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 111: 07-27-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we cover three excellent readings, in which we learn more about God's righteous nature, the forgiveness we have through Jesus Christ, and how Jesus teaches us to pray.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading from Genesis picks up where we left off in last week's reading, where we saw Abraham meet with two angels and the Lord Jesus Himself. This week's reading deals with Abraham's pleading with God concerning the people of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities were located just north of the Dead Sea in an area known for its great fertility. Today's reading chronicles the events leading up to the destruction of the cities, turning them into the wasteland that

they are today.

First Reading:

> *Genesis 18:20-32 NAS95 20 And the LORD said, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. 21 I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know." 22 Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the LORD. 23 Abraham came near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will You indeed sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" 26 So the LORD said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare the whole place on their account." 27 And Abraham replied, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose the fifty righteous are lacking five, will You destroy the whole city because of five?" And He said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29 He spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose forty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it on account of the forty." 30 Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak; suppose thirty are found there?" And He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." 31 And he said, "Now behold, I have ventured to speak to the Lord; suppose twenty are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the twenty." 32 Then he said, "Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it on account of the ten."*

The LORD told Abraham about the terrible sin of the people of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 20). The text says that the LORD would go "down" to Sodom (v. 20). This word brings with it two meanings, geographically south and downwards spiritually. Looking back to chapter 13, we see how Abraham's nephew Lot chose to live in this fertile region when the land would not support both of their herds, and there was a conflict among their herdsmen (Genesis 13:7). Abraham, a man who was well acquainted with God and knew of His grace and forgiveness, pleaded with the Lord Jesus before He went down to the region to judge them. We are not told how Abraham knew that the LORD's visit meant judgment. Regardless, Abraham began pleading on the basis of whether there were fifty righteous people in the cities and whether the LORD would not destroy the people. Jesus' answer was implied as negative; there were not fifty righteous people in the region. After Abraham received this negative implication, he boldly decreased the number to 40, then 30, 20, 10, and finally just 5. By implication, by not responding to Abraham's final question, the region of Sodom and Gomorrah did not contain even five righteous people. What a terrible condition the region had come to without having even five righteous people in the region!

We may ask, how many righteous people were there in these cities? We know there was at least one righteous person in the land, the person of Lot, or at least he came to be righteous later in life after the destruction of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah, where he lived. Even if Lot was righteous in the eyes of the Lord, this would not have brought the total number to the value of five, as predicted by Abraham's question. We know that the LORD did not destroy Lot. Rather, He sent the two angels with whom Abraham had met, and they eventually led him away from the city before the fire rained down (Genesis 19:24-25). Looking a bit deeper at Lot, although he may or may not have been a righteous man at the time of the story in Genesis 18, we know that sometime later, he repented and was added to the hall of faith in the New Testament. We also know that God spared the city of Zoar from destruction because of Lot's request (Genesis 19:20-21).

The rest of Lot's family didn't fare so well. We know that Lot's wife didn't make the grade (Genesis 19:26). The relationship between Lot's daughters and God is murky since we know that they later engaged in immoral sexual relations with their father since they felt that after the destruction of Sodom every man was dead and that they had to save the race from extinction (Genesis 19:19:31). This severe faithlessness may be abrogated a bit in light of the fact that they had just witnessed the terrible extermination of everyone in the region in which they lived by fire and brimstone raining from the sky (Genesis 19:24). This brings to mine the story of Elijah when he thought that he was the last believer alive in the entire world (1 Kings 19:14). Then the LORD reminded this great prophet during his brief season of faithlessness that there remained 7,000 who had or would be true to Him (1 Kings 19:18). So although Lot's daughters may have doubted God's promises made through Abraham, we are not told the ultimate condition of their heart.

Abraham brought out the central point of the reading in his question at the end of verse 25, "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" The answer, one that is woven throughout the narrative of the decreasing numbers, is a resounding yes. Yes, the Judge of all the earth shall do justly, including destroying the wicked. Although in our day, God mostly withholds judgment of the "wicked" until after they die, the Bible is clear that judgment is a certainty for those who deny the Lord Jesus and don't yield to His Holy Spirit in giving up their sinful lives.

It is helpful to read what Saint Peter wrote about today's story and Lot:

> *2 Peter 2:6-9 NAS95 6 (emphasis added) and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those*

> *who would live ungodly lives thereafter; 7 and if He rescued **righteous Lot**, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment,*

Peter's explanation helps us to understand the implications of living a **lifelong** pattern of sin without repenting through God's empowerment found through faith in Jesus Christ. Peter was clear that we are to learn from other's mistakes, and Sodom and Gomorrah stand as a "doozie" of an example useful to all of us today. Paul said, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). This leads us to the main point of the reading. If Lot can find forgiveness and faith in God in spite of the series of poor choices he made, we can do the same. God stands ready to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9b-ff). Through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we are motivated to confess our sins (1 John 1:9a) and receive God's blessing upon our lives, demonstrated by our service to Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from Colossians continued from last week (Colossians 1:24-28) but skips forward to verse 12 of the second chapter. The context of the omitted verses 1 -11 in the second chapter leading up to today's reading is Paul's affirmation of Jesus' humanity and divinity, something which the Gnostics opposed. This was because the false teachers who had infiltrated the church taught that, since only the spirit was good in contrast to evil flesh, the person of the Lord Jesus could not have truly manifested Himself as divinity in the flesh. Paul said, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). He also taught the Colossian church how they were complete in Christ Jesus and spiritually circumcised in their heart without the necessity of the physical operation itself (vv. 10-11). The reading continues with essential teachings on a Christian's identity in Christ.

Second Reading:

> *Colossians 2:12-14 NAS95 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you*

> *alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*

Paul taught that as believers, our spiritually dead carnal life is buried in baptism as a picture of being born from the Spirit of God. When a person is immersed in baptism, they make a statement that their sins are buried with Jesus Christ's burial, but when they emerge from the water, they are raised in the newness of life, similarly to when Jesus rose from the dead. Although Jesus was dead, God raised Him from the dead (v. 12d). Through faith, God in a sense raised believers from the dead (v. 12c). In addition, as believers, God forgave all of our sins – past, present and future (v. 13) and nailed the record of our transgressions to the cross of Christ (v. 14). This hostile "certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us" (v. 14a) has been forever taken away from us!

What does it mean to have all of our sins taken away, forever, with even the record of them being destroyed? One aspect is that if Satan (or we do in ourselves) brings our past sins back into our mind, we can call upon God in prayer to fight this spiritual battle raging against us with a one-hundred-percent specific outcome. This is because, as believers, God has forgiven us through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Only when we doubt our standing as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ can these attacks harm our minds. Another aspect is that we can trust that although people may bring up our past sins, God will never do it. Through Jesus Christ, God has placed our sins as far as the East is from the West (Psalm 103:12).

Next, as we turn to the Gospel reading, we will learn something from the Lord Jesus about how He instructed His disciples to pray specifically concerning their needs. This study will be helpful because we know that prayer is the antidote to worry that comes when our enemies (spiritual and physical) bring up our past sins.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke is the Lord Jesus' teaching on prayer, which He gave in response to one of His disciples' questions: "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." As you read, begin to develop a list of bullet points from Jesus' teaching. Ask, "What is Jesus teaching me about prayer?"

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 11:1-13 NAS95 1 It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." 2 And He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. 3 Give us each day our daily bread. 4 And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation." 5 Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6 for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. 9 So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. 11 Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? 12 Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? 13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"*

What can we learn about prayer from the Lord Jesus? The big idea of Jesus' teaching on prayer was to pray to the Person of the Father, pray specifically, and pray persistently. Prayer is an antidote to worry, as when Satan brings to mind our past sins, as we just mentioned in the second reading. In order for this to be an antidote to worry, we must enter into the reality of this prayer, not just recite it. Here are some other points that we can learn about prayer from today's reading.

- We have a Father (that implies a relationship with someone bigger, wiser, and more able to cope with this world than ourselves; we are not orphans).

- Our Father is in heaven (He is above the fray of this world and has power and resources at his command that we cannot even fathom).

- His name is holy (His name refers to his character and essence. If he is holy, then he relates in a way that is set apart from the world's way. His holiness creates a foundation of trust for us to surrender our will to His will and turn to Him in our time of need.

- He has a kingdom that is on the move. We can choose to be part of His kingdom and allow His way of heaven to infiltrate this world through our lives. Instead of worrying about how I will make it in this world, I am now focused on being used by God to bring His ways to bear on this world.

- He forgives us, and we can extend forgiveness to others through His strength. This is a quality of the Kingdom of God that is countercultural to the world's ways.

- He leads us out of temptation and delivers us from evil. Do I really want to be delivered from temptation and evil, or do I want only to be delivered from the negative consequences of sin?

- He has a kingdom, power, and glory that will be manifested forever. Do I want to be a part of this, or do I think that doing life on my own is a better option?

- God calls us to be specific in our prayers. If we (or others) are sick, Jesus teaches us to pray that we may be well. This may be intuitive to you, but how often have you been ill and not prayed for your own healing? Perhaps Jesus will allow sickness in your own life, such as by giving you compassion for others who are sick.

- God calls us to be persistent in prayer. This is clear not only in today's teaching but also in Jesus' teaching on the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8). In that case, Jesus applauded the efforts of a woman who continually nagged a judge to resolve her case. Jesus calls us to be persistent.

These are some amazing realities that Jesus understood. They allowed Him to live in a countercultural way, free of worry and anxiety, because He knew who His Father was. He offers that same perspective for us if we ask Him to teach us to pray in this way.

As believers, we can be confident that God hears our prayers and answers them. John said, "This is

the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him" (1 John 5:14-15). The key is praying according to God's will. We do that by learning His will; the way to do that is to study His revealed will in the Bible, the Word of God. God's answers to our prayers may not be as we expect. He may answer yes or no, wait, or lead us in another direction to pray. God calls us to pray boldly, as we see in Hebrews: "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

We hope that what you have learned today will help you to pray more effectively and fervently by having the confidence that God will hear and answer you. Over the years, I have prayed for a very long list (about 150) of people each day concerning their salvation. Over almost two decades, I have seen God answer my prayers miraculously. In one case, a man who had experienced God's miraculous intervention in an accident came to know the Lord Jesus much later in his life as a result of a second drunk driving arrest. This was a man that I had been praying for over the course of about 15 years. He later told me that he had felt called to God that entire time, which was the natural outcome of what had to happen. He was thankful for God bringing him to this point of decision by using the bad events in his life to turn him around onto the track of following Him. Perhaps one of my faithful readers will recognize the person about whom I am speaking. May God be glorified in all we do, and may we praise Him for His intervention.

Reflection Questions

1. Today we learned something from Jesus about how to pray. In what ways does Jesus' teaching challenge your current prayer life?

2. Reflect on some of your urgent prayers to God in the past year. Were any of these written in a journal? How were these prayers answered? How helpful would it be for you to write down certain prayer requests in a journal in order to be able to remember and to look back and update them with notes about how God responded? Consider starting a prayer journal and using note cards to write down the urgent prayer requests you carry daily.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 108: 07-20-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we are studying a reading from Genesis in which Abraham meets the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus, who provides him with an important confirmation of a promised blessing. We also look at a reading in Colossians and close with the story about Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Genesis is the Lord's appearance to Abraham when he was ninety-nine years old, just after he had obeyed God's order to be circumcised (Genesis 17:24) along with his son Ishmael (v. 13), born through his handmaid. Just before this, God reconfirmed His promise of a son through Sarah by saying, "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah

will bear to you at this season next year" (Genesis 17:21).

First Reading:

> *Genesis 18:1-10 NAS95 1 Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. 2 When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, 3 and said, "My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. 4 Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; 5 and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant." And they said, "So do, as you have said." 6 So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes." 7 Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. 8 He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. 9 Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "There, in the tent." 10 He said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him.*

Note how the reading opens with "Now the LORD appeared" (v. 1) and then says in the next verse, "three men were standing opposite him" (v. 2b). In order to understand what is happening in these verses, we must look beyond the verses covered in the reading. Later in this chapter, we see that "the men" (plural) departed, and Abraham was left standing with the LORD (Genesis 18:22), at which point Abraham did his famous reasoning with God about whether there were any righteous men in Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32). Next the text says, "As soon as He had finished speaking to Abraham the LORD departed, and Abraham returned to his place" (Genesis 18:33). If the men departed, but Abraham was left standing with the LORD, what was happening was that Abraham was standing face to face with the preincarnate Jesus Christ. God appeared as a man to Abraham through what theologians call a "Christophany." As Abraham rushed around to prepare a meal for the group of two men (who were angels as stated in Genesis 19:1) and the Lord Jesus, the Lord provided yet another confirmation of His promise to him as they ate together. Sarah also heard the promise as she listened from the tent door while the "men" ate outside (v. 10). The Lord told him, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son" (v. 10).

For Abraham and all of those who walk by faith, this passage tells of God's story of redemption. Abraham is called the father of faith because it was through him that the Messiah would come. He

looked forward to redemption, while we look back in history at the cross, where the transaction took place. Jesus paid the price for our redemption and provides the way for us to be reconciled to the Father, resulting in eternal life. This re-confirmation of God's sending of a promised son delivered by none other than The Promised Son Himself provided an important foreshadowing of how God's promises may be trusted in the sending of the ultimate, final, only Son, Jesus, to the earth some two thousand years later.

God understands what we need in terms of confirmation of His promises when we may be in doubt. In the same way God understood Abraham's need to confirm His promise, we, too, may turn to God for the confirmation of the promises He has made to us. We do this first by understanding His promises and then turning to the Scriptures to renew our understanding of the promises that we find there. We affirm those promises in prayer and learn to stake our lives on what God has said. Daily, we learn to walk by faith in God, trusting His character and knowing He will make good on His promises.

As we transition to the second reading, we will see the importance of understanding Jesus' true humanity in light of the false teachings in the early church. Although Jesus appeared to Abraham in the form of a man, as we saw in the first reading, the Bible states that Jesus was born in the flesh through Mary to live a perfect, sinless life and then gave Himself as the final offering for sins forever.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians. It is vital to understand the context in which Paul is writing to the church at Colosse. Today's reading is from the book's opening chapter, which is concerned with correcting the heretical beliefs of some in the Colossian church, including elements of Gnosticism. This belief system taught that matter is evil, God is good, and in the case of the Colossians, that Jesus was just another emanation of God and not fully God Himself in the flesh. They also taught that a special secret high knowledge (gnosis) was required for true salvation and spiritual enlightenment.

Second Reading:

> *Colossians 1:24-28 NAS95 24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. 25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, 26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, 27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.*

Paul affirmed how Christ's body is the church for which he rejoices in his suffering (v. 24). The core of his message to the Colossians was how God had revealed through the church the mystery "which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints" (v. 26) which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v. 26b-ff). Through the reception and understanding of this mystery, believers are made complete in Christ.

A question that we must ask ourselves, based on this text, is whether Christ's sacrifice was sufficient, or do we need to do something to add to it to make up what is lacking? What was Paul referring to when he said that his suffering filled up "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions "?

The Scriptures are clear that God's work of redemption was finished on the cross when Jesus declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Hebrews 10:12 says, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (ESV), which further verifies that redemption was finished at the cross by Jesus' sacrifice. Paul himself affirms in various places and in various ways that Christ's work is sufficient to cover our sins. Cite numerous verses here.

God calls us to serve Him through our good works that flow out of a heart changed by God. This is clear from these verses in Ephesians:

> *Ephesians 2:8-10 NAS95 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.*

James, in the Book by his name, described the nature of saving faith as that which produces good

works for God (James 2:17). Rather than thinking that by doing God's work, we are earning our salvation, God calls us to seek His will for our lives and accept the blessing of Jesus' finished work for us. In this way, we may be presented to God as "complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28), as we read in today's reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke picks up from last week's message regarding the Good Samaritan. This time, instead of relating a story about a traveler on a road, Jesus and His disciples traveled on a road. We know from the context that the village where we will read about them entering is Bethany. This small city was located very close to Jerusalem.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 10:38-42 NAS95 38 Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. 39 She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. 40 But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." 41 But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; 42 but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."*

The reading is a story about priority and motive. It's about the energy with which we do something. Martha busied herself with the dinner preparation while Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to Him. This contrasts with how we saw Abraham and Sarah work together to prepare the meal for the Lord and then listen to Him during the meal (except Sarah listened from a distance). Here, Mary allows Martha to serve while sitting down and listening to Jesus. This bothered Martha, who then spoke up to Jesus about the situation. Jesus gently corrected Martha's misunderstanding of Mary's motives, thinking that she was being lazy and neglecting in the serving of their important guest. Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen to sit and listen at Jesus' feet.

It's not bad that Martha desired to serve Jesus, but there can be a service devoid of relationship. This is inferred by the way that Martha talks to Jesus about Mary. Her service was no longer about

meeting the needs of Jesus, but was about keeping score and trying to validate herself. Mary, on the other hand, was willing to appear culturally inappropriate by sitting at the feet of Jesus with the rest of the men. She felt comfortable sitting at the feet of Jesus, which is the usual place for a disciple in that cultural context. Mary seems to be the only one who truly understood that Jesus had to die. We know that the Gospels record how Mary anointed Jesus that evening. Jesus could likely smell Mary's anointing while He was hanging on the cross, which would serve as a small comfort and blessing.

The main point of the reading is not that Jesus is reprimanding Martha for serving Him but that He is saying that our serving needs to be connected to the relationship (sitting at Jesus' feet). Mary showed true devotion to Christ, not just by serving Him a meal but by being present and listening to Him. She understood that Jesus' time on earth was drawing to a close, something that Jesus' own disciples failed to understand (Luke 18:34).

Reflection Questions

1. Abraham is the father of faith and needed confirmation of God's reliability. What promises of God are you standing on, and how is God reconfirming your faith to trust Him? How can others support you in your journey to walk by faith?

2. In the Gospel reading, we see Mary sitting and listening to Jesus while Martha busies herself with the preparation of the meal. In what ways was Martha jealous of Mary? Was Mary lazy? Why or why not?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 105: 07-13-2025

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 30:10-14 NAS95 10 if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. 11 For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' 14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.*

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

substance of the epistle may be summed up in a key verse (3:11), "Christ is all and in all."

Second Reading:

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

Paul concludes with a very wonderful prayer for the Colossians with a reference to God's "beloved son, in whom we have redemption" (v. 14). Then, our reading for today begins, detailing who this "beloved son" is. First, "He is the image of the invisible God." We learn two essential ideas here. "Image" means an exact copy; in other words, there is no difference in essence between God and Jesus. Also, since God is invisible, He has made it possible for us to see Him in physical form through the incarnation of Jesus. John's Gospel is helpful here: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known (1:18).

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

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

the head.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 10:25-37 NAS95 25 And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" 27 And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 28 And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." 29 But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. 31 And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, 34 and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' 36 Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" 37 And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward*

him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

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

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

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

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

We should also observe that the lawyer's initial question assumes that he—or we—can *do* something to inherit eternal life. The action of the Good Samaritan is evidence of a heart that is right before

God. The heart that has a genuine love for God and serves Him comes to Him by faith and serves by His grace.

Reflection Questions

1. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the roles of the characters are easy to identify. In real life, it is much harder to recognize the needs of strangers and take prompt action. In what ways do you see opportunities for you to be a compassionate neighbor to someone in need, even someone very different from you?

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 102: 07/06/2025

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we learn about finding peace and comfort from God during challenging times by resting in His future promises of peace and prosperity, as outlined in the closing chapter of Isaiah. We learn about the value of humility and how God calls us to reflect on His works, not our own. In the Gospel reading, we see God's early missionary force sent out before His crucifixion to spread the word of the kingdom being ushered in through the Messiah, Jesus, and about the coming judgment for those who ignored His promises.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the message from the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah is God's closing message to Judah concerning the ultimate future restoration of Jerusalem, the city of God's choosing given to the people of his choosing – the Nation of Israel. Chapter 66 provides essential insights for the contemporary audience, who faced threats from the Assyrian Empire, which soon took over the Northern Kingdom, as well as the Babylonians, who later took over Judah itself.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 66:10-14 NAS95 10 "Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her, all you who love her; Be exceedingly glad with her, all you who mourn over her, 11 That you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts, That you may suck and be delighted with her bountiful bosom. 12 For thus says the LORD, "Behold, I extend peace to her like a river, And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; And you will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip and fondled on the knees. 13 As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; And you will be comforted in Jerusalem. 14 Then you will see this, and your heart will be glad, And your bones will flourish like the new grass; And the hand of the LORD will be made known to His servants, But He will be indignant toward His enemies.*

In the opening verses, God instructs Isaiah that Jerusalem is a holy mother of God's people, a place of safe dwelling and nourishment full of bounty (vv. 10–11). Jerusalem, which was still standing at that time and had yet to face the utter destruction promised to it (Isaiah 22:1-14), had been a beacon of God's glory to the world since the conquest of the Jebusites and the placement of the temple there. The city in which God dwelled served to reveal Himself to the Hebrew nation as well as the surrounding Gentiles. It is no coincidence that the name Jerusalem itself means "city of peace" since it was (and will be in some future age) the representation of God's presence and rule on earth. In verse 12, we see this aspect of the City of Peace extolled, where God says, "Behold, I extend peace to her like a river." The next part of this verse reveals the future, universal significance of the City of God, not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. God says that He will bring the glory of the nations into Jerusalem, and he shows the coming of the nations to be a good thing. These would have been strange words to Isaiah's contemporary audience since they would have viewed anything from the Gentiles as unclean and dangerous. This was primarily because the Gentile Assyrian army was poised, ready to strike down the Jewish Northern Kingdom very shortly. The reading concludes by continuing the expression of God's peace and comfort to His people (vv. 13 – 15). God said their hearts would be glad (14a), that they would flourish physically like "new grass" (14b), and that He would conquer their enemies (14c).

This message of hope given by Isaiah, the Prophet of Judah, would have been very comforting to the people who had only to look to God for their ultimate deliverance from their enemies and future peace. Little did they know that the ultimate peace would not come until after they had killed their promised Messiah and waited while God fulfilled His divine plan by bringing the Gentiles to faith in Him through the mystery of the church (Ephesians 5:32). In our day we can look to Isaiah's message and find a similar application. We can trust that in the end, God will vanquish our enemies, bring eternal peace to us, and ultimately fulfill all the prophetic promises He has made to us. When we read about the "nations" in the Old Testament passages, such as those found in Isaiah, we can trust that God has a plan for us and that we are a people grafted into the nation of His choosing, Israel. As in-grafted believers, we share not only in the responsibilities of God's people but also in the current and promised blessings.

The Scriptures teach us the importance of focusing on God, both in good times and in bad. I recall an incident a few years ago when I was windsurfing on the eastern coast of Florida. The boom, which held the sail to the mast, suddenly broke in two, and I was forced to swim a long distance back to shore. My readers may recognize that many of the illustrations I include are often drawn from my experiences windsurfing! As I made my way back towards shore with a sidestroke while grasping onto my board and broken rig, I kept my focus on the distant shoreline. I found it helpful to focus on my goal as I made progress towards it at a snail's pace. It is during these times that keeping the goal in sight is helpful, and how promises are never to leave us or forsake us. During the easy times, it's easy to place our beliefs on a shelf and not retrieve them again until the next hard thing comes along. But during our difficult struggles, God becomes paramount in our minds. This isn't necessarily a bad thing because we do indeed turn closer to God when hard times come, rather than falling away and feeling that God has left us during our challenges. As I continued my long swim that day, as I got closer to the shore, the lifeguard who had earlier been blowing his whistle at me for being too close to the guarded area began watching me through binoculars to see if I needed any help. With the whistle-blowing exercise fresh in my mind, I happily scurried onto the grassy shoreline of the public park quickly rather than waiting around for him to question me. I thought, how dare I break down in the guarded area where windsurfing was prohibited, and there was nothing that the lifeguard could do about it! These lessons teach me the importance of relying on God and the value of focusing on Him during both the good times and the bad.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading picks up where we left off last week in the Book of Galatians. Here, Paul continues his explanation of salvation by faith alone and not through the works of the Law. Earlier, Paul had just finished explaining the danger of the believers falling into the trap of conforming to religious Jewish practices for the sake of preventing persecution for their faith. Paul said, "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (Galatians 6:12). Some in the church were urging conformance to religious practices including circumcision and the boasting about it as though they were the religious police, judge, and jury (v. 13). Paul's opposition to their boasting is the subject of today's reading.

Second Reading:

> *Galatians 6:14-18 NAS95 14 But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15*

> *For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. 16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace, and mercy be upon them, and the Israel of God. 17 From now on, let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.*

In this short message, Saint Paul extolled the value of boasting only in the finished work of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for us, rather than in anything that we do, even if it be of great religious or spiritual value. God promises that peace will fall upon those who walk humbly in light of this admonition, although they may endure persecution for Him (v. 17, the "brand marks of Jesus"). Paul closes the reading and the entire Book of Galatians with a closing blessing in which he calls for God's blessing while affirming the brotherhood of those whom he had addressed so sternly throughout his message.

Paul's words from the reading remind us of the Prophet Micah's message from God to the people of his era. Near the end of his Book he wrapped up the entirety of the calling God was placing upon the people in one short sentence: "He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). As we saw in the first reading God calls us to focus upon His works and promises and through this we find comfort through our difficult times. In today's second reading, Paul added to this by reminding his readers of the value of walking in humility and boasting only about what God has done for them rather than what they have done for Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the Gospel reading from Luke is Jesus' sending of the seventy, an early missionary group who went out across the land in pairs to present the message that "the kingdom of God [had] come near to [them" (v. 9). This group was given spiritual power for healing along with this message which also included an admonition for those who turned against God's provisions of the kingdom.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 10:1-12 NAS95 1 Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. 2 And He was saying to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord*

> *of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. 3 Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' 6 If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. 8 Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; 9 and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10 But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' 12 I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than for that city."*
> *Luke 10:17-20 NAS95 17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." 18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. 19 Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."*

God sent the seventy pairs with precise instructions, the first of which was to discern the receptiveness of the house in which they were preparing to enter. Jesus had earlier warned His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount about "not casting their pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6), meaning not to attempt to preach godly things to those who persist in ungodliness and are unwilling to listen. Jesus expanded upon this admonition by promising to His missionary force that those who don't listen will be subject to severe and eternal discipline. Jesus told them that the destruction of those who reject the message would be worse than the destruction experienced by the unrepentant sinners in Sodom, which the Lord destroyed by divine fire from heaven (v. 12). This missionary force returned after the conclusion of their assignment with the astounding news of divine power over Satanic forces (v. 17). Jesus then told them about how He had already seen Satan fall from his exalted position and how He had given them this divine authority which they experienced during their journey (v. 19). In closing, Jesus pointed them to His higher purpose. They were not to boast about the power that He had given them for their missionary responsibilities but rather to rejoice in the fact that, unlike Satan and the nonbelievers, their names were written in the Book of Life in Heaven (v. 20).

By application, the power to which Jesus extended to His first ministry force of seventy people extends to us to a certain extent today. As missionaries of Jesus, we are called to use discernment in gauging the receptiveness of our audience. We are also to recognize that like the seventy, we too possess divine power that comes from God according to the spiritual gift that is given to us (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; and 1 Corinthians 12:28). We are also reminded to keep in mind the urgency of this message because nonbelievers will be judged with a worse fate than those of Sodom.

And like we saw in the second reading, we need to walk humbly before the Lord and exalt in His works rather than our own. We are to "rejoice that [our] names are recorded in heaven" (v. 20) while using the example of the seventy as guidance in how we are to approach that that may be highly resistant to the Gospel.

A few things to keep in mind regarding the reading are:

- There is a great need for missionaries in our world today.
- God places a significant intrinsic value upon each person, where He wishes that none would perish (2 Peter 3:9).
- The consequences of rejecting Jesus are real and eternal.
- Jesus demonstrated the value of community in accomplishing His missionary work by sending the missionaries in pairs. We don't need to perform our "scary" ministry alone, but rather, we can follow Jesus' example and work in teams to achieve the greater glory of God.
- A fantastic spiritual battle is unfolding behind the scenes in the heavenly realm. As believers, we enter the "second heaven," which is an invisible domain but which is very real in terms of the spiritual battles being waged.
- Through all of these things, we need to remember Jesus' 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).

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Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel reading, we learned about Jesus' first missionary force of seventy people sent out as "lambs amid wolves (v. 3). In what ways do you feel like a lamb among wolves in the work that God has called for you to do today?

2. In what ways do God's promises empower you to accomplish His work, including the Great Commission? How does gaining a better understanding of God's promises help you? What are some ways in which you could learn more about God's promises and create future reminders about what you have learned?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 591: 06-29-2025



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass study notes. This week, we begin with a reading from Acts 12, in which the evil King Herod imprisoned Peter. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, which is Paul's last written statement to the world just before his martyrdom. We conclude with this week's Gospel lesson, in which we will look at Peter's confession of Jesus as the much-awaited Messiah. We answer the question, what did Jesus mean when He said, *"You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it"* (Matthew 16:17)?

The first reading is from Acts 12, and the context is just after the apostles had heard that the Gospel had gone out to the Gentiles and that they also were being saved (Acts 11:1). Barnabus had found Saul (Paul) in his hometown of Tarsus (v. 25) and brought him to Antioch where he spent a year with him there (v. 26). It was in Antioch that Saint Luke reported that the believers were first called "Christians" (v. 25), likely a term of derision given to them by the pagans in the region. At the close of the chapter, God revealed through Agabus that a worldwide famine would occur. Subsequently, the church in Antioch took up a collection to send to the "brethren living in Judea" (v. 29). From the end of Chapter 12, Peter's ministry faded from view. Paul became the prominent leader of the church, whose focus at that point also shifted from the Jews to the Gentiles. Paul later called himself "a prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles" (Ephesians 3:1), while Peter was the one who had been entrusted with the Gospel to the Jews (Galatians 2:8).

> *1 Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2 And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. 3 When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4 When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. 5 So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. 6 On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 7 And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter's side and woke him up, saying, "Get up quickly." And his chains fell off his hands. 8 And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." 9 And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from*

> *him. 11 When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." (Acts 12:1-11)*

The story revealed how God responded to the prayers of the church (v. 5) in a powerful way to secure Peter's release from prison. Peter testified that the Lord had sent an angel to rescue him from the King who had just killed his friend and fellow disciple James (v. 2). The events of that evening were so mystifying to Peter that he wasn't even sure that they were happening (v. 9). It was only after Peter had "[come] to himself" (v. 11) that he realized that his release was had occurred.

This story in Acts gives many reasons to fear God, not man. Hebrews 13:6 reminds us, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" When we find ourselves in situations where someone in a position of power is misusing their authority to harm the cause of Christ, we can have confidence in standing up for our beliefs and doing the right thing, even if we are punished for it. Peter's life was in danger, and God delivered him. And for some reason, while God spared Peter's life at that time, He did not spare James' life. So, we don't always know the outcome of our faith, but we do know that God is our helper, and we can turn to Him amid our fear and trust Him for the outcome. Ultimately, evil people are not in control. Even their evil is used by God for His redemptive purposes (Romans 8:28-30).

The Book of Acts is a story of transitions. As we close today's reading from Chapter 12, the focus in Acts shifted from Saint Peter to Saint Paul. In the same way that Peter was bold in sharing the Gospel with the Jews, Paul spread the Gospel message to the Gentiles and the far reaches of the Roman world. He endured many hardships, and as we move to the second reading, we will see the closing chapter of his adventurous life of faith as he prepares for his transition to eternal life in heaven.

The second reading today is from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. In this address, Paul recorded one of his final statements to the church before he was martyred. We have included verses 9–16, which were skipped in the reading, to provide the full context.

> *6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the*

> *future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. 9 Make every effort to come to me soon; 10 for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service. 12 But Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. 13 When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments. 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. 15 Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching. 16 At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. 17 But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:6-18)*

Paul alluded to the practice in Jewish Law in which drink offerings were made (Exodus 29:40). The drink offering in the Old Testament pointed to the finished work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. When we celebrate communion, we commemorate Jesus' finished work on the cross for our salvation through the pouring out of His blood for us. Paul used this terminology to say that, like Christ, he too would soon be offered up to God. Next, Paul requested the provision of some practical items, including a cloak and reading materials (v. 12). He warned his readers about Alexander the Coppersmith to prevent them from also coming into contact with him (vv. 14–15). Sadly, Paul commented that nobody stood by him in his first trial except for the Lord, who strengthened him so that he could complete his proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 16–17). He knew that at any instant, he could be sent to heaven (v. 18).

As we approach the end of Paul's life, it is a fitting time to reflect on our own lives and the legacy we will leave behind. God used Paul in some amazing ways, but isn't it true that God wants to use all of us for His good work in the world? We may not have a worldwide ministry like Paul. Still, God wants us to be able to come to the end of our lives and be able to look back and say with Paul, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.*" What does it mean to love or long for his appearing? How might this value system mark our lives? What do you need to be doing today and tomorrow so that you can say this at the end of your life?

As we move on to the Gospel lesson, let's pause to remember the great sacrifices that Paul made for us as members of his future Gentile church.

The Gospel reading this week is from Matthew 16. The context of the reading is just after Jesus fed the 4,000 alongside the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 15:33-39). Next, He went by boat to Magdala (v. 39), and then, just before today's reading, Jesus explained to His disciples what had happened regarding the feeding of the two large crowds: first the 5,000 and then the 4,000. After He did this, Jesus warned them to beware of "the leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:11), and then He traveled with them to the region known as Caesarea Philippi. It is in this region that, as we will see in today's reading, Peter made his famous confession that Jesus was the Christ, the much-awaited Messiah.

> *13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:13-19)*

Several significant points jump out of the text. First, Peter, the uncontested leader of the disciples, made the marvelous statement through the help of God the Father that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (v. 16). Jesus affirmed Peter's confession and went on to build upon it. What did Jesus mean when He told Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (v.18b)? Jesus' meaning is clear when we look one level deeper into the plain meaning found in the original language. Peter, whose name in Greek is "Petros," literally means "rock." However, the foundation on which Jesus spoke about building the church is a different Greek word, "petra," which means a mass or rock. In context, what Jesus said was close to this paraphrase: "Simon, I am changing your name to Petros, and upon this petra (foundational mass of rock) I will build my church." Jesus said that He would build His church upon the foundation (petra, meaning a mass of rock or many large rocks), which, in context, refers to Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. Peter clarified this meaning in the First Epistle of Peter. Peter said, "You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Although Peter used the word "lithos" for stone, he stated how the individual stones are built up into

a holy priesthood of believers "through Jesus Christ." The church is the collection of spiritual rocks that are built on the "petra" or foundation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16), through whom is the only way to eternal life (John 14:6).

Saint Paul used a similar analogy in explaining how God empowered him as the leader and builder of the church among the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:1), in the same way, that Peter was the builder of the church among the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Paul said, "According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each person must be careful how they build on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). In Ephesians, Paul clarified how Jesus intended the church to interpret this passage by pointing out that our faith has "been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20).

Paul used the symbolism of Jesus as the Rock or foundation in First Corinthians:

> *1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)*

When Paul said, "they were drinking from the spiritual rock" and "the rock was Christ" (v. 4), both times he used the word "petra." Jesus was the foundation stone, the One Who provided sustenance to the Hebrews escaping from the Pharaoh.

Jesus Himself explained the necessity of a sure foundation in Luke Chapter 6:

> *47 Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: 48 he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst*

against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great. (Luke 6:47-49)

When Jesus said, "he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock" (v. 48), the word in the original was "petra," The giant rock that was rolled to seal Jesus' tomb was a "petra" (Matthew 27:60). Peter **was** one of the foundational stone**s** (the apostles and prophets). Still, Jesus **is** the Chief Cornerstone, the Foundation of the Church. "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).

Second, Jesus said that He "will give you the keys of the kingdom in heaven and that whatever he bound on earth would be bound in heaven and whatever was loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven." We previously discussed this in the June 8, 2014, edition of Mass Notes. In summary, we said that the keys to the kingdom are salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. 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. Peter and the other apostles were being sent out with authority to preach the Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), which would be the entry point of faith. In a certain sense, they were being commissioned to open the doors of the Kingdom of God to others by their obedience in proclaiming the Good news and making disciples. We then see Peter in Acts 2:14-40 fulfilling this call by preaching a message of repentance and salvation in Jesus Christ. This is in line with Jesus' teaching when He 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). Later, Jesus instructed the group of ten disciples (eleven less Thomas) gathered together in the upper room after His resurrection that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved. The keys of the Kingdom were being entrusted to this group of men who had been with Jesus in a personal way. They were going to be His hands and feet in the world from now on. The story of the Gospel continues to transform lives because we are all commissioned to be His ambassadors, representing God's love and truth to the world through our lives and our proclamation of the Good News (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Finally, Jesus said, "The gates of Hades will not overpower it" (v. 18c), meaning that all of the evil will not be able to overcome the God-ordained movement of the church. This is an essential statement that no matter how awful the world may become, the power of Satan will never destroy God's church. We can rest in the fact that Jesus has overcome the world (John 16:33, 1 Corinthians 15:57), and through Him alone, we can find the power to continue His commission of making disciples and teaching (Matthew 28:16-20).

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Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. All three passages for this week involve the opposition that Christians have had to face to be faithful to God. In what areas of your life have you faced opposition because of your faith? How can these passages strengthen your faith and give you the truth to hold onto in times of opposition?

2. Jesus asked his disciples a very pointed question: "Who do you say that I am?" At some point, each of us has to answer this question. How does Peter's response resonate with you? Is this the foundation on which you are building your life? If so, how does your life reflect this? If not, what foundation are you building your life on? Would you like Peter's response to be your response as well? You can pause and ask God to change the direction of your life so that you can build on the Chief Cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 169: 06-22-2025



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we spent a considerable amount of time discussing the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, mentioned in a reading from Genesis. We dedicate so much time to this man because of the way his ministry prefigures the eternal intercession and finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. In the second reading, we learn from Saint Paul's teaching about the celebration of communion and conclude this week's study with the miracle of our Lord's feeding of the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading is when Abraham was returning from battle with the forces that kidnapped his nephew Lot (Genesis 14:12). Earlier, Lot had separated himself from Abraham after he chose the well-watered, fertile Jordan River Valley towards the east. Not long afterwards, Lot found himself surrounded by war in the nations surrounding the Dead Sea (Genesis 14:3). Abraham mustered his troops and successfully rescued his nephew and all his possessions (Genesis 14:14-16). Today's reading picks up during Abraham's return from this perilous rescue mission as he passes by the city of Salem, which is known by its modern name, Jerusalem (formerly Jebus, the land of the Jebusites).

First Reading:

> *Genesis 14:18-20 NAS95 18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. 19 He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; 20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." He gave him a tenth of all.*

In the reading, we are introduced to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High" (v. 18b). Melchizedek is perhaps one of the most significant figures in the entire Bible, ranking second only to Jesus. Some believe that Melchizedek was the preincarnate Christ Himself, a "Christophany" or appearance of Christ before His physical birth to Mary as recorded in the Gospels. Why is Melchizedek such an important person, and what application does his ministry have for our lives today? Before we answer this question, we will provide some background about him.

Who is this man, Melchizedek, king of Salem? In today's reading, we find Melchizedek bringing out bread and wine to greet Abraham, who was returning from battle with the forces that kidnapped his nephew Lot. The New Testament offers additional information about this enigmatic figure. In Hebrews 7:1, the text reads, "Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him." Looking at the Book of Hebrews as a whole, you can see that it's grounded in an explanation of Christ through the perspective of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood, thus the title given to the book "Hebrews," meaning Jews. In Genesis 14:3, Abram, later known as Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, is referred to as a Hebrew. We see in Hebrews 7:1 that Melchizedek is described in three ways: 1. The King of Salem, the area we now identify as Jerusalem, and 2. A priest of the "Most High God," meaning a priest of the *only* true God, and 3. One to whom Abraham, the father of the Jews, gave tribute. The lesser person offers tribute to the greater. To summarize, Melchizedek was a king and a priest worthy of tribute.

Going on in Hebrews 7 we find in verse 17, "You [Jesus Christ] are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek," quoted from the Old Testament Book of Psalms 110:4. According to the Book of Leviticus under what we call the Jewish Law, all the Old Testament Priests had to come from the tribe of Levi. Still, Melchizedek was a priest before the separate tribes or Law even existed! Yet Abraham gave a tenth portion (or tithe) to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:4) as required under the later Law for all priests (verse 5). What is being explained here is that Melchizedek was one of a class of priests that foreshadowed the coming final, eternal (and final) High Priest, Jesus. Melchizedek, whose name means "King of righteousness," could not have come from the line of Aaron (Levi) or Judah, because these lines did not exist during his lifetime. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system; the final sacrifice was Jesus' death on the cross, which did away with the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 10:11-14). Christ was from the "order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4, Hebrews 7:17), not the line of Aaron. This new order is made even more clear by reading beyond the quoted section of Psalm 110 to verse 7, "Therefore He will lift up his [Jesus Christ's] head." This eternal priest, Jesus of the non-priestly line of Judah, is and will be exalted by God. As a side note, Melchizedek was the first biblical figure to portray the concept of a priest-king.

Now, with this wisdom in mind, let's answer the question we posited in the opening: Why is Melchizedek such an important person, and what application does his ministry have for our lives today? As Christians, we cannot underestimate the importance of what Melchizedek's priesthood teaches us. First, the "Melchizedekian" is eternal, in contrast to the Jewish sacrificial system that passed away after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Indeed, the Levitical priesthood died the moment that Jesus died and the veil was torn in two (Matthew 27:51), although the Jews nursed it along for another four decades. Second, the priesthood of Jesus is eternal and is not tied to the life of the priest. Hebrews says, "The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because

they were prevented by death from continuing," (Hebrews 7:23). This is a critically important point because the Scripture says regarding Jesus, "Therefore He is able also to save **forever** those who draw near to God through Him, since **He always lives to make intercession for them** (Hebrews 7:25, emphasis added). Bold text alone does not provide this quote with enough emphasis, as the implications for the church and the Christian are enormous:

- Since Jesus lives eternally, He is always there for us. His intercession with the Father God is eternal on our behalf. In contrast, human priests died, and their ministries ended with their passing.

- Regardless of whatever type of human priesthood was instituted after Jesus' death, the Scripture is clear that the sacrificial system and associated priesthood was eliminated by God forever. The sacrifice of lambs (Exodus 12:5, Numbers 28:7), wine (Numbers 28:7), or bread (Leviticus 7:13) was forever eliminated by Jesus willingly offering Himself and one perfect sacrifice forever, because "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). We can be thankful that Jesus' sacrifice cannot ever be repeated and will never need to be.

- Jesus declared victory over sin, whereas the Levitical priesthood left a memory of sin. We see this clearly in the Book of Hebrews.
Hebrews 10:1-4 NAS95 1 "For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

- Jesus is the Victor of sin and is nowhere in the Bible ever portrayed as a victim. Jesus chose to go to the cross on behalf of our sin. Jesus is our Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the One Who suffered on our behalf. Jesus said, "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:18). Because Jesus was victorious over sin, we can be victorious over sin as well. The Bible says, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

- Jesus instituted a new priesthood consisting of all believers, and the old, broken, bloody, and corrupt (Matthew 21:13) sacrificial system of the Old Testament has passed away forever. The Scripture says, "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). As believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we offer continual **spiritual** sacrifices to God. "Through Him, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

In closing, was the man Melchizedek in the reading the preincarnate Christ? Hebrews 7:3 says about him that he was "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually." However, later in verse 15, the author made the point quite clearly that Melchizedek is a type of Christ, something that points to the later Messiah Jesus. "And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the **likeness** of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:15, emphasis added). So, was Melchizedek Christ in the flesh? Maybe, though this isn't explicitly stated in the Scriptures. What we do know is that he points to Christ by representing an eternal priesthood that Jesus now carries for us.

As we move on to the second reading, hopefully, each of us recognizes the principle of giving to God, as demonstrated by Abram after his victory in rescuing Lot from the ungodly kings who surrounded him and had taken him captive. Our giving to the church, charities, and those in need demonstrates that we understand the source of victory is God, and He owns it all. We are to hold our time, talents, and treasures loosely in our palms and let God take from them as He sees fit. As Christians, we are not like the people of Pompeii who perished while grasping their possessions before trying to flee the volcano.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 1 Corinthians deals with Saint Paul's teaching on the celebration of communion.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NAS95 23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*

In the reading, Saint Paul spoke about the celebration of the communion meal. He said, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26, emphasis added). This teaching placed a precise time limit on the celebration of this essential ordinance. As we look forward to the return of the Lord, we, like the Jews on the evening of the Passover, walk in obedience to the Lord's commandment to celebrate communion *until* He returns.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is an essential ordinance given to us by the Lord Jesus before He returned to heaven. Each time we celebrate communion, we commemorate Jesus' death on the cross for us, on which He gave his body and poured His blood for us. Jesus instituted the communion celebration during His Last Supper with the disciples on the eve of the Jewish holiday known as Passover. This critical feast commemorated the Jews' deliverance from the final plague brought against the Pharaoh as recorded in Exodus 12. On the solemn eve many millennia ago, the Hebrew people were instructed to slaughter a lamb and mark their doorway with its blood. On that evening, the Death Angel passed through the land and killed the firstborn of every living thing, both human beings and animals, except those who had followed God's commandment in faith by marking their doorways with the symbol of the Lamb of God. The Feast of Unleavened Bread, in which the Jews eat bread without the yeast rising agent, follows Passover. The absence of leaven is symbolic of the Jews' rapid flight from Egypt immediately after that first Passover evening, when the lamb was slaughtered in obedience to God's command for the salvation of each household. The absence of leaven also came to be associated in later Jewish thought with the purification from sin, i.e. leaven is sin, such as Jesus noted when He said to be on watch for the "leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6). The symbolism is clear; Jesus is *our* Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God that takes away our sin. John the Baptist said about Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus is the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

What does this reading mean for our lives? First, God calls us not to forsake the assembly together in the communion service (Hebrews 10:25). As we celebrate communion from now until the day the Lord Jesus returns, we look back to the one sacrifice that He made for our sins. Second, we can recognize that we are saved by grace through faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9), the same as Moses and the other believers in the Old Testament. They looked forward to Jesus through the symbols of God's supernatural provision, as seen in manna and the healing that came by faith in God, by humbly kneeling before the bronze serpent. The elements of communion remind us of Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed to pay the debt for our sins. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). This truly is a celebration, for though our sins are scarlet, we have been washed as white as snow through this sacrifice. We now live in response to this great and precious gift. May you not only celebrate communion, but each day, with a joyful and thankful heart.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke 9 records Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. This is the only miracle that appears in all four of the Gospels. The total number of people fed would have likely been over ten thousand, as the crowd numbered five thousand men, not counting women and children.

Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, which took place along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, marked the beginning of a series of pivotal events in His ministry, as identified by following the parallel accounts in the Gospel of John. One of these crucial points of decision for the crowds of followers is evident in the easy-to-remember verse 6:66 in John's Gospel, "As a result of this, many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." These turning points arose as people began to determine in their hearts whether they were faithful followers of Jesus. Another of these is in the previous chapter of John where it says, "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18). This is where the rubber meets the road; the faithful followers of God are those that recognize Jesus as God in the flesh, the Messiah, rather than just a miracle doer who they thought would deliver them from their Roman oppressors.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:11-17 NAS95 11 But the crowds were aware of this and followed Him; and welcoming

> *them, He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing. 12 Now the day was ending, and the twelve came and said to Him, "Send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place." 13 But He said to them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people." 14 (For there were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, "Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each." 15 They did so, and had them all sit down. 16 Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people. 17 And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets full.*

As the story progressed, we know from the parallel accounts that Jesus asked Philip (who was from this region) to provide for the crowd. We know from that account that Philip responded to Jesus, stating that it would require the amount of 200 days' wages to buy that much food. This was a significant amount, but it wasn't beneficial, given the distance from the city and the vast size of the crowd. Nevertheless, the people had followed Jesus some distance away from the city and saw Him as One Who would provide for them, so it was natural for Jesus to accommodate their needs through His disciples. In this case, the people found out that God was the true multiplier of things. Again, we know from the parallel account in John that the people did indeed recognize Jesus as a Prophet, seemingly the One prophesied about in Deuteronomy 18:15. However, they misunderstood the role of the Messiah (John 6: 14–15). The people saw in Jesus a political ruler Who could free them from their poverty and Roman oppression. In the end, twelve baskets were left over, corresponding precisely to the count of Jesus' disciples. Each disciple was left with one basket to highlight Jesus' ability to provide amid impossible circumstances. God provided the food, regardless of the people's faith, and used this sign to point to the True Messiah, Jesus.

We, too, may have misunderstandings about how Jesus' power should be used in the world. Although we should ask God to provide for our circumstances, we must recognize that, like the people of the biblical era, we often want God to use His power for our comfort, security, and advancement. We need to be careful to let God be God and not expect Him to be our personal "Genie in the bottle" performing miracles on demand. Nobody stands above Him, for He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and His purposes are beyond understanding. Even though the people in this story wanted Jesus to become their civil King, Jesus ministered to them to meet their spiritual needs instead. One day, Jesus will return to rule and reign on the earth and fulfil the expectations of a perfect ruler.

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Reflection Questions

1. The Book of Hebrews opens as follows. "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe*" (Hebrews 1:1-2). With this passage in mind, proceed through the Book and study the context of Hebrews before and after chapter 7. What do you find regarding how Jesus is the eternal priest/king that fulfilled the requirements of the Law and how He is our eternal High Priest that makes intercession for us (1 Timothy 2:5). What impact should / does Jesus' intercession make on your perspective and response the challenges, blessings, and your inadequacies?

2. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus called upon God's miraculous power to perform a miracle that would provide for people's basic needs and, at the same time, confirm Himself as the Messiah. It is evident from reading the synoptic Gospels that His disciples didn't understand the miracle until Jesus explained it to them sometime later, after feeding a second large crowd. In what ways have you missed the knowledge of the miracles of God in your own life? List two or three ways in which God has recently provided for you that you may have taken for granted. Tell God your thankfulness for His provision and ask Him to point out to you ways in which He continues to do so.

Going Deeper

Another figure that prefigured this ministry was Joseph in the Book of Genesis, followed by King David, also of the tribe of Judah. Do a study of these people and see what remarkable parallels you can draw between them and Jesus.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 61:

06-01-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we will see in the first reading the murderous reaction of the Jews to Stephen's message in the Book of Acts. Then, we will continue the study from previous weeks in the Book of Revelation and conclude with the Gospel reading, where we see Jesus' prayer on our behalf.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This reading is from the Book of Acts. It shows the immense opposition the early church was under. In Acts 7:1-53, Stephen gave a courageous speech that pointed out the inconsistency of the Jewish people's ability to follow God. Stephen was one of the seven men chosen from among the larger group of disciples to serve in the food service ministry because the twelve apostles felt that they "should not give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2). After Stephen's appointment, a group of Jews from the surrounding nations "rose up and disputed with [him]" (Acts 6:9) because "Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (v. 8). Evidently, Stephen had many other skills and spiritual gifts than just his food service ministry. Before we go to today's reading, let's read what happened after his convicting speech to understand the context better.

> *Acts 6:10-15 NAS95 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.*

In verse 12, the "Council" to which Doctor Luke (the writer of Acts) is referring is the Sanhedrin, which is the supreme Jewish court of justice, the same one that falsely condemned the Lord Jesus (Matthew 26:59-66). The Council acted the same way they did during the "trial" (using the term loosely) of Jesus in that they rounded up false witnesses to testify against Stephen (v. 13a). During the hearing, the Council provided Stephen with the ability to make a very long and reasoned defense (Acts 7:1-53). "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him" (v. 54), which is where we pick up with today's reading. *Note: The complete text of Stephen's speech is included in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's study.*

First Reading:

> *Acts 7:55-60 NAS95 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.*

The main point of the reading was the great similarities between the way Stephen died and the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the same way that Jesus' death was filled with miracles (earthquake, darkening of the sky), Stephen's death was also miraculous in that he told how he saw a vision of the Lord Jesus exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven and graciously prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers. In both cases, the Council heard false testimony and then rushed to execute the death sentence upon them. Just as Jesus did (Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed right before he died for God's forgiveness of their great sin of killing him (v. 54). As the saying goes, the

apples don't fall far from the tree. As Jesus' devout apostle, Stephen followed closely the way of his master, including forgiving his tormenters before his death. Ultimately, instead of having the Jews' desired effect of stopping the spread of the Christian message, the persecution of Stephen did quite the opposite. Stephen's example of bold testimony amid persecution emboldened those who went after him as the growing church spread across the globe.

Three other points emerge from the reading. The first is the introduction of Saul, who we know later as the Apostle Paul (v. 58). Here we see Saul assisting in the persecution of Stephen in guarding the cloaks of the people who were stoning Stephen to death. This was just a foretaste, because we know that Saul began raging a holy war against the Christians in the next chapter. There Luke records, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). A second point in the reading that can be drawn is regarding the posture of the Lord Jesus in Stephen's vision. The author of Hebrews records about Jesus, "When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3c). However, as Stephen was being killed, he saw a divine vision of Jesus "**standing** at the right hand of God" (v. 55c, emphasis added). Jesus' position "at the right hand of God" means He is exalted by God the Father in heaven. Jesus' standing position is, as one commentator stated, His "active interposition to help, as Mediator and King, or readiness to receive His persecuted servant" (Annotated Bible Notes). Hebrews says, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). In the same way that Stephen saw Jesus' interceding for him before the Father, when we die, we can expect to see Jesus standing and interceding for us with the Father God. Only through the righteousness of Jesus will we be able to enter the presence of God the Father. Finally, note that as the Jewish mob rushed to murder Stephen, they covered their ears (v. 57). This is indicative of their response to hearing the sin of blasphemy, which gives an indication of the crime of which they were accusing Stephen of committing since blasphemy carried with it the penalty of death (Leviticus 24:16). Jesus foretold of the coming of this day when He said, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2).

An application of the reading is that, as believers, we can expect to face persecution. Saint Paul said, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). As we do, we should remember that the church often grows the most during these times, and we may experience the most personal growth in these circumstances. We should endeavor in advance to develop a philosophy of suffering under persecution to the extent that when it comes upon us, we are prepared to respond in ways that lead us closer to God. The North African apologist Tertullian (c. 160–225) wrote much about suffering and persecution. He said, "But go zealously on, good presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us,

torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent" (Tertullian's *Apology*, Chapter 50).

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see some insights that Jesus provided through the Holy Spirit's recording of Jesus' prayer to the Father on behalf of all believers. Interestingly, just before this prayer, Jesus warned His disciples about the coming persecution. But first, we will hear from Jesus through His closing warning to the world in the Book of Revelation.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study of Revelation that we have looked at for the past several weeks. The context of today's reading is Jesus' closing words to the world as delivered by the angel to John. When John saw the angel, his immediate response was to bow down and worship him (Revelation 22:8). Instead, the angel told John, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:9). Regardless of who brought the message, as you read the words that John recorded from the angel you will see that the message is directly from Jesus Christ Himself. Although the text doesn't state this outright, as happens in the Old Testament prophets when they say, "Thus says the Lord," verse 16 says that the message is from Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *Revelation 22:12-20 NAS95 12 Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying. 16 I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. 17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost. 18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things*

says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus provides His seal of authority to the message by clearly identifying Himself as the sender of it in verse 16 ("I Jesus"). This crucial closing message of Jesus to the world opens with the phrase "I am," which also clearly identifies the speaker as God. This phrase is repeated no less than four times in this short section. This is indicative of the importance that readers should give to it because it reveals that the sender is explicitly identified as God, the "I am" of Exodus 3:14. The speaker uses many phrases in the reading to identify Himself as God including "the Alpha and Omega" (v. 13), "the root and descendant of David" (v. 16), and "the bright morning star" (v. 16), and most importantly the outright statement "I Jesus" (v. 16).

Jesus' closing message is full of critical scriptural truths:

- His return will happen quickly (v. 12) in the sense that the events will unfold quickly when it begins to happen. Jesus bookmarked today's reading by closing with this same admonition, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (v. 20). Jesus said about this in the Gospel of Matthew, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). When the end-times events begin to unfold, they will be concluded within a single generation.

- Jesus will reward those who served Him by bringing their rewards to them when He returns (v. 12). Justice will be provided by "render[ing] to every man according to what he has done." This means, at least in part, that He will bring punishment to those who don't serve Him when He returns. Verse 15 makes this clear: "Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying." In contrast, believers "take the water of life without cost" (v. 17) since they thirst for the ways of God and are the eternal recipients of His grace (unmerited favor).

- Believers are those who "who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and may enter by the gates into the city" (v. 14). They are those who "hears the words of the prophecy of this book" without adding to or taking away from them (v. 18) as the false teachers were doing (and are doing today). Countless theological cults engage in practices that either nullify the Word of God (take away from it) or add legalistic, religious practices that their followers must observe to be saved (add to it). Jesus provides a clear warning not to do either of these things because otherwise they shall be forced, along with all the other

> nonbelievers, to enter into the Great Tribulation. This is the Day of the Lord's judgement spoken of in Revelation and previously by the Old Testament Prophets such as Jeremiah.

- Jesus, in His grace, sent this message specifically to the churches (v. 16) so that they may receive and learn from Him the only way to the tree of life (v. 19). Those who resist His message of salvation through faith in Him alone (John 14:6) will find themselves eternally locked out of the holy city.

We can learn a lot from this closing section of Revelation. Jesus is faithful to us in that He continues to tell the world the truth about the only way to find peace with God, although most of the world has and will continue to reject His message. As we move on to the Gospel lesson, we will see Jesus' heart for His believers as we listen in on a prayer He gave on our behalf to His disciples before He ascended to heaven.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the Gospel reading from John 17 is Jesus' high priestly prayer that He offered to God the Father just before His arrest and crucifixion. He opened the prayer in verse one of this chapter by "lifting up His eyes to heaven" and saying, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life" (John 17:1-2). This sets the tone as He continues the prayer on behalf of both His disciples and those who will come to believe in their testimony.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 17:20-26 NAS95 20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. 24 Father, I desire that they also,*

> *whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; 26 and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."*

Jesus taught about the importance of a unified church in the reading. He said, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me **through their word**; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21 emphasis added). Unity does not come through coercion or oppression but through individuals who understand their true identity in Christ. When believers in Jesus focus on Jesus and His glory, the petty issues often dividing followers will fade away. Jesus helps us see that unity results from belief in Christ, who is one with the Father.

Jesus prayed on behalf of His disciples who had believed by firsthand knowledge ***and*** for those who believed through the *testimony* of His disciples (v. 20b, "through their word"). Unity is important in the church because it's through this unified message that God's power is revealed. All of the believers after the era of the disciples have come to faith in Jesus through the testimony of "**the word"** and "**their word**." "The word" is the testimony of the disciples through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, written in the New Testament Bible. "Their word" is both the testimony of the disciples *and* the testimony of all believers. Jesus' purpose in this message was a calling for the church of God be unified in their proclamation of the Gospel so that the entire world may believe (John 17:21f). Jesus brought this out in verse 26, "I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

As we contemplate the three readings from today, what stands out is our great value in following Jesus, regardless of what it may cost us. Knowing the Lord Jesus as our Savior empowers us to tell others about Him even though we may be ridiculed or even harmed because of our testimony. In the Western world, it is easy to take advantage of our religious freedom and forget the great sacrifices that Christians around the world are making for Jesus every day. As we live our lives, we are called to pray for those who suffer for Jesus around the world, as well as to prepare for persecution in our own lives.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways have you faced or are you facing persecution for your faith? How does Stephen's example, which mirrors Christ and knowing the warnings about persecution in Scripture, help you to face it more strongly?

2. Choose one of the ways that Jesus is described in the second reading in Revelation 22 and reflect upon what this means and how this character quality can make a difference in your own life.

- Jesus is coming quickly.
- Jesus is the rewarder.
- Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.
- Jesus is the Root and a descendant of David.
- Jesus is the bright morning Star.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 57: 05-25-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week's study is long but important. We challenge our readers to stick with it, as we think you will find great rewards in doing so.

The first reading from Acts records the findings of an important meeting in the church called the Jerusalem Council. After this, we continue the study in Revelation, in which we see how God presents a new, perfect Holy City made in heaven for the saints to dwell in forever. Then, we close with the Gospel of John, in which we see Jesus' foretelling of the promise to send the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of all believers.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts and records the event known as the Jerusalem Council. Leading up to

the reading, Paul had endured some tremendous persecution to the extent that, while in Lystra, he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20). It's possible that during this time, Paul experienced his visions of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). After Paul's miraculous recovery, he traveled with Barnabas back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch and "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23). Here Paul said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (v. 22c). Thus, Paul continued his leadership of the Gentile church and next journeyed to Jerusalem for a critical ecumenical council, meaning a gathering of all of the church leaders from both the Gentile and Jewish realms.

First Reading:

> *Acts 15:1-2 NAS95 1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.*
> *[If you would like to read the section that was omitted, it is included at the end of this week's study.]*
> *Acts 15:22-29 NAS95 22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas–Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."*

As the reading opens, Doctor Luke records how some men from Judea began teaching that as Christians they must adhere to the practices of the Mosaic Law, especially concerning the matter of circumcision (v. 1). This was the reason that Paul and Barnabas went down to Jerusalem to discuss this critical issue. (The complete text of the ecumenical council meeting is included at the end of this study in the "Going Deeper" section). James was the leader of the meeting, who wrote the biblical Book of the same name, and was a relative of Jesus. His leadership is implied since, after the Council, he stood up unopposed and made the pronouncement that we see in verses 22 – 29. While

this was an essential finding of the Council, we must remember the occasion that led to the initiation of the vital gathering and the culture in which the events happened. Without saying it, James's bottom line gave believers confidence that they did not have to be circumcised according to the Mosaic Law. But they were to hold to other "essentials" including abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from the eating of blood, eating of meat from animals that had been strangled, and from the sexual sin of fornication (v. 29). These things were so repulsive to Jewish Christians who had just come out of Judaism that the Gentile believers were asked to be considerate in these ways for the sake of unity. When we read this list, we understand the degree to which the Jewish and pagan cultures clashed and the context in which the early believers were immersed. This cultural context greatly influenced the findings of the leaders in the meeting. If converted Jews and pagans were going to get along in the family of God, these bare essentials would help them achieve unity. We know later, Saint Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 8 that eating food sacrificed to idols was acceptable only if it did not violate one's conscience and those around them (1 Corinthians 8:10-13). The principle elicited by Paul in First Corinthians would seemingly also apply to the practices of eating strangled food and blood. However, the prohibition of sexual sin stands out on the list as a universal principle for believers of all time (for Old Testament believers and New Testament believers).

One of the big ideas in the reading is how God entrusted the church's ministry to frail, imperfect believers to safeguard the treasury of truth with great diligence. Back then, the church leaders in this crucial era in which the New Testament Scriptures were written were tasked with many significant responsibilities. They were responsible for both keeping the church pure from false teachings while at the same time balancing the critical cultural factors of their day, including the movement of the church away from a purely Jewish organization to one containing a large proportion of Gentiles. The findings of the Council were significant because they showed how the church leaders were willing to subjugate the Mosaic Law through their acceptance of Jesus' fulfillment through His death and resurrection. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). To the extent that the Law served to safeguard the conscience of the Jewish believers, it was necessary to them for conscience's sake. Still, they were not to foist these legalistic practices upon the Gentile church.

Some application points you could consider are how cultural "baggage" affects our Christian walk and how that influences other believers. How do we foist a list of requirements upon other believers around us who don't come from the same cultural context as ourselves? Perhaps a good case would be a Christian who worships in a way different than your style (maybe they raise their hands, possibly they pray a spontaneous prayer) or a believer who votes for a different political candidate than you do. Is it possible to still be united in Christ, but differ on some of the unique expressions of faith? A good principle to follow, coined by St. Augustine in this matter: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the continuing study of the Book of Revelation. The context of the reading is after the conclusion of Jesus' one-thousand-year (millennial) reign on earth, during which Satan will be bound. Just before Jesus began this reign on earth, some three and a half years before, He had returned to the earth in fulfillment of Acts 1:11 and gathered all of the believers, both living and dead, to heaven. Believers who were already dead were rejoined with their bodies and given new glorified ones. Believers alive at Jesus' coming were gathered to Jesus in their living bodies, after which they also received their glorified bodies. Jesus told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:3). It is evident that the New Jerusalem is the place that Jesus went to prepare. This perfect city is now being presented to the believers of all time as an eternal dwelling place. After the return of the Lord Jesus, all believers now have real (but glorified), physical bodies, so they require a real place to live.

In contrast, when saints die in the current age, they go to heaven without their physical bodies and the need for physical lodging. Therefore, Scripture seems to indicate that God provides them the New Jerusalem as their dwelling place from the moment they receive their glorified bodies at the time of the return of the Lord Jesus to earth. In summary, people with only a spiritual body in heaven rest in that spiritual place, whereas when they rejoin their physical bodies, they will again require a physical resting place. This is even though the New Jerusalem is somehow built in heaven!

After Jesus' thousand-year reign on earth, Satan was released from his bonds and allowed to lead one last rebellion against God. In this massive battle of Gog and Magog (Revelation 20:8), he allied himself with the non-believers who had secretly held out during the millennial reign of Christ on earth. As these demonic forces surround the great city (Jerusalem), fire came down from heaven and devoured them (v. 9). Afterwards, every non-believer in the universe from all time stood before the "great white throne judgment" (Revelation 20:11). First, the devil joined the beast and the false prophet who was already in the lake of fire. Then the Scripture makes a very sobering statement concerning the universal judgment of non-believers, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). The lake of fire is called "the second death" (v. 14) about which Jesus said in the next chapter, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). God describes everyone who fails to trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation by these characteristics, regardless of how "good" they may have perceived themselves to be before the judgment against God's standard of perfection. As believers, we understand that our perfection comes only through accepting Jesus' finished work on the cross for us.

As the cataclysmic events grind to a sudden halt John records how the earth as we know it will be destroyed and replaced by a new creation in which there will no longer be any sea (Revelation 21:1). At this point one of the angels that poured out the last seven plagues introduced the bride of Christ, the group that we know as the church (v. 9). Today's reading opens with the New Jerusalem descending from the sky down towards the new earth. How the New Jerusalem that descends from the sky and the new earth relate to one another is unknown. We don't know if the city "touches down" or remains a heavenly dwelling place, but within sight of the new earth, a form of "satellite city" in the sky.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 24-27 which were omitted are included below.

> *Revelation 21:10-14 NAS95 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. 12 It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*
> *Revelation 21:22-27 NAS95 22 I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; 26 and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; 27 and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

John described the New Jerusalem coming out of the sky as a city with twelve gates marked by the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, signifying that the Old Testament pointed the way to this eternal city. The foundation of the city, though, was laid by the "twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 14), identifying that this beautiful city was built on the testimony of the New Testament disciples (learners), who later were called apostles (sent ones). In the intervening verses that were omitted from the reading (vv. 15-21) John provides more significant details about the gates of the holy city, the walls as well as the size, some fifteen hundred miles square (v. 16). He described the street of

the city as "pure gold, like transparent glass," (v. 21) something hard to understand. How can gold be like transparent glass? Suffice it to say that our categories of beauty can't contain the world that is to come.

Rejoining the reading in verse 22, John describes how there is no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem because "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." In verse 24, the Gentile nature of the church is specifically mentioned when John says, "The **nations** will walk by its light, and the **kings of the earth** will bring their glory into it," something about which we read in the first reading. The city is by definition a pure place in which "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (v. 27). We saw a similar list of prohibited people in the introduction. The principle of repetition marks this as an essential point. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8) The "holy city, Jerusalem" (v. 10) will be just that, holy, forever and nothing unholy will enter it forever.

We can find rest in the fact that despite the current difficult circumstances we may be experiencing, or the haunting memories of things that have happened to us in the past, we will find eternal rest in a perfect place prepared by God for us. We will never again have to question whether someone is walking with the Lord, for everyone will be in perfect harmony with God. We won't be living in some ephemeral city consisting of wafting clouds depicted in the media about heaven. Still, instead, we will live in a perfect, physical city with a perfect, holy God forever. In this place, we will find perfect fellowship with people from all walks of life, both Jews and Gentiles, and this will mark the perfect end of discrimination forever in ways that the civil laws could never do.

An important takeaway point is for us to remember that this world is not our home, and it's not all there is. The world will tell us that the one with the most toys wins, but we are not playing their "game." We live with an eternal perspective that is unsatisfied with this world's finite and dead-end satisfactions. When these things are in their proper place, we can enjoy them. What is eternal about this world is the human soul. That is why it is crucial to settle the question of our eternal destiny now. This passage tells us how we can know if we are permitted into the New Jerusalem, God's eternal city. "Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" can enter. How do we know if our name is written there?

The Bible tells us that it is the Lamb's book, which is significant. Who is the Lamb? None other than Jesus Christ (John 1:29 tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away sins of the world). When sin entered the world through Adam, a blood sacrifice was required to forgive sin (Hebrews 9:22). All through the Old Testament, lambs were sacrificed instead of the person who deserved to die for the sins they committed. Jesus' death and shed blood, as the Lamb of God, was the final and complete sacrifice to provide forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 10:12). First Peter 1:3-5 and 1:18-21 explain the importance of Jesus' sacrificial death for the salvation of our souls:

> *1 Peter 1:3-5 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*
> *1 Peter 1:18-21 NAS95 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you 21 who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*

Therefore, you can be assured that your name is written in His book of life if you trust in the Lamb of God to take away the penalty for your sin and look to Him to give you eternal life. If you have not consciously made this choice to trust in Jesus' sacrificial death to cover the payment for your sin, you can pray right now to tell Him that you would like this gift, which provides forgiveness of the debt you owe God and assurance that your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

The Gospel reading will teach us more about belief in Jesus, for Jesus told His disciples how to demonstrate their faith and love for Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 14. Jesus had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them (John 14:3), which was mentioned in the discussion on the second reading. Jesus also told His disciples that He wouldn't leave them as orphans, that He would come to them through the promise of a Helper, "that He may be with you forever" (John 14:16). In today's

reading, we learn about this Helper Jesus promised to the disciples and to all believers who trust in His name. This discussion was prompted by the question in 14:22: "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?"

Gospel Reading:

> *John 14:23-29 NAS95 23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. 24 He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. 25 These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. 26 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. 27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. 28 You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. 29 Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe."*

The reading opened with Jesus clarifying why He is disclosing certain things to the disciples and not others. Jesus explains that those who love Him will keep His commandments (v. 23a). He is telling those closest to Him, the twelve disciples, these things so that they might no longer be enslaved, but instead, be intimate, like friends, knowing the will of God (John 15:15). He says, *IF* you love me, then you will keep my word (meaning obey Him from the heart and have His value system become your value system). Loving God in this way leads us to keep the commandments of God; it is love in action: loving God leads to godly actions. It seems that one of God's love languages is following Him, instead of following our own inclinations and misguided desires.

Next, Jesus, who had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them, told them how both the Father and the Son would "make Our abode with him"—him being the one who loves Jesus and keeps His word (v. 23d). So while Jesus was predicting His physical departure from this world, He reassured His disciples that He would still be with them, by making their hearts His new home.

He would make their hearts His home by sending the Holy Spirit to live inside them. Jesus reminded them that this promise of the sending of the Holy Spirit wasn't just His words, but the Word of the Father Who sent Him (v. 24); therefore, all three Persons of the Godhead were involved. Jesus

promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to them to "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (v. 26). This was to comfort them and bring them peace (v. 27) because He had earlier told them that He was going to be leaving them (John 14:3). Looking back on what Jesus said, it is essential to note that the Holy Spirit can't teach us all things or bring things to our remembrance if we are not putting His Word in our heart. We know that the Holy Spirit is the person who inspired the Bible, since Saint Peter said, "for an act of human will ever made no prophecy, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). We cooperate with God's work in our lives when we read, study and integrate the truth of God's Word in our daily lives.

Jesus told them all of this so that when the Holy Spirit came, they would remember His promise of sending Him to them and be comforted, which is what we find in the Book of Acts. Many of His followers were confused and discouraged after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. But then, the promised Holy Spirit came, launching the Church in Jerusalem during the feast of Pentecost. The disciples, who had cowered in an upper room a few weeks earlier, were emboldened and spoke new and unlearned languages to preach the good news of salvation through Jesus. Such strange things were happening that Peter had to explain them to a large crowd who had gathered to inquire about the disciples. Peter said that Jesus had sent the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit, was the "culprit" for these signs and wonders: "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The 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) and that the Holy Spirit would teach them and bring to remembrance all things. He stands ready to do the same for us. The Holy Spirit is the Person of the Godhead who empowers believers for ministry.

The big idea in the reading is that Jesus promises not to leave any of us orphans, but rather, He promises to give us peace through the presence of His Holy Spirit. We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives as believers in Jesus Christ. The Spirit's ministry to the hearts in whom He dwells is essential 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. Many Christians are trying to live the Christian life in their own strength, living as orphans. That is not God's intention. He specifically tells us that we are to rely on the Spirit to live the Christian life. We can ask Him to teach us if we don't know how to do this. When we read Scripture, we can look for what it tells us about walking in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:18) relying on the Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and having our mind set on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8).

There are manifold ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer; here are just a few of the

things the Holy Spirit gives us:

- A second birth, a spiritual birth, making us "born from above" or "born again" (John 3:3) with a regenerated soul (Titus 3:5).
- Confirmation that as believers, we are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:15-17).
- Membership in God's universal church is baptism with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- The ability to understand and apply the Scriptures to our lives (1 Corinthians 2:12).
- Intercession on our behalf in prayer (Romans 8:26 – 27).
- A seal or guarantee until the day that we are redeemed in heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we considered how one's cultural background impacted their Christian beliefs and how these beliefs affected the other believers around them. When did you meet another Christian from a cultural context much different from your own? In what ways did you need to reexamine your core beliefs to give them the grace or leeway to accept them as brothers or sisters in the Lord?

2. In what ways can you identify with Jesus' disciples who were discouraged when He said He was

going to leave them? How have you felt like an orphan? Identify which characteristics of living as an orphan or a child of God in the **table below** resonate with you. Talk to God and other solid Christians about your desire to be shored up in the areas where you still live like an orphan. Praise God for the confidence He has given you as a child of God.

Orphan	**Child of God**
Anxious and worried about needs: no sense of God's infinite resources. It feels like I have to make life work independently, and who I am is not enough.	Content about God's provisions: Has a sense that my God shall supply all my needs according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:11-19).
Infused with a sense of conditional love and acceptance, you're only as good as your last performance.	Infused with a sense of unconditional love and acceptance, failure is not fatal (1 John 3:1).
Highly defended from a sense of vulnerability; needs to be safe, secure, and right. Criticism either demolishes me or propels me to show them wrong. Either way, I protect myself from the gnawing voices of criticism. Shrinks back in fear and resists taking God-directed risks.	Learns that feeling inadequate is a natural consequence of the Fall. Instead of turning to self-protection, I try to find my adequacy in Christ (2 Cor. 3:5). This allows me to be realistic about my weaknesses and honest about my vulnerabilities with God and others. It allows me to overcome fear and take God-directed risks.
Prays when "on" or in crisis.	Prays throughout the day, knowing that the Spirit dwells in me and wants to relate to me (1 Thess. 5:17).
Uses "Christian freedom" to indulge the flesh, such as biting and devouring each other, being conceited, provoking and envying others. Gal. 5: 19-21 says: "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; [20] idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions [21] and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."	Uses "Christian freedom" to "serve one another humbly in love" (Gal. 5:13). Starting to see the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23): [22] "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,[23] gentleness and self-control." These are coming from the inside of my being, not just being imposed from the outside or merely trying to conform to Christian standards.
Needs to be in control and persuade people to see things my way. I am controlled by a need to impress people.	Becoming Spirit-controlled, which frees me up to submit to God-given authority, to let other people be "right" and to care more about incarnating Christ than impressing people.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 54: 05-18-2025



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

Missions have always been at the heart of the ministry of the church. Just before His return to

heaven, Jesus had told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). He had commissioned them to make disciples, baptize believers, and teach new Christians to obey all that Jesus had taught (Matthew 28:19-20). The Apostle Paul and Barnabas had set out from Antioch to do precisely that, and they found a mixed reception wherever they went, first reaching out to the Jews.

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

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

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

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

First Reading:

> *Acts 14:21-28 NAS95 21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." 23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. 24 They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. 27 When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. 28 And they spent a long time with the disciples.*

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

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

If all that is true, it is no wonder, then, that there will be no tears in heaven, no death, no mourning,

crying, or pain. The ruler (Jesus, the promised Messiah or anointed one), sitting on His throne, says, "Behold, I am making all things new." John indicates that he has been instructed to write these words because they are "faithful and true." We can count on them.

Second Reading:

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 13. The context is just before Judas Iscariot left the Last Supper meal at the table with Jesus to betray Him.

Gospel Reading:

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

What someone says just before he dies is often regarded as extremely important. The night before Jesus was crucified, He had close, personal fellowship with His disciples at what we refer to as the Last Supper. In addition to having a meal with them, reminiscent of the original Passover in Egypt,

and washing their feet in a new picture of His servant nature and the ministry of cleansing that He continues for His followers today, Jesus made three significant statements.

Jesus said first in the reading that the Son of Man (His most frequent reference to Himself) and God the Father are glorified in Him. Isaiah wrote about this feature of Christ. Undoubtedly, it refers specifically to His death in which God's marvelous plan of redemption is made possible, ultimately to bring great glory to Jesus and the Father.

In the next chapter of John (14:1-3), Jesus clarifies that He is to leave His disciples to return to heaven. Here, He seems to be speaking more directly of the experience of His death and separation from the Father, which is a path the disciples cannot follow. The Apostle Peter tells us that Jesus, during those three days His body lay in the tomb, actually visited where the devil's angels suffered. He preached, revealing to them their doom as a result of His sufficient sacrifice on the cross (1 Peter 3:18-20).

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 51: 05-11-2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we will study readings from the Book of Acts, Revelation, and the Gospel of John. We will go into some great depth on the first two readings. We hope you both enjoy and learn something from our study this week and you are forever spoiled for the ordinary.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. Paul and Barnabus were on their first missionary journey to share the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues (Acts 13:4). So much happened in Jerusalem that they wanted others to know – Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension had defined the Jewish faith in a whole new way. The Holy Spirit had been sent to the believers to empower them to

be witnesses all over the world (Acts 1:8). Paul and Barnabus were "set apart" to be witnesses to Who Jesus was and what He had taught them (Acts 13:1-3). They were also sent to help those who were lost in darkness so that they could see the light of the Good News, that their sins could be forgiven, and that a new relationship with God could be established through faith in Jesus (Acts 13:38-39).

During their travels, they often went to the Jewish synagogue to share how Jesus was the fulfillment of the promised long-awaited Messiah (Acts 13:33-39). They gave convincing evidence to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles that Jesus matched the description of the One from God Who would provide salvation. Jesus had risen from the grave, sealing the case that He was the Christ (Acts 13:32-33). In today's reading, we find Paul and Barnabus being invited back to the synagogue to continue sharing their insights about God's work through Christ.

First Reading:

Note: Paul's speech in Antioch was omitted from the reading. If you would like to read the speech, it is included in the "Going Deeper" section at the end of the study.

> *Acts 13:14 NAS95 14 But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day, they went into the synagogue and sat down.*
> *Acts 13:43-52 NAS95 43 Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. 44 The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. 45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. 46 Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.'" 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. 50 But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51 But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

As a result of Paul's speech the previous week, a large group from the city gathered so that they didn't miss Paul's second address. The Jews received this second message of Paul very jealously, which resulted in them instituting persecution of Paul and Barnabus by "incit[ing] the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city" (v. 50) such that they were driven out of the city. However, many of the Gentiles in the mixed crowd heard Paul's speech and responded in faith (v. 48). Paul and Barnabus did as Jesus had commanded the disciples (Matthew 10:14) and shook the dust of the feet in protest while they left that city and went on to Iconium (v. 51).

The reading marks the transition point of Paul's ministry from the Jews to the Gentiles (v. 46), which became his primary ministry (see Galatians 1:16, Romans 15:15-16). Paul said later about this in Romans, "But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous" (Romans 11:11b). The outpouring of God's Spirit on the Gentiles was something that the prophets predicted long ago. Isaiah said, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). This marks the dawn of a new and unseen era, the church age. Paul spoke about this later in his ministry:

> *25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, 26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, 27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:25-27).*

The big idea in the reading is that amid rejection and persecution, the Word of the Lord can still penetrate and transform hearts.

Next, we move on to the second reading, in which we will see the eternal impact of Paul's ministry on the eternal lives of believers worldwide.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from the Book of Revelation is a "parenthesis," or pause in John's revealing of the seven seal judgments being unveiled by Jesus. We cannot overstate the importance of understanding the context of any reading, especially when dealing with the end-time events

portrayed here in the Book of Revelation. When reading Revelation, one has to know that the story moves between visions of events happening on earth and things happening in heaven. Along the way, there are frequent pauses in the action, or "parenthesis," where the vision shifts from earth to heaven or vice versa.

Looking back on today's reading in chapter 7, beginning in chapter 6, Jesus pours out a series of judgments on the earth (Revelation 6:1-17). With the unleashing of the sixth seal, great signs are seen in the sky (Revelation 6:12). This accords with what Jesus spoke about in Matthew 24:29-30. John said, "I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood" (Revelation 6:12). Jesus said about this in Matthew, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). The next verse in this section of Mathew provides is with strong clue as to the overall context of the signs as it relates to Jesus' promised return (Acts 1:11). Jesus said, "And **then** the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory" (Matthew 29:30, emphasis added). Jesus said that He would return after displaying the signs in the sky, just before the seventh seal judgment is poured out on the earth. This brings us to the parenthesis in the text from which we find today's reading, after the revelation of the sixth seal but before the return of the Lord Jesus and the unveiling of the seventh seal.

The event that happens before the parenthesis of today's reading is another tangential pause in which John records the gathering of 12 groups of elect saints (meaning believers) from within Israel. John records the details of this event in the opening of chapter 7:

> *1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bondservants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: (Revelation 7:1-4).*

The angels divinely mark 12 "tribes" of Israelites consisting of 12,000 from each group. The value of 12,000 is possibly not a literal number but rather indicative of the fullness or total completion of the

task. Regardless, this marking is such that these people are set apart to receive God's divine protection during the balance of the tribulation period, some three and half years. John makes this clear later in Chapter 12. "But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent" (Revelation 12:14). This "sealing of the bondservants of our God" is also indicated in the parallel passage in Matthew. Jesus says in that Gospel about this event, "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matthew 24:31). This divine sealing, marking or protecting occurs just before Jesus' return and the unleashing of the final judgments upon the earth, including the seventh seal, seven trumpet judgments and seven bowl judgments. The bowl judgments conclude the wrath God has stored out to pour upon the unbelieving world at the end of the age. "Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished" (Revelation 15:1).

After the divine "sealing" is completed, the story moves to John's parenthetical vision of a large group of believers in heaven, where we pick up at today's reading.

Second Reading:

Note: Verse 13, which was omitted from the reading, is included separately.

> *Revelation 7:9 NAS95 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands;*
> *Omitted verse:*
> *Re 7:13 ¶ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?"*
> *Revelation 7:14-17 NAS95 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. 16 They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."*

In the reading, John said, "After these things," meaning after the sealing of the "144,000" (Revelation 7:4) and the outpouring of the first six seal judgments upon the earth. The scene now shifts back from events on earth to events in heaven. We must be cautious in our interpretation of the events in heaven because those occur outside of the space/time domain we are bound to on earth. However, John's juxtaposition of this parenthesis in this exact spot in Revelation is significant because it indicates the source of the great cloud of believers about which John is speaking in the reading. Verse 14 reveals that the source of the "great multitude" (v. 9a) are "the ones who come out of the great tribulation." These "tribulation saints" are the believers who are killed for their faith as the end of the age grinds to a halt during the reign of the Antichrist on earth. Later, John says about this wicked person, "It was also given to him to **make war with the saints and to overcome them**, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him" (Revelation 13:7, emphasis added). During this terrible time, the reign of the Antichrist will be so strong as to almost fatalistically determine the outcome of each person alive on earth at the time. "If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints" (Revelation 13:10). The saints that are killed during this time will be divinely protected in heaven forever; in contrast to the "144,000," we saw who is divinely protected on earth during the tribulation period. This group in heaven will no longer hunger or thirst, or be too hot or too cold" (v. 16) "for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd" (v. 17a). We will read more about Jesus' role as Shepherd in the Gospel lesson. Many of the Christian saints on earth during this time will be martyred for their faith, while the "144,000" will enter the Millennial Kingdom alive to repopulate the earth. When Jesus returns, He will gather the saints (believers) who have survived up to that point and those who died in the Lord. Saint Paul said about this, "Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). This is the return of the Lord promised in Acts 1:11 and the rapture (or catching up) of all believers, both alive and dead as stated in this verse from 1 Thessalonians.

The big idea in the reading is that even though this world does not recognize and treat God's people (saints) well, these verses reassure us that there will be justice and provision in life to come with a sense of eternal comfort. We see how Jesus acted as the divine Shepherd of His sheep in heaven. As we move onto the Gospel reading, we will see how Jesus portrays Himself as the Shepherd of His sheep on earth.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint John. The Book of John casts Jesus as the Son of God and speaks of eternal life in terms of knowing Him. The context of today's reading is Jesus' teaching on His role as

the Shepherd of the true sheep in contrast to the false sheep and shepherds that abounded in Israel during this time of extreme satanic activity surrounding Jesus' ministry.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 10:27-30 NAS95 27 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."*

The big idea in the reading is that God offers security to believers through the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God pictures Himself as the "Shepherd of the Sheep," and this occurs early in the Bible. The first time this concept appears is back in the Book of Genesis when Jacob was prophesizing about the twelve sons (and tribes) of Israel, this time about Joseph. "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a spring; Its branches run over a wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, and shot at him and harassed him; But his bow remained firm, And his arms were agile, From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)" (Genesis 49:22-24). The shepherd theme is reminiscent of the opening of Psalm 23, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want" v. 1). As we examine today's reading, we find additional insight into the identity of this Shepherd of Israel. He emerges as a Shepherd-King figure With a special relationship with the LORD. This is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself, about whom Jesus says of Himself, "I and the Father are one" (v. 30).

As believers in Jesus, we can find great comfort in John's writing. First, God will never lose any of His sheep; God Himself places a calling upon our lives to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (v. 28). Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6:44). Second, we can trust that God will take care of us in the same way that a Good Shepherd takes care of His sheep. Finally, although we may feel judged by worldly people in this age, our True Judge, the Lord Jesus Himself, is the only absolute judgment that counts. We can trust that God's judgment will be correct in that as we enter eternity, He will judge between the lost sheep and evil shepherds in our land and differentiate between the ones who serve Him well.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the reading from the Gospel of John assure you that you are one of God's sheep? Some characteristics of His sheep are:

- His sheep hear His voice,
- Jesus assures us that He knows us, and
- His sheep follow him.

How can you use this Scripture to help you know that you are in the sheepfold and to counteract the doubts the enemy uses against you to make you question your faith?

2. Looking at the first reading, how does the fact that Paul and Barnabus were met with rejection and violence while simultaneously experiencing a degree of welcome give you an interpretative framework for your own experiences of sharing the Word of God with others?

Going Deeper

The following is Paul's speech to the Jews and Jewish converts (proselytes, Acts 13:43) in Antioch:

> *Acts 13:15-42 NAS95 15 After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." 16 Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17 "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their*

stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. 18 "For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. 19 "When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance–all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. 20 "After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. 21 "Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22 "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' 23 "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24 after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 "And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' 26 "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. 27 "For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. 28 "And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. 29 "When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. 30 "But God raised Him from the dead; 31 and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. 32 "And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, 33 that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' 34 "As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE blessings OF DAVID.' 35 "Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.' 36 "For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; 37 but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. 38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. 40 "Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: 41 'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.'" 42 As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath.

Study Questions for Going Deeper:

1. Briefly trace the history of God's work in the world to bring people to reconcile people to Himself. For example:

- God chose the Jews and made them great in a foreign land (v. 17)
- . . .

2. List all the evidence given by Paul in this passage to prove Jesus' Messiahship.