshadows a host of future blessings promised by God for His believers as we saw in the first reading from Isaiah. We saw in the second reading how God granted us a new heart, one made not of stone, but a renewed one through the power of God's Holy Spirit. As we celebrate Christmas this day, we can look back at how God has so richly blessed us through the sending of His one and only Son who died to take away our sins (Hebrews 9:26 – 28). May God richly bless you this Christmas Day.

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

Reflection Questions

1. The Gospel reading detailed how the shepherds left their flocks in order to visit the obscure village of Bethlehem in order to locate the long-awaited Messiah. Open your Bible to the Old Testament Book of Micah, chapter 5, verses 1 – 2.

Considering both the first two verses of Micah 5 and the reading from Isaiah, what were some of the curses pronounced upon the Jews?

2. Considering these same verses but also including the second reading from Titus, what were some the blessings that God either promised or brought to fulfillment through His believers?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-18-2022



This week as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, like last week, we will be studying some important prophetic voices from the Old Testament. We will also be reading from the

Gospel of Saint Matthew to hear how he confirmed that the coming birth of Jesus would fulfil these predictions made centuries earlier.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Before we turn to the first reading from Chapter 7 in Isaiah it's important for us to explain the personality of King Ahaz, the King of the Southern Tribe of Judah, about whom Isaiah will be speaking. Ahaz was son of King Jotham, the latter whom was a godly ruler of Judah. King Ahaz came into power when he was 20 years of age and he went bad immediately at the beginning of his reign. Second Chronicles provides an important insight into the personality of the King. "But he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel; he also made molten images for the Baals" (2 Chronicles 28:2). Not only was Ahaz an idolater who caused the circulation of idols to the god Baal, but he even burned his own children as sacrifices to false gods. The Scripture said, "But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out from before the sons of Israel" (2 Kings 16:3). He went from bad to worse after the attack of the King of Assyria who had already overtaken the Northern Tribes.

20 So Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him. 21 Although Ahaz took a portion out of the house of the LORD and out of the palace of the king and of the princes, and gave it to the king of Assyria, it did not help him. 22 Now in the time of his distress this same King Ahaz became yet more unfaithful to the LORD. 23 For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Aram helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they became the downfall of him and all Israel. (2 Chronicles 28:20-23)

As if that wasn't bad enough, Ahaz then went on to block the entrance to the temple in order to prevent the true worship of God (2 Chronicles 28:25). King Ahaz started out bad and continued in his ungodly rule until the very end of his life without ever having a change of heart and repenting of his sin. It's with this understanding of the king that we turn to the text of the first reading from Isaiah.

First Reading:

10 Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 11 "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" 13 Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? 14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:10-14

The Lord gave King Ahaz the opportunity to trust in Him by asking for a sign. Instead of asking for a sign, King Ahaz spoke out of the pride and self-reliance of his heart, which displeased the Lord. God had given him an invitation and he refused to accept it. This "tried" the patience of the Lord, because he persisted in his independence and refused to trust in God's provision of a sign to assure him. God used this event of obstinate disobedience to foretell of Messiah. This prophecy was ultimately fulfilled through the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Because the Gospel reading relates to the prophecy of Isaiah from the first reading we will consider that passage next. This reading is from the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew.

Gospel Reading:

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. 19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. 20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." 24 And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, 25 and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

While many of us are already familiar with the narrative concerning the birth of Jesus, this passage highlights important truths for our lives. First, Saint Matthew brought out the fact that Jesus was born not through natural human relations, but through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. This is important because since God is without sin this was the only means by which the sinless God-Man could come into the world. Second, since the virgin birth was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, we can trust other prophecies that speak to areas of our life and ministry. This includes things like how the second coming of the Lord will play out, how the world will be eventually unified under Jesus' earthly reign. Third, Jesus was sent to save His people from their sins. This is God's special invitation to counteract the destructive nature of sin in order to stand before a Holy God and not be rejected at the judgment. This is not only "a" plan for salvation, it is "the" plan. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Matthew's Gospel also brings out an important prophetic fulfillment regarding the title of Jesus as Immanuel. This title means "God with us" which is an important relationship aspect of the Messiah's advent. The Messiah reveals the heart of God as One who lives among us. The implications of Jesus being called Immanuel are twofold. First, Jesus came so that we might come to the Father through Him. Second Jesus moved into the neighborhood to stay in order to show us God's love so that we might live eternally with Him. Christianity is the only belief system that purports that God became a man and died for our sins. That is the powerful implication of Immanuel, God with us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the second reading from Romans, Saint Paul also confirmed the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding Jesus. While these are introductory remarks and salutations, there are many meaningful truths contained here.

Second Reading:

1 Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, 4 who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake, 6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; 7 to all

who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1-7)

It would be easy to read this passage casually and gloss over the deep insights, but Paul confirmed the following truths about Jesus and His people.

1. Jesus' birth and ministry was predicted by Old Testament Scriptures (v. 2).

2. Jesus would be born in the line of King David as to his earthly genealogy (v. 3).

3. He would be the Son of God and as God would have the power to be resurrected from the dead (v. 4a) and be filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 4a).

4. He would be perfectly holy (v. 4b).

5. He would be the Lord of the Church.

6. All grace would flow through Jesus (v. 5)

7. Jesus would establish the apostles of the church, including Paul (v. 5).

8. His Church would bring about obedience and faith (v. 5).

9. Paul's ministry would extend to the Gentiles (v. 5).

10. All believerswould be called "saints" and, like the apostles, called out to ministry (v. 7).

Saint Paul knew Jesus in a multi-faceted way, which should be a model for us as followers of Him today. Most importantly, we need to recognize Jesus as the Son of God who was raised from the dead and lived a holy life through the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can receive His grace. Receiving His grace means that I am now in good favor with the Father and I am declared righteous.

Reflection Questions

1. Review the list above from the second reading in Romans 1 about Jesus. Choose one point and think about how this truth affects your life.

2. What difference does it make to you to know that Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us"?