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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-08-2017



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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will

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

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

This is the same message that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples in His great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told them," And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:7-9). In Jesus' model prayer He instructed His disciples to first begin with adoration of God and thanksgiving. Jesus continued, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:10-12). After adoring God and thanking Him for His provisions we should remember to confess our sins to Him before we move onto asking Him for the matter about which we need help. One of the things we can confess (which literally means "to say the same thing" which implies we agree with God) is our limited perspective, which is causing our anxiety in the first place. We can approach God with confidence (Hebrews 4:16), which should produce thankfulness in our hearts, no matter the circumstances we face. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

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

To summarize, Paul said that instead of worrying, we should pray, being thankful that God hears us and that we are not alone in our trials. He also directed believers to focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise. In addition, we should

practice the things that Paul taught which would entail walking by faith in the truth of Scripture and not by sight (or our feelings). Finally, we can only expect and look forward to experiencing the peace of God after we have done these things that are connected to living in the truth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

The events about which Isaiah spoke were often "telescoped" together in such a way that distant events were seen as happening with near-term events. This is sometimes called the "mountain peaks of prophecy" or "prophetic foreshortening." The "last days" about which Isaiah spoke in verse two above is the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) that is chronicled by John in Revelation. It is at this time that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to usher in His kingdom reign over the world and finally bring an era of peace (Revelation 19:11-16).

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

1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. 3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My

vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress. (Isaiah 5:1-7)

In today's reading, Isaiah is singing a song about God, who is Isaiah's beloved. God had a vineyard that was planted with a choice vine. Isaiah explained the metaphor of the vineyard being the house of Israel (v. 7). This metaphor of Israel as the vine occurs throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. After tending it and building a tower to protect it, the vineyard produced "worthless" grapes (connoting wild or sour grapes). God had no other choice but to remove the hedge of protection that He placed around Jerusalem and Judah and allow it to become a wasteland because of their rejection of the covenant relationship with God (v. 5). This prophecy of physical destruction was fulfilled through the invasion of the Babylonian forces in successive waves with the last one in 586 BC resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (2 Kings 25:1-10). The final destruction of Jerusalem will occur in the future, when God allows a person called the AntiChrist to establish his kingdom rule in Jerusalem (Revelation 13). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see that a second part of the destruction of Jerusalem was the spiritual element that came when the Messiah, Jesus, whom God sent, was rejected by the Jews.

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

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

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

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:33-46)

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

The story starts with a landowner who planted a vineyard. The text in all capitals in verse 33 is a reference to Isaiah 5:1 that we read in the first reading. It is also very similar to the wording that God said about Israel being a "choice vine" in Jeremiah 2:21. The vinegrowers rejected their role as laborers on behalf of the landowner by abusing and killing the landowner's servants who came to collect the produce (v. 35). The escalation continued to the point that the vinegrowers killed the landowner's son (vv. 37-39). In light of the context, it is clear at this point that Jesus is referring to Himself. Jesus then let the Jewish leaders dig their own graves, so to speak, by asking them what they would do in such a situation. They said, "He [would] bring those wretches to a wretched end, and [would] rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who [would] pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons" (v. 42). In other words, the landowner would entrust the vineyard to other people who **would** be trustworthy. Jesus then seized the opportunity to teach them from their own Holy Scriptures by quoting a verse from Psalm 118 with which they would have been familiar. What Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders was that **He** was the stone who they (the builders) were about to reject. But their rejection of Him as Messiah did not deter God's plan, for Jesus would become the cornerstone of real faith for past and future generations.

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

1. The landowner represents God the Father. The landowner made a huge investment in the vineyard and then entrusted it to the vinegrowers. In the same way, God invests in people and then entrusts His ministry to them for the purposes of bearing fruit.

2. The vineyard represents Israel. It contained a tower and walls which were protective measures taken by the landowner to preserve his valuable investment in the vineyard.

3. The vinegrowers represent the Jewish religious leaders.

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

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

5. The "other tenants" are the future church that would consist primarily of the Gentiles in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies.

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

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

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

God, in His grace provided one final warning to the Jewish leaders in verse 44. "And he who falls on

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the Prophet Ezekiel in which we learn about the seriousness of sin. Then we move to the second reading with a continuation of the study in the Book of Philippians. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. We provided a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Ezekiel in a previous edition of Mass Notes. The context of the reading is the Lord's teaching on the seriousness of sin. "The soul who sins shall die," (v. 4d) the text says in the opening section of this chapter. Specifically, God taught on the seriousness of idolatry (v. 6), covetousness (v. 6), robbing the poor (v. 7), depriving the hungry from food and the poor from adequate clothing (v. 7), and charging interest on loans to a fellow Jew (v. 8). Obedience to God's Laws flows from an obedient heart, one that has been changed through embracing the mystery of God's love. Saint Paul said, "[F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). God's gift is eternal life but it comes only through faith in Him. In the Old Testament times, this meant trusting in what they knew about God and looking forward to their Messiah Jesus' future conquering of sin forever. In a sense, God had already provided salvation because Jesus is called the Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world, although that event was yet future (Revelation 13:8). In a similar way, the Kingdom of Heaven is an already, not yet proposition. In our day, we receive eternal life by trusting in what we know about God and looking back to what Jesus did for us on the cross.

A summary of this section is given in the verses that immediately proceed the reading:

"Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord GOD, "rather than that he

should turn from his ways and live? 24 But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die." (Ezekiel 18:23-24)

With this context in mind let's proceed with the reading.

First Reading:

25 "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? 26 When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. 27 Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. 28 Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die." (Ezekiel 18:25-28)

The reading is a study in contrasts, first, that of a wicked man that repented of his sin, and second, one that continued in his sin to the point of death. We see in verse 26 that habitual sin can have serious consequences, even to the point of death. Let's back up and look more closely at the difference between someone whose heart has been renewed by God and the person who remains spiritually dead. The Scripture reveals very clearly that there are two distinct classes of people, two different roads with only one of them leading to heaven. Jesus called them the narrow road and the broad road (Matthew 7:13-14, below). The first class is those whose sins are forgiven and who are spiritually alive, born from above (John 3:3). Ezekiel said something about this earlier in this chapter, "All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live" (Ezekiel 18:22). The second class is those whose soul is spiritually dead and whose sin will be held against them for an eternity after they die. This is a crucial point especially since most people in the world are unknowingly on the broad road. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). If a person never truly experiences and trusts in God's saving grace through faith in Jesus then their soul remains spiritually dead during their life on earth. When they die physically, their already dead soul enters the abode of the dead and at some future point they will experience a second death. This fearsome event is enough to scare anyone and is described in the Book of Revelation. "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). "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).

Let's go back to the reading. In verse 27 God said, "when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life." Is God saying that a person earns their way to heaven by their good works? No, the whole of Scripture

is clear that good works flow out of a heart that has been regenerated by God. Yes, nonbelievers can do good works, but their motivation is different from a child of the kingdom. Even though they are spiritually dead, they are still human beings created in the image of God. Whatever they do flows out of their existence as an image bearer of God, but their deeds do not result in them obtaining eternal life. The Scripture shows that works that are pleasing to God flow from a heart that is submitted to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said this plainly in John 6:29. When people asked what they should do to fulfill the works that God requires, Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: To believe in the one He has sent."

Ezekiel's message is reminiscent of an event that occurred in the Book of Acts with a couple named Ananias and Sapphira that showed the deadly result of sin in the rapidly growing, early church. The story best tells itself as follows below.

1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? 4 "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." 10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (Acts 5:1-11)

While not every sin is met with such immediate consequences, we see that sin is a serious matter and believers are called to holiness. As we move onto the second reading, we will see Saint Paul's call to holy living by being unselfish and walking in unity to accomplish God's purposes. The context is that Paul had wrestled with a hypothetical argument whether it was better for him to continue ministering amidst his struggles in prison or go to heaven to be with the Lord. His conclusion was that it was better for the Philippians if he stayed (Philippians 1:24), and that he was confident that he would indeed continue (v. 25). Next, Paul admonished the Philippians to walk in a unified way worthy of Jesus Christ (v. 27). He warned them that they may have to suffer for Jesus' sake (v. 29).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

All of this leads to the second reading for today which opens with the adverb "therefore." Therefore, with these previous things in mind, let's read the text. [Note: Two versions of the reading were

provided, we are using the shorter one because we covered the other verses in a previous week.]

Second Reading:

1 Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, (Philippians 2:1-5)

Paul is making a hypothetical and rhetorical argument by using four "ifs" in the first verse, the idea is "if then." It is rhetorical because the "if" is not really in question, it is assumed. So they "if" could be read as "because." Because there is 1. Encouragement in Christ, 2. Consolation of love, 3. Fellowship of the Spirit, and 4. Affection and compassion then do the following things. First, be unified for God's purpose (v.2). Second, act unselfishly and humbly (v. 4). Finally, as a means of accomplishing unselfish and humble behavior worthy of Jesus Christ, live with the mindset of regarding other's needs as more important than your own (v. 4). An attribute of a person that has been made spiritually alive by faith in God is that they look out for "the interests of others" (v. 4). The high ideals of this passage can only be lived out if we are in Christ. He is the One who empowers us to let go of selfishness and pride so that we can embrace the new life of humility that Christ lived and gives us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew Chapter 21. The context is just after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Matthew 20:7-8), the same way a king would enter a city. Next, Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple in order to purify it (v. 12), healed people (v. 14), and twice contended with the chief priests and scribes in the temple (vv. 15-16, vv. 23-27). An interesting thing happened between Jesus' two visits there. As Jesus was walking by a certain fig tree he saw that it was not bearing fruit so he said to it, "Let no fruit grow in you ever again" (v. 19c). Afterwards Matthew recorded, "And at once the fig tree withered" (v. 19d). The disciples, in response to what Jesus did to the tree said, "[H]ow did the fig tree wither all at once?" (v. 20c). Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen. And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (vv. 21-22). Clearly Jesus performed the "miracle" of the killing of the fig tree so that the religious leaders would either see it or hear about it. He was emphasizing the importance of faith that leads to good works. With this context in mind let's read the Gospel passage that Jesus directed squarely at the "chief priests and elders of the people (v. 23a) who had confronted Him while He was teaching.

Gospel Reading:

28 But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work

today in the vineyard.' 29 "And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he regretted it and went. 30 The man came to the second and said the same thing; and he answered, 'I will, sir'; but he did not go. 31 Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you. 32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him; but the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him; and you, seeing this, did not even feel remorse afterward so as to believe him." (Matthew 21:28-32)

Jesus said that there are two groups of people, those who believe and do the work of the Father, and those who don't believe and don't accomplish the Father's work. Jesus told them that they did not follow John the Baptist's calling to repent and believe, as did the first son in the story.

This is a story of contrasts between two sons. First, the sons have different degrees of fruitfulness in accomplishing the works of their father. The first one bears fruit and the other one does not, like the fig tree in Jesus' previous story. Truly, both sons at first refused to work when directed to do so by their father. However, the first son repented and accomplished the will of his father. One son is a child of their Father God; the other son is shown through his works to be a child of a different father. Jesus explained this paternal relationship while addressing the Pharisees in John's Gospel. He told them, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Though these were harsh words, Jesus was telling them the truth in order for them to have an opportunity to repent of their sin and turn to Him in faith.

As was explained earlier, there are two roads. Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow road is the one on which the godly son who repented of his sin traveled. The broad road is the one on which the ungodly son made his journey.

Finally, there are two ultimate destinations as well. Jesus said earlier in Matthew's Gospel, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). Jesus points out that you can have the right theology and pay lip service, but that is not the criteria for being in the kingdom of heaven. The destination is heaven for the son that repents and becomes a child of Father God, and hell for the son that does not repent and turn to do the will of the Father. Proverbs 14 says, "There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death" (v. 12). This is the broad road, and a person doesn't realize that they are on this pathway until they are confronted with the reality of their sin in light of the Holy Scriptures. God in His grace desires for everyone to repent of their sin and believe in Him for eternal life (2 Peter 3:9).

Let's summarize what we have studied so far this week. As we saw in the first reading, God places a high value upon repentance. In that reading, we saw the contrast between a wicked man that

repented and another that continued in their sin to the point of death. In the second reading, we also saw a study of contrasts, that of a humble believer that looked out for the interests of others and an implied person that did not. In the Gospel lesson, we saw a contrast between two sons, one a child of God and the other a child of the world. There were two roads and ultimately two final destinations.

I had an encounter at a funeral that helps to illustrate the two paths about which the Scriptures speak. I attended a funeral for a dear Christian woman and ran into a friend of mine from high school at the luncheon afterwards. I remembered that I had previously shared with her the plan of salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. As we talked she joyfully told me how she had recently acquired some sort of floating cooler gizmo for her pool so that she didn't have to leave the pool in order to get a new drink. As she was telling me the story I noticed that something clicked in her mind at which point she suddenly began backtracking and downplaying the importance of this new gadget. Even though I never objected to what she was saying I noticed that her conscience seemed to speak to her. I wrapped up my short visit at her table and wished her well as I left.

People everywhere are on one of two paths; one group knows their path and the other ones follow where the world leads them. The people who are on the narrow path through faith in Jesus Christ exude God's holiness as they go about living their lives. As we saw in my illustration, this has a certain repelling effect to the ones unknowingly on the other road. As believers, we can rejoice in the fact that our ultimate destination is heaven, even if we have to make the hard choices associated with walking along the narrow road. The Scripture is clear that God is "a rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Those people who honestly seek God **will** find Him. This is clear from a principle found in Jeremiah 29:13.

May you continue to seek God as you journey this week.

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we talked about two sons, one a child of God and the other a child of the world. Read the following passages and then answer the questions that follow.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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Acts 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1 John 5:13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Romans 10:9-10 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

A. What does God say about whether or not we are a sinner, regardless if we have faith in Jesus Christ?

B. What does God tell us about how we can be sure that we are on the narrow road since the Scripture said that you are a sinner?

2. Each of the passages help to create a robust picture of true faith. True faith expresses itself in following the will of God out of a repented heart. Spend some time with the Lord asking Him if there are any packets of resistance in your heart about which you need to repent and turn towards God.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-24-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Isaiah in which God provides an evangelical calling to everyone in the world. Then we continue to study in Philippians by backing up to Chapter 1. Finally, we move to the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew on the parable of the workers in the vineyard in which we see a picture of God's marvelous grace.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The context is the section where God was telling of His free offer of salvation to everyone, not just the Jews to whom Isaiah was writing. God said, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isaiah 55:1). God was clear that His calling was for everyone as we see in verse 5. "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, And a nation which knows you not will run to you, Because of the LORD your God, even the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you." As you read, keep in mind this universal offer of salvation that God made to the world some seven hundred years before Jesus was born.

First Reading:

6 Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him, And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. 8 "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)

The message is a general evangelistic calling that also gives us some insights into the nature of God. First, God is compassionate and forgiving of sin even though He is far above people in His ways and thoughts. Second, God calls everyone to repent of his or her sin and place their trust in Him. Third, people must not wait to place their faith in God as it may easily become too late when they become hardened by sin and the opportunity for them to believe passes. Finally, God reminds us that His ways are far above our own. In context, this means that the way that God brings sinners to repent of their sin and place their trust in Him is beyond our understanding, it is a mystery of God (John 3:8). This is what we discussed a few weeks ago when we studied Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John Chapter 3.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Philippians. Paul and Timothy (Philippians 1:1) opened the letter by proclaiming to the believers in Philippi their confidence in God's work in their lives and in the lives of all believers. They said, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (v. 6). Paul then went on to testify how God had been working in his life in spite of and even through the hardships that he had endured in prison (Philippians 1:12-13). Note that we included all of the verses from 20 – 27 including the ones omitted from the reading in the lectionary.

Second Reading:

20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. 27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel . . . (Philippians 1:20-27)

Paul spoke about the inner conflict that he was having on whether it was more important for him to stay in the world to minister there or to join God in heaven, although the choice would of course be up to God. Paul said that regardless of what happened to him, he realized his life found meaning only when it was connected to the purpose of exalting God, "for to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21). Paul undoubtedly suffered greatly in prison. Perhaps during the time he wrote these passages he was experiencing something very difficult. In spite of his hardship, Paul said that his choice was to remain doing his work (v.25). Next, he went on to state his overarching theme of the Book of Philippians, the call to become more Christ like. He said, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v. 27a). Throughout this Epistle Paul urged the believers to become

more and more like Christ in their behaviors and attitudes. Paul closed this section with a call for unity among the believers in the Philippian church (v. 26). He told the Philippian believers to "[stand] firm in **one** spirit, with **one** mind striving **together** for the faith of the gospel (v. 27b-c, emphasis added). This too was a call for Christlikeness as Jesus also prayed for unity in the church (John 17:21).

When we stand back and look at what Paul said, which of us would have the strength to say what Paul did while he was sitting in prison? In spite of his circumstances, Paul continued to spread the Gospel, even when his life was in turmoil. Paul helps us to see that everything doesn't have to be perfect in our lives for us to minister to others and share the Gospel.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is a parable from the Gospel of Saint Matthew. The context is that Jesus was talking to the crowds that were following him in the region of Perea, known as "Galilee beyond the Jordan" (Matthew 19:1). Some Pharisees also came to "test" Jesus by asking him a question about the legality of divorce (v. 3). Next, Jesus had a conversation with a rich, young ruler during which Jesus made the statement, "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 24). The text says His disciples were "astonished" and asked Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" (v. 25). Jesus' answer helps to shed some light into the mystery on how anyone comes to believe in God. He said, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). With this introduction in mind let's read the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

Gospel Reading:

1 For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; 4 and to those he said, "You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you." And so they went. 5 Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing. 6 And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day long?" 7 They said to him, "Because no one hired us." He said to them, "You go into the vineyard too." 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first." 9 When those hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. 10 When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, 12 saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day." 13 But he answered and said to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. 15 Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" 16 So the last shall be first, and the first last. (Matthew

20:1-16)

Many people who live in large cities such as Los Angeles know how to hire workers by going to their local building supply store in the morning and selecting from among the men that gather there to find work each day. This was a common practice in Jesus' day. The workers would gather in the marketplace with hopes of being hired for the rate or one denarius, which was a typical day's wage with the day lasting from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm.

In this story about God's value system in the Kingdom of Heaven, the workers were all hired at different times, but in the end were given the same wage. Those who worked a full day were given the agreed upon wage for the day. Those who worked less than a full day didn't know what they would receive, but they figured it would be better than nothing. How surprised they all were when the last workers received the same wage as the first workers. The landowner provided for them all, even though their effort was different.

Jesus' point is clear: No matter when a person comes to be part of God's work in the world, God provides generously to all. The Jews thought that since they were God's chosen people since the time of Abraham, they should receive special "compensation" for their labor. After all, they reasoned, they had borne the brunt of the labor in the heat of the day. Why should they be lumped in with all the death-bed conversions and get the same eternal reward as the Gentiles? What incentive would there be to surrender your life early and follow God? Wouldn't God's radical grace encourage a sense of licentiousness and living for oneself?

Jesus' rationale, here, is interesting. We surrender our lives because the landowner is generous (we can trust Him) and it's actually good to be in His presence for as long as possible. The ones who had been away from the landowner for much of the day had suffered enough. While those who come to Christ late in life are given the same eternal destiny as those who committed their lives to Christ early on, Jesus reminds them that the reward of being with God in His presence is generous already. And those who labor for the Lord are not really "sacrificing" anything—they have the benefit of a longer history with the landowner. Can we not trust Him and be thankful that He provides for all who put their faith in Christ: Jew or Gentile, life-long Christian or death-bed conversion?

Let's highlight some of the key insights this parable implies about the nature of God. First, God is persistent in calling people to Himself. The landowner went out no less than five different times to call workers including early in the morning (v. 1), about the third hour (v. 2), about the sixth hour and ninth hours (v. 5), and finally about the eleventh hour (v. 6). Second, God is very generous. The landowner gave the exact same wage to those that had started working much later in the day. Man, who was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), has a strong sense of judgment that was violated when all of the workers received the same wage regardless of how many hours they worked that day. The wages that the landholder paid to the workers that worked less than a full day is what we call "grace," which means unmerited favor. Third, God is sovereign (v. 15). The landowner said, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?" (v. 15a). Finally, God calls the workers His friend (v. 13), though we see that this is conditional upon believing. Jesus said in John's

Gospel, "You are My friends if you do what I command you" (John 15:14).

In summary, God is persistent in calling people to Him, is generous, is sovereign, and calls believers His friend. Although His ways are above understanding, He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures. It is there that we discover that He is full of grace and patient in calling sinners to repent and believe in Him. Saint Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). The parable of the workers in the vineyard clearly illustrates the grace that God provides in calling each person in the world to trust in the finished work of His Son Jesus Christ. As we saw in the first reading, God calls everyone to believe in Him. And we saw in the second reading that God calls us to minister and spread the Good News even when our circumstances aren't perfect. Let us worship our wonderful, generous, persistent God with our whole lives.

Reflection Questions

1. A strong theme in this week's reading was on God's abundant grace which is able to forgive all of our sin. If you have received God's saving grace, what sins are you still trying to "pay" for by your good works? How might the truth of God's compassion and abundant pardon (Isaiah 55:7) and His provision of grace (from the parable of the generous landowner) help you to embrace the fact that you don't have to pay for your sins?

2. Another strong message in the reading was the surrender that happens in us when we realize who God is. Each of the readings called for life-change to happen as a result of realizing:

> God's ways are not our ways
>
> To live is Christ
>
> The last shall be first, and the first last

Where do you need to integrate these realities into your own life, surrendering to our trustworthy and generous God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-17-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn from Paul in dealing with Christians holding beliefs that differ from our own. Then we learn much about forgiveness in the Gospel lesson through the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

The first reading is from the Apocrypha and won't be covered in Mass Notes today. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from Romans 14 follows a section in which Paul teaches about the godly calling to show grace to others with differing beliefs related to Christian practices such as the honoring of a holy day or a person's choice to abstain from meat. Paul said, "He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God" (Romans 14:6).

Second Reading:

Romans 14:7-9 NAS95 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are

the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Paul continued his explanation by providing the reason why we as Christians should show grace to others with differing practices driven by their beliefs in such debatable matters as what we eat or when we worship. As fellow believers holding diverging views on the negotiable topics we are to remember that our souls and wholly given over to the Lord. When we place our trust in the Lord he came into us and regenerated our previously dead souls. Jesus spoke about this reality in the Gospel of John when He emphasized the reality of the spiritual birth with Nicodemus. Jesus said that "you must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). As believers in the Lord Jesus, ones who testify with our voices that God has raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9), our hearts are spiritually born again. As such, God has placed a seal upon us dedicating us to Himself. That is the whole reason that God has called us to Himself (Acts 2:39). The reading closes with, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (v. 9). Jesus' rulership is over both the living and the dead, in the sense that He is Lord over everyone including believers who are alive, believers who have died, and unbelievers both living (but spiritually dead) and dead (as those who suffer the second death).

Paul's message serves as a reminder to us about recognizing in serving God as our ultimate goal instead of debating about relatively frivolous issues. Does one choose to go to church on a Saturday night instead of Sunday morning? Does one choose not to eat meat on Friday? Let us not disparage others because of their beliefs but let us instead remember through these debates that our reason for existing is to serve the Lord. It is hard to argue with someone about such issues while serving the Lord with our whole heart. People are dying every day without the knowledge of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus who gave Himself for their sins. Let's get on with fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) making disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Holy Trinity, and teaching them to obey all that the Scriptures teach.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Matthew continues from last week in the section of Jesus' final, detailed teachings to His disciples before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem before He gave His life for the payment of our sin debt. Last week's reading covered Jesus' teaching on church discipline including the general procedure one Christian "brother" is to use in confronting another. Here the term "brother" means a fellow believer. This week's reading continues Jesus' teaching about the godly behaviors of a Christian in forgiving others.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 18:21-35 NAS95 21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. 23 For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he had begun to settle

them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 25 But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. 26 So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' 27 And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' 29 So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' 30 But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. 31 So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. 32 Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' 34 And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. 35 My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Peter asked Jesus a question about how often he should forgive another believer (brother, v. 21). Should I, Peter asked, forgive him even "up to seven times?" (v. 21c). Jesus answered him with a call to radical forgiveness, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven" (v. 23). Jesus then provided a parable in order to illustrate this high standard of forgiveness. We know that it is a parable because He introduces it by saying "For this reason the kingdom of heaven **may be compared to**" (v. 23, emphasis added).

The parable of the unforgiving servant begins with a certain servant who owed the king a sum that was impossible to repay, "ten thousand talents" (v. 24b). In biblical times, a talent amounted to about 20 years of wages for an average worker, bringing the debt to some 200,000 years of work. In our day we would say that the servant owed the king something like a zillion dollars, a sum which would clearly be impossible for anyone to repay not the least of which a lowly servant. Next, through an act of unbelievable grace, and clearly foreshadowing God the Father's forgiveness of us through faith in Jesus, the servant humbly fell upon his knees and begged for mercy (v. 26). Upon seeing the servant's heart, the king felt compassion and completely forgave his servant of the debt that he could never repay. The king provided a means for forgiveness knowing that the repayment of the debt was impossible by the man's works. As the story continues, we should expect the servant to leave the judgment hall with a sense of great peace and generosity, but that is not what happened.

As the servant left the encounter with the king-judge, he went out and found a fellow slaved who owed him a substantial sum, equivalent to about one hundred days wages (one denarii was about one day's wage). In contrast to the "zillion dollars" the first servant had owed to the king this was a relatively insignificant amount. Additionally, since this first servant's debts would have most likely included the sum total of all that was owed to him by all of the other servants who had made borrowed from him, in all probability all of the debts had been erased. Though we have to be careful not to make a parable walk on all fours and instead to seek the central principle our Lord is getting at, all the members of this "loan pyramid" we will call it were forgiven, including the first servant

and all of the servants who owed money to him. Therefore, the act of the first servant in asking for repayment of the 100 denarii debt was pure greed. This calls into question the honesty of the servants "impassioned plea" before the king in the first place. As a result of his greed and unrepentant heart, the king ordered the debts of the servant reinstated, something which was impossible for him to ever repay.

Jesus parable closes with the central point of Jesus teaching, something which is worthy of repeating here and every day that we live. "My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (v. 35). Lord, help us, without you we are powerless.

Jesus' teaching in the parable gets at some very important truths. First, unbelievers are separated from God the Father by a debt that they can never repay, even in 200,000 years or working to earn their salvation. The Scripture make it clear that nobody can earn their way into heaven, regardless of how "good" they are and how hard they work. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). God's standard of righteousness in order to enter heaven is perfection. Perfection cannot be granted by our doing of good works but rather by faith in Jesus' finished work on the cross. The scripture says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Second, as believers we are called to forgive other believers, seventy times seven times, that is a whole lot! However, this principle of forgiveness also extends beyond believers, as is clear from the whole canon of Scripture. We as believers are to forgive others regardless of their spiritual condition. God has placed upon believers the unique ability to exercise forgiveness, something which the lost world has a hard time understanding. We have to exercise a degree of common sense here as repeated, unrepentant attacks against us may warrant the separation of ourselves from these circumstances. In other cases, such as the treatment of believers by nonbelievers in certain parts of the world (and even in increasing frequency in the western world) we should expect continuing mistreatment.

Finally, the principle that we learned about showing grace to others holding differing spiritual beliefs brings with it a need to forgive, in an ongoing manner, those who hold these views. Unless God changes their hearts, we must recognize that their beliefs will likely never change. No matter how much this offends us we must turn our hearts to the Higher Judge, the King before whom we will stand to receive rewards for the things that we did with the gifts that He gave us during our lifetimes.

When we talk to others we can find many stories of forgiveness, or the lack thereof. I think of someone I know whose daughter was abused by a man. She told me that she would never forgive that man. I think that in her mind the act of not forgiving him provided her with a certain sense of power and control over the abuser of her daughter. This brings me to a much deeper story about personal forgiveness, one that I have chronicled at length in my personal journey to finding true

faith in God and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It was my struggle to understand and later to forgive someone who greatly harmed me during my childhood years that led me to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ.

The bottom line is this. Because God has forgiven us from the payment of an impossibly huge debt brought about by our sin, we should likewise forgive others.

If you have a testimony about forgiveness please share it with us on the place provided for that purpose on the web site.

Reflection Questions

1. Think long and hard about this question, and pray about it before you answer. Who is someone for which you have heretofore refused to forgive? In what ways has your unforgiveness given you a sense of power over them? In light of what you learned today, will you grant forgiveness to the person that harmed you?

2. When was a time when you encountered another Christian who held different beliefs than your own. How do you classify this difference in belief according to a major or minor difference? If the difference was one that upon further reflection you could classify as something rather minor, how does today's second reading help you to place this in perspective? What if the difference was more major, say concerning whether Jesus really did rise from the dead. Is there any principle that arises from the reading that could help you to relate with a person holding this belief? How does that principle relate to your calling to fulfill the Great Commission?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-10-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to Ezekiel from the first reading. Then move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and conclude with Matthew 18 where we discuss the procedure given to us from God regarding the resolution of disputes between believers. We would like to think that we would never need this but conflict is one inevitable consequence of the fall of mankind (Genesis 3).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. He was an animated prophet who sometimes acted out the message that God gave him in very peculiar ways. For example one time he dug a hole in the side of his house (Ezekiel 12), cooked his food using human waste for fuel (Ez 4:9), and laid on his right side for 390 days and then 40 days more only on his left! Ezekiel was among about ten thousand in the second group of Jews that were carried off to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar's invading forces in 597 BC. He ministered after the tragic death of godly King Josiah in 609 who had enacted broad reforms in Judah. However, the people were so entrenched in their idolatry that they quickly returned to their tragic way of living after the king's death at the hands of the Egyptian army. Ezekiel's message, like many, if not most of the prophets, is easier to understand after it has been fulfilled versus interpreting it in the predictive sense. For example, chapter 38 of his book contains a frightful prophecy about something that will come upon Israel at some future date. We know from the description of the events in that section that nothing like this has ever come upon them up until now, but interpreting Ezekiel's message is extremely difficult without the benefit of hindsight. Such was the case even for Jesus's own disciples in interpreting relatively straightforward messages from Isaiah regarding the Lord Jesus himself. Interestingly enough, the meaning of today's reading is very clear.

The context of today's reading is clearly illustrated in the first six verses that precede it:

1 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 "Son of man, speak to the sons of your people and say to them, 'If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman, 3 and he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows on the trumpet and warns the people, 4 then he who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and a sword comes and takes him away, his blood will be on his own head. 5 He heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning; his blood will be on himself. But had he taken warning, he would have delivered his life. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet and the people are not warned, and a sword comes and takes a person from them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require from the watchman's hand.'" (Ezekiel 33:1-6)

Ezekiel provided an illustration of the responsibility for the people to warn each other regarding their sin by relating it to the necessity of a person appointed in a military position to warn his superiors of an approaching army. It is common sense that a person appointed as a military guard would quickly report an approaching army, yet the people didn't warn each other about the sin that was approaching and even inside of their own souls.

With this context in mind let's continue reading the text of the first reading.

First Reading:

7 Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. 9 But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life.(Ezekiel 33:7-9)

Part of Ezekiel's role as a prophet was to vindicate the theocratic kingdom rule that God had ordained through the Law. This message was very specifically directed towards Ezekiel. Notice that the word "you" (and your) appeared no less than seven times in reference to Ezekiel. Verse one provided a good summary of the big idea of the reading. "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth and give them warning from Me." This message was not, as some have said, in the context of evangelism. This admonition was made specifically to the Prophet Ezekiel in the context of warning his fellow Israelites about God's strong admonition for them to live according to the terms of their covenant. Ezekiel's role was to call them back to their covenant relationship with God. Not only was Ezekiel a watchman for the house of Israel, but all of the prophets, including the New Testament prophet John the Baptist acted in that role.

We can draw a theological principle from the text. Sometimes love is tough, we don't always want to hear what the authorities are saying when we are stepping out of line with God's plan for our lives.

God in His kindness warns us when we are moving into destructive ways, but we are responsible to heed the warning. God warns us not only through His Word in the Bible but also through other people who embrace and then speak the truth of His Word. He also warns us through allowing certain difficult circumstances to intervene. Sometimes our first instinct is to attack the person that brought us the information about which we felt convicted. Later when we study the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus provided a procedure for dealing with conflicts between believers.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is just after Paul finished explaining his compelling desire for all of Israel to come to faith in the Lord Jesus including those before his time (Romans 9), those during his time (Romans 10), and those that will come after him (Romans 11). Next in Chapter 12, he explained how Christians were called to live transformed lives and present their bodies as living sacrifices. This is in contrast to what the author of Hebrews said about the Jewish Law, "Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (Hebrews 10:11) since Jesus offered his body not as a victim but willingly on the cross once for all (Hebrews 10:10).

The reading today is from Chapter 13 which opens with an admonition for believers in the Lord Jesus to submit to their government authorities. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). He continued:

Second Reading:

Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. 5 Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7 Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Romans 13:2-7)

It's important to remember that God commands us to obey our government authorities. As we will see in the reading he puts this admonition on the same level as our need to obey the Commandments. With this context in mind let's proceed with the second reading.

8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Paul quoted from the Old Testament and provided the seventh, sixth, eighth, and ninth commandments (Exodus 20:13-17). Paul also included Jesus' statement from Mark 12:31 that summed up the last five commandments. Christians are called to be careful stewards of their resources and to obey the commandments given by Him and which God has already placed on their hearts (Romans 2:15). As you can see, the heart of what God wants for us is to love one another. We fulfill this "law" by treating others with dignity and respect, the way we ourselves would want to be treated. Instead of trying to take advantage of people for our own gain, we should "owe" them nothing except love. What an amazing contrast Christians would be if we lived according to this passage.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The context was just after the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:2) when Jesus began to teach the disciples about God's kingdom values. The disciples asked who was the greatest in the kingdom. They evidently were alluding to the argument recording in Luke regarding who of **them** was the greatest (Luke 22:24). Jesus settled the matter by setting a child before Himself and saying, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Jesus continued to teach them that the kingdom of heaven lies in sharp contrast to the kingdom of this world.

Gospel Reading:

15 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst." (Matthew 18:15-20)

Today's Gospel lesson can be applied in two contexts, first for the resolution of an issue between two Christians (whether or not they attend the same church), and second, as a procedure set forth by God for handling issues related to church discipline. The process for resolving either type of dispute is similar. In the reading, Jesus provided a four-step process for resolving conflict. First, Jesus taught that the offended person should talk to the offender privately, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother (v. 15)." The Greek word translated "show him his fault" is elegchō, which in this context might better read, "to convince and turn them away from their sin." In Galatians, Paul directed that this must be done "in a spirit of gentleness, each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Second, Jesus stated that if the private meeting did not result in repentance and satisfaction, the offender was to be approached by a small group, "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with

you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED" (Matt 18:16). The second meeting provided the offender with another opportunity to repent, albeit more forceful than a private meeting. Paul affirmed this doctrine as applicable to the church: "Reject a factious man after a first and second warning" (Titus 3:10).

The third step that Jesus outlined in Matthew was a "public corrective summons." In this announcement Jesus said, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church (ekklesia in the original)" (Matt 18:17a). The word ekklēsia means, "a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation.

The fourth and final step that Jesus outlined regarding corrective discipline in the Jewish assembly was a "public corrective exclusion." Jesus continued his discourse in verse 17 and said, "and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (v. 17b).

Should this four-step process outlined by Jesus for correction within the Jewish assembly be utilized in the church at large? Yes. It would seem that Jesus intended this four-step process for all believers. In Matthew 18:17 this is the second and last occurrence of the word "church" in the gospels. It is used in a different sense here from that in Matthew 16:18. In the earlier occurrence it has reference to the body of Christ composed of those who are baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). Here it speaks of the local assembly, a body of believers gathered together as a fellowship. Both times the Lord uses the term He is anticipating in the future when the church age would begin after His resurrection from the dead. Second, Paul evidently believed that Jesus' teaching applied to the church since he provided similar advice. In 2 Thess 3:6 and 1 Corin 5:5, Paul said, "deliver such a one to Satan," which is very similar to Jesus' teaching in the fourth step in Matthew 18:17b. In 1 Tim 5:20, Paul's advice was very similar to Jesus' third step (Matt 18:17a), "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Paul's advice in 2 Thess 3:15b to "admonish him as a brother" was very similar to Jesus' first step of restoration with a sinning brother in Matt 18:15. Paul in describing the process of discipline against an elder used very similar language to Jesus in 1 Tim 5:19-20. It is evident from the biblical evidence that Paul and the apostles relied upon Jesus' teaching on discipline within the Jewish assembly, and that this teaching was relevant to the yet to exist church.

What does this mean for our lives? First, the goal of church discipline is restoration as well as the secondary purpose of restraining sin in the church. Paul said, "(W)ith gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will." Church discipline was also for the purpose of restraining sin, as is evident in 1 Timothy, "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning" (5:20). The same theme is evident in the narrative of Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5 with the conclusion of the account by Luke, "And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things" (v. 11).

Second, Paul and Peter made it clear that a secondary purpose of church discipline was to preserve

the Christ-like reputation of the church among the gentiles. Paul spoke to the Philippians, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world" (2:14-15). Peter made a similar statement in 1 Peter 2:12.

Finally, an additional insight from the Epistles is that Paul intended church discipline to keep false teachings from the church. In Galatians 5:7-9 Paul stated the principle that a little bit of sin in the church spoiled the whole assembly. In 2 Thessalonians Paul stated the principle explicitly, "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (3:6). A final insight offered in the Epistles is the restorative goal of church discipline. In 2 Timothy, Paul stated, "with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (2:25-26). The insights from the Acts and Epistles help to clarify both the process and purposes of church discipline.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you handle conflict? What steps of this four-step process could you begin to practice this week?

2. When Christians live under God's kingdom values, our lives should look very different from those who are still ruled by worldly values. This week's Scripture focused on the following themes. Which of these do you already practice? Which do you want to see increased in your life? Use this to guide your prayer life with God this week:

A. Because God tells the truth and warns humans of impending danger connected to sin, we likewise are called to tell the truth and warns others. We saw this in the first reading from Ezekiel.

B. Because God loves us, we too ought to love others. Instead of exploiting people or moving toward them in selfish ways, we move toward them in love. We saw this in the second reading from Romans.

C. Because God's heart is one of restoration, we can become peacemakers in the midst of conflict and sin.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 9-3-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a comprehensive introduction to the Prophet Jeremiah and a reading from this great prophet of God in whom we find many similarities to Peter and Paul. Then move to the second reading from Saint Paul from Romans 12 in which he warns about not being conformed to the world. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we see a certain circumstance in which Peter found himself conformed to a false belief taught by the world.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. Known as the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah was one of the most prolific prophetic writers in the Old Testament having written both the Book by his name as well as Lamentations. He began writing during the reign of godly King Josiah beginning in 627 BC and continued during the eventual destruction of Jerusalem in 586 by the Babylonians. A key verse that summarizes the situation in Israel during this time is found in the closing chapter of the Book. "For through the anger of the LORD this came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence. And Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 52:3)

God was angry with the people for a variety of reasons, but foremost among them was that they had

turned away from their worship of the One True God and instead worshiped dead idols. Female deities were frequent objects of worship in the Old Testament. For example, God said:

"Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me" (Jeremiah 7:17-18).

God was angry with them because they were baking cakes and offering cakes to the "queen of heaven," who was the female deity of their day. This goddess was likely someone associated with grace and blessing. The Scripture is clear that all grace flows through the Lord Jesus Christ alone. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God was clear that worship was to be given to Him alone. The Jews were commanded not only to forsake worship of foreign gods but also not to even **create** an image of any deity, be it of the True or God or any god. Interestingly enough, this law was binding upon them and all New Testament believers (see John 14:15, this goes beyond the Ten Commandments as in John 13:34). As well worshiping an image they were not to even **create** an image of even the True God and assign worship to it in any manner. God knew that when they built something to honor Him that they would fall into worship of the image and not God Himself. The Second Commandment given by God to Moses spelled this out very clearly to them:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:2-6)

If that were all that was going on then perhaps God would have relented in His judgment of them through allowing Babylon to overcome the nation and destroy Jerusalem. However, conditions in Israel were even worse than that as we see further on in Jeremiah Chapter 7:

30 "For the sons of Judah have done that which is evil in My sight," declares the LORD, "they have set their detestable things in the house which is called by My name, to defile it. 31 They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind" (Jeremiah 7:30-31).

Not only did they offer sacrifices in the temple to false gods, they even sacrificed their own children in a fire. This was the context of the first reading today. As you read, try to imagine the anguish that Jeremiah must have been experiencing because of the extreme misbehavior of God's chosen people.

First Reading:

7 O LORD, You have deceived me and I was deceived; You have overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; Everyone mocks me. 8 For each time I speak, I cry aloud; I proclaim violence and destruction, Because for me the word of the LORD has resulted In reproach and derision all day long. 9 But if I say, "I will not remember Him Or speak anymore in His name," Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, And I cannot endure it. (Jeremiah 20:7-9)

In the reading and in light of the context we see the passion of the Prophet Jeremiah in pleading with the Jewish people to repent of their sin and turn to the worship of the True God as prescribed in their Law. Jeremiah said that the people derided him in spite of the fact that what he was telling them was the truth and was for their own good (vv. 7-8). He said that it was impossible for him to contain within himself the words which the Lord God has given to him to proclaim. Later in the Gospel lesson we will see the similarity between Jeremiah and the Apostle Peter in his passion for God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading comes from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. In this passage, he is encouraging the believers to respond to God with their whole lives:.

Second Reading:

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

Paul begins his thought with the word "therefore." Whenever we see this word, we should ask: "what's the 'therefore' there for?" Paul gives some pretty heavy directions to the believers, but it is based in the reality of who God is, which he has spent the last 11 chapters talking about.

As you may recall from previous weeks, Paul was addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church at Rome. He just finished expounding on the mysteries of God, who in his kindness has grafted Gentiles into the true vine of faith. This is truly a wonderful chapter in salvation history, deliverance from God's wrath has been paid in full by Jesus Christ's death on the cross. That is the basis of the "therefore". So this is what Paul is saying: as a result of God's mercies, it is only fitting to respond to Him with our whole lives; body mind, and spirit.

Have you ever seen people who profess to be Christians, but only act like it when they are at church or around other Christians? Then you see them at work or at a gathering acting in ways that are contrary to the way of Christ. They may using foul language, mistreating a waitress, or even cheating in order to get ahead. This is problematic because it is inconsistent with the reality of God's mercy in their life. Paul says in this passage that Christianity is a wholistic endeavor. God is looking for true worship. We cannot compartmentalize our spirituality to one day a week or around certain

spiritual activities. All of life can be a spiritual endeavor if we give ourselves fully to God as a living sacrifice. God is worthy of our bodies being submitted to Him, that includes our behaviors, actions and what comes out of our mouths.

What are we sacrificing? We are sacrificing doing things according to the "flesh" which Paul likens to the worldly system that has infected every fiber of our being. The world's way operates according to doing what is right in our own eyes, without considering God and His ways. The world's way operates without God in the center. So Paul is urging his brothers (both Jew and Gentile) to not be squeezed into that dead end mold. Yes, it may feel like a sacrifice to put God at the center of your life, but it is what each person was designed for.

How do we get there? By the renewing of our mind. What does this mean? Our minds have been shaped by so many things: our family values, our cultural values, messages from the media, our experiences and how we have interpreted those experiences. Paul urges believers to be proactive about understanding what influences your perspective—and to exchange what has held you captive by lies for the freedom of the Truth. We know that the only reliable source of Truth is founded upon and consistent with the Bible. Jesus said "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). In context, He was pointing to Himself as the truth and to holding to His teaching as the only form of freedom from being captive to the lies of the enemy (satan). So the only real "sacrifice" in this passage of Romans is giving up the destructive lies in one's life and learning to live according to the Truth. That is why studying the Bible, hearing God's heart by biblical teachers and being around others who walk according to the Word of God is so important for our minds to be renewed. It may feel like we are swimming upstream at first, but God will slowly and surely renew our minds so that we will see that His will is good, pleasing and perfect. Paul urges his brothers and us, because he knows it a matter of life and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson let's and reflect upon what we learned from the first reading. Jeremiah's passion reminds us of one particular character in the New Testament. Whom jumps out at you as the one filled with passion for his people, one who sometime acted impulsively without regard for who those around him would respond? Cephas, whose name is translated as "Peter" (John 1:42), whose brother was the disciple Andrew, was just such as man. In his second Epistle, Peter spoke similar harsh words about the false teachers of his day:

1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 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, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord. 12 But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed, 13 suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, as they carouse with you, 14 having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children; 15 forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; 16 but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. 17 These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. 18 For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19 promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. 20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. 22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." (2 Peter 2:1-22)

I, like Peter, also have a passion for confronting false teaching. Some time ago a group of Jehovah's witnesses pulled up to my parent's house while I was visiting there one weekend. I knew how their operation worked, as only one of them got out of the car and the other two also recorded their "credit" for having made a household visit. I sensed in my spirit what was happening and I began to pray silently for God's guidance. As the man sat down at the picnic table outside I just happened to have a Bible ready along with a sheet of paper blank on at least one side. I drew three columns on the paper with a horizontal heading across each section to serve later as a title for each category. As we talked I began to fill in important details about the Person of Jesus Christ in each of the three columns. I filled out the columns like this and explained the biblical support for the first column.

_____	_____	_____
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by Jehovah
uncreated always existed	maker or all other things	maker of some things

God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

As we talked, the man began getting more agitated as he realized that his theological beliefs aligned with both the second **and** the third columns. I kept asking him, do you know anything about the religious cult about whom I am writing in that last column? The crowning blow came when I filled in titles for each of the categories:

Biblical Christianity	Jehovah Witness	Mormon
eternal	created by Jehovah	created by God
uncreated always existed and made all things	maker or all other things	maker of all things in partnership with God
God in the flesh	Michael the archangel	spirit brother of an angel called Lucifer

Suddenly the man stood up in a rage just at the exact time that my sister decided to stop by for a visit as she saw me sitting outside at the table. As I attempted to introduce my sister to him, the man screamed some obscenities at me and my sister and ran towards his car. I wonder what kind of call report he wrote down that day (follow this link to see their blank form)!

Many of us can relate to Saint Peter. Of all the disciples, Peter is the one with whom I most identify. Some of us are impulsive in our reactions and responses, especially in situations in which we feel the Lord Jesus has been disrespected. Peter like the Prophet Jeremiah, was a man of passion, the first of whom Jesus entrusted the "keys of the kingdom." Even Peter, the foremost of the disciples, was at least one time overcome by the forces of evil that raged especially violently during the period of Jesus' earthly ministry. Satan would stop at nothing to derail Jesus' ministry, even if he likely didn't understand all of the implications of Jesus' prediction of His own death. Matthew recorded the following incident which is the Gospel reading for today.

Gospel Reading:

21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. 22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." 23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS." (Matthew 16:21-27)

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first and too stock of his actions later. After having spent the better part of three years, he was obviously upset that anyone would harm Jesus, especially the chief priests and scribes. He was clearly the leader of the group of twelve disciples and the first one and a representative of all twelve to whom were later given the "keys of the kingdom," meaning that He entrusted them with the dispersion of the Gospel message to the world. His main role was as a witness to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Sometimes called the "first among equals," he played a leading role in the early church as can be seen in Acts Chapter 1 when he was the first to gather the ten remaining disciples in order to replace Judas Iscariot the traitor. Peter, whose heart was changed by the Holy Spirit, was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18). He was called a "pillar of the church" in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:9) and acted as the de facto spokesman of the disciples (see Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27, Mark 11:21, etc.). Peter's modus operando may have been something that those of us partial dyslexics can relate, "durry up and hoo something." Peter couldn't bear the thought of losing his best friend and ministry partner for whom he had dedicated his life the past several years. Peter, like Jeremiah and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when he was told that these nemeses would kill his Messiah!

Yes, the purposes of God had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter, who was overcome both with his passion and love of Jesus, was as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 23). The time of Jesus ministry was an era of extreme demonic activity. Almost a dozen times in the Gospels Jesus was confronted by a demon possessed person and cast it out of them (for example Matthew 9:33, Mark 7:26, Luke 4:33). Our enemy the devil seems to have a lot of capabilities, but we know for certain that Peter wasn't in any way "possessed by a demon." No, what happened in this incident was that Peter simply repeated a mantra that was implanted in the world by the father of the world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), Satan, the devil himself. This lie was the Messiah would come and set up his eternal kingdom without the need for anyone to deal with their sin, either in a personal or corporal sense for all of Israel. The people of the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) saw no need to humble themselves before God, repent of their sins, and allow God to give His life as the perfect, once for all sacrifice of sin forever (Hebrews 10:14). For a very brief instant Peter was conformed to this world, just as Paul warned about in the second reading from Romans.

What does this mean in our lives? First, how have we responded to God's prophetic word? Have we like Jeremiah taken the Word and given it to others to watch the works of God unfold in their lives? Second, have we taken the Word into our own hearts and allowed God to transform us in such a way as Paul stated in the second reading? Are we offering our bodies as living sacrifices, something with which Jeremiah, Peter, and Paul have firmly conformed? Finally, what lies is **our** culture telling us today? What lies would we, like Peter, repeat in an instant when suddenly confronted with something that went against the world's teachings? What would be our reaction when invited to the wedding of a gay friend, how would we respond to the questions of the deacon board about our action in response to this event? Is it acceptable to love the sinner but hate the sin? These are things which we must reason with in advance such that when the sudden circumstance arises we are as

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Saint Peter said, ready to give a response" (1 Peter 3:15).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Peter impulsively responded to Jesus' prophecy concerning His coming death, burial, and resurrection. Think back to a time when you found yourself in a situation in which your faith was challenged and you responded impulsively without thinking about all of the implications of your actions. In light of the Gospel reading, what could you learn from Peter and Jesus in terms of how to respond in the future?

2. Review the past few weeks of your life. In what ways have you been tempted to be conformed to the pattern of this world? What lie is behind the temptation? What truth can you hold onto to help you to be faithful to God in the midst of ongoing temptation? If you are not sure how to answer these questions, pray to God right now and ask Him to open your eyes to the deceptive nature of sin and help you to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-27-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah where we see and explain meanings of the phrase "the key of the house of David." Then we move to the second reading from Romans 11 where you will read many additional verses beyond what was published in the lectionary in order to understand the meaning of God's Word based on its context. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel message from Matthew 16 and study the meaning of a phrase similar to what we saw in the first reading, "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" in which Jesus emphasized the importance of Peter as the first among equals of the disciples.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Before we begin, I will briefly review the format and method of these weekly study notes. The format can be understood from the acronym A-B-C but starting from the "C" and working backwards: context, big idea, and application. First, we provide the full scriptural context of the text including verses that were omitted in the reading. We also provide the historical context along with the background and setting of the author. Second, we study the text in light of its historical context to determine the theological big idea. We develop this in light of a "Christological" focus, that is upon the redemptive message found throughout the Bible of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, whether in a future context as in the Old Testament or in a present or historical context as in the New Testament. We do not rely upon an allegorical interpretation but instead use the historical critical method and refer to the original languages and parallel passages whenever necessary. Finally, we provide several applications of the text for the present day Christian. Although there is usually only one main interpretation of the text, there are many possible applications. With these guiding principles in mind, let's move onto the first reading.

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The reading is a parenthesis in Chapter 22, meaning

that it was a pause or temporary transition from the main theme. The theme that Isaiah was describing in the chapter before this parenthesis was the future destruction of Jerusalem that we know came over 125 years later in 586 B.C. Isaiah wrote just prior to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by Assyria in 722 B.C. The context of the reading is that an evil man named Shebna, who was the secretary of the treasury under King Hezekiah, built for himself a royal tomb so that his name would be remembered after he was dead. Evidently, this Shebna was misappropriating funds (see 2 Kings 18:18, 19:2, and Isaiah 36:3, 37:2). This reading includes verses 15-18 and verses 24-25, in order for you to read the whole section of Scripture.

First Reading:

15 Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts, "Come, go to this steward, To Shebna, who is in charge of the royal household, 16 'What right do you have here, And whom do you have here, That you have hewn a tomb for yourself here, You who hew a tomb on the height, You who carve a resting place for yourself in the rock? 17 Behold, the LORD is about to hurl you headlong, O man. And He is about to grasp you firmly 18 And roll you tightly like a ball, To be cast into a vast country; There you will die And there your splendid chariots will be, You shame of your master's house.'

19 I will depose you from your office, And I will pull you down from your station. 20 Then it will come about in that day, That I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, 21 And I will clothe him with your tunic And tie your sash securely about him. I will entrust him with your authority, And he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, When he opens no one will shut, When he shuts no one will open. 23 "I will drive him like a peg in a firm place, And he will become a throne of glory to his father's house.

24 So they will hang on him all the glory of his father's house, offspring and issue, all the least of vessels, from bowls to all the jars. 25 "In that day," declares the LORD of hosts, "the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 22:15-25)

God was angry with ungodly Shebna and Isaiah said that he would be deposed (v. 19) and replaced by godly Eliakim the son of Hilkiah (v. 20). Shebna squandered resources in order to build a tomb to enthrone his name in history (v. 16). The focus of the reading is upon the great contrast between Eliakim, a type of Christ, and Shebna, a type of Antichrist, and by application (and prophesy) between Christ and the Antichrist. Remember that a type is when persons (or statements) in the Old Testament prefigure the person of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For example, the Prophet Jonah, who spent three days and nights in the belly of the great fish (Jonah 1:17) was a type of Christ, in the same way that Jesus spent three days and three nights in the belly of the earth (Matthew 12:40). Eliakim typified the Person of Jesus Christ (as we see in verses 21-24). Jesus, Isaiah prophesied, would "be entrusted with authority (v. 21), become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah" (v. 21), and possess the "key of the house of David on his shoulder" (v. 24).

Jesus quoted from this passage, as we will see later in the Gospel lesson when He addressed Peter after this important disciple had confessed Jesus as the Messiah. There is a parallel between the trusted servant Eliakim and Peter the disciple of Jesus who came along much later. Both Eliakim and Peter were trusted servants, the latter so much so that Jesus said he would build His church upon him along with the other ten trusted disciples. There are other parallels that exist to the New Testament. The phrase in verse 22 "the key of the house of David" is very similar to a phrase used in the Book of Revelation. Saint John, the author of the Book said, "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this" (Revelation 3:7). John said that Jesus was the One Who "is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens" (v. 7). Jesus alone holds the keys to the kingdom.

The closing of this section of text is marked by a view of the end time tribulation period in which the false Christ, the Antichrist typified by Isaiah as Shebna, will be taken down (v. 25, Revelation 19:19-20). Isaiah said that the Antichrist, "the peg driven in a firm place will give way; it will even break off and fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut off" (v. 25). We can trust that the true Jesus will overcome the false Christ but not until God has tolerated the hardness of almost the entire world's heart against believing in the Gospel message. Though God will speak the Good News to the world all at the same time through the voice of an angel (Revelation 14:6), precious few will believe. During the end time period God will call and redeem all of Israel (Romans 11:26).

Something that we can take away from the first reading includes God's eventual judgment of sin. Shebna, though he was rich and powerful, was not immune to God's judgment and the consequences of trusting in himself to make it through life. This is the essence of what it means to be "anti-Christ"—having a posture of self-reliance. In contrast, the Christ-follower is one who recognizes his or her own need for a Savior and invites Jesus into the daily stuff of life in order to let Christ rule and reign in our hearts.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading from Romans Chapter 11, we need to discuss a portion of text before the reading in order to bring out the meaning. The context is Paul's discussion about the future of Israel. Romans 9 dealt with Israel's past, Romans 10 with the present (in Paul's time), and Romans 11 with the future. As you read this first omitted section (Chapter 11 vv. 25-32), keep in mind the study last week regarding the unfolding of the revelation of the mystery of God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles.

25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery–so that you will not be wise in your own estimation–that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." 27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the

fathers; 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Romans 11:25-32)

Paul said that the reason God allowed the Jews to harden their hearts against the Messiah Jesus was to allow for the salvation of the Gentiles in the church. God loved the world so much that He allowed this mystery to accomplish His saving work for the Gentiles as prophesied in the Old Testament (Isaiah 49:6). Paul wrote as moved by the Holy Spirit about the unveiling of this phenomenal mystery.

Now let's read the actual second reading.

Second Reading:

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? 35 Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

Paul marveled at the wisdom and knowledge of God (v. 33). How could God tolerate the hard-hearted Jews in order to provide for the salvation of the Gentiles? The ways of God are unfathomable (v. 33). The implication of this for our own lives is multi-dimensional. As we go through life, there are so many things that are out of our control that we do not understand. We know that God has the power to change things—yet, sometimes he doesn't do things according to what we think is best. This is the crisis of faith. Will we trust that God is wiser and more knowledgeable than we ourselves are? Or will we rail at God for being unloving and incompetent in our lives? While God doesn't cause evil, He does permit it (as in allowing the hearts of the Jews to be hardened). There is a choice that each believer in God has to make at some point in their relationship with God: Am I going to trust God's ways or am I going to trust in my ways above His ways? Throughout the Bible God uses His divine agents to accomplish His work, be they angels, prophets, animals, or even people like us. As we transition to the Gospel lesson, meditate upon the depth of the wisdom of God in the past biblical record in order to trust Him in the midst of any present-day confusing circumstances for your own life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading this week is from Matthew 16. Jesus had just been showing the disciples His supernatural power through the feeding of the 5,000 and a separate incident of feeding of 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 many pagans believed was the seat of the underworld, a place where immoral practices were done on a

regular basis to appease the gods out from the "gates of hell." There were even niches carved out of the rock cliff in order to display the idols that were worshipped in this area. It is in this ominous and evil place that Jesus had a valuable lesson to teach His disciples.

Gospel Reading:

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." 20 Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20)

In the reading, Jesus clearly emphasized Peter as the foremost among the disciples and this along with other New Testament readings indicate that this disciple was something like "first among equals." Jesus told Peter that He would build His church upon both Peter and his confession of Jesus as the Christ. As we delve further into the analysis of the reading, we ask our readers to contemplate how Jesus could lay any authority for giving the Gospel message to the world on anyone, even Peter. Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and impatient, always wanting to take actions but maybe never thinking things through as thoroughly as he would later in his life.

Several significant points jump out of the text. First, Peter, the uncontested leader or the disciples, made the marvelous statement through the help of God the Father that Jesus was indeed the Messiah (v. 16). Jesus affirmed his confession and went on to elaborate upon Peter's statement. 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 mass of rock or many large rocks), which, in context, is Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ. However, Jesus clearly indicated that Peter was the foremost of these building blocks, the "first among equals." Peter, with his heart changed by the Holy Spirit of God so as to confess Jesus as the Christ was the foundation of the church. Jesus entrusted this authority to him like what we saw with Eliakim in the first reading. Peter, as first among equals, shared this authority with the other disciples.

Peter clarified this meaning in the Book of First 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 man must be careful how he builds 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 corner stone" (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 the "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), but 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).

A second significant point in the text arises from when 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 29, 2014 edition of Mass Notes. In summary, we said that the keys of 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 is 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. And the story of the Gospel continues to penetrate lives because we are all commissioned to be his ambassadors, representing God's love and truth to the world with 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. The church is on the offensive, storming the "gates of hell" as was so symbolically portrayed by this incident happening at Caesarea Philippi. This is an important 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).

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel reading, 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 you are building your life on? 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, too? You can pause and ask God to change the direction of your life so that you can build on the Chief Cornerstone, Jesus Christ.

2. In the Gospel lesson 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. Where do you see this passage intersecting with your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 8-20-2017



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. Chapter 56 is in the closing section of the Book of

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

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD, "Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed. 2 How blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who takes hold of it; Who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil. 3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people." Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, 5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, And a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. 6 Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant; 7 Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7)

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

Although Isaiah provided additional information about God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through the Jews this was not a new concept in the Bible. Even in the very first Book of the Bible God spoke about salvation coming to all people through Abraham the father of all believers. God told Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:18). King David said some three hundred years earlier, "All the ends of the earth

will remember and turn to the LORD, And all the families of the nations will worship before You" (Psalm 22:27). Earlier in Isaiah's record he provided insight into the ultimate method that God would use to bring salvation to the whole world. He said regarding the future Messiah Jesus, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them" (Isaiah 9:2). Though the Jews were always a light that pointed to salvation through faith in God, the ultimate light would be the Lord Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

Second Reading:

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

16 If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? 25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery–so that you will not be wise in your own estimation–that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles

has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." 27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Romans 11:13-32)

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

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

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

How could God allow the hardness of the Jewish people's hearts and to set them aside until the last Gentile that desired salvation would find faith in Jesus Christ? This is one of the deep mysteries with which Paul was wrestling. The answer, at least partially, is found in the last verse of the second reading. "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all" (v. 32). God

loves us so much that He is willing to endure the hardness of the Jews hearts until all of us Gentiles that desire salvation find faith in Jesus Christ. The point that Paul makes throughout his letters and the passage in Romans in particular is that we can trust God's mercy, even if we don't fully understand His ways.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In today's Gospel lesson remember that at this point the church age was still hidden and God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through faith in Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross wasn't in view yet. The context of the Gospel reading is just after Peter (and Jesus) walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:25-31) that we studied last week. After Jesus had calmed the wind and the waves they crossed the lake and came to the region of Gennesaret (14:34) located on the northwest shore of the lake. A series of events preceding this caused Jesus to leave this Jewish region. This included the unwillingness of the Jewish people to repent (Matthew 11:20-24), the rejection of Jesus by the people in his own hometown of Nazareth (Matthew 13:53-58), and the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-10). Jesus' movement to this region spoke symbolically of the future ministry to the Gentiles that some of the disciples would have.

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

Gospel Reading:

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

The Gentile woman was from a group of people who had always troubled Israel. The Canaanites were first mentioned in the Bible way back in Genesis Chapter 10 (v. 18). They were among the people groups that God promised to drive out during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt (see Exodus 33:2 and 34:11). They were a people that in Old Testament times lived in the lowland regions west of the Jordan River. Mark called her "a Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race" (Mark 7:26), indicating that she was a Greek. Jews had always been separated from the Greeks (or Gentiles) although the

Jews were immersed in a thoroughly Greek culture. As the story plays out the Gentile woman called out to Jesus by using a respectful title, "Lord, Son of David" (v.22) and one which elicited that she had some understanding of Jesus. She called Jesus by the name "Lord" three times. The word "Lord" means master and the one using the term would be implying their submission to His authority in their life. Certainly, she had heard about his healing powers, but now she used a title that was reserved for the Messiah. She was a persistent woman, and Jesus' disciples implored him to send her away "because she keeps shouting at us" (v. 23c). Then Jesus addressed her and said that His ministry was only to the Jews (v. 24). Next, the woman bowed down before Jesus and He used a metaphor and told her that "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27). The "children's bread" referred to God's covenant people the Jews. This meant that since she wasn't a Jew she was not technically Jesus' first **priority** during his short earthly ministry, which was to the Jews, not to the Gentiles. Her answer to him was very surprising and was an indication of the faith that she had in the Lord Jesus. "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). Jesus rewarded her faith by immediately healing her daughter. The Bible is clear that God commends those with faith, He is a "rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). The Gentile woman was rewarded by having her daughter healed. One can only imagine what became of the woman afterwards since Jesus absolutely made a tremendous impression upon her.

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

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

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

am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Reflection Questions

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

   - Have you made a decision to accept His call and be grafted into the life of Christ?
   - What does God's inclusion of Gentiles into the salvation story tell you about His character and heart?
   - How does God's longing to see all people saved encourage you to reach out to others with His good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

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

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of First Kings in which Elijah hides in a cave and waits to hear from the voice of God. Then continue the study in Romans in the second reading and conclude with yet another continuing study in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus and Peter walk on water.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9-13)

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

Some life lessons through which we can learn from Elijah's interaction with God as follows, God may be wanting to get our attention in the same way. First, God may be asking us, "What are you doing her?" This is a question of purpose, personal meaning and identity. Only God can give us the answer to this question. Second, God may be telling us where to find Him. In Elijah's case it was geographical, however in our case it may be more of a state of our heart, seeking Him where He has chosen to reveal Himself – His Word, the Bible. Finally, He may be showing us Who He is. Surprisingly enough, God chose to reveal Himself in a still, small voice. Our world shouts, but God whispers. What can we do to quiet ourselves and listen?

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading, Saint Paul likely felt that way as he poured out his heart to his fellow Jews who stubbornly resisted the Gospel message. The reading this week is a continuation of

the previous weeks study in Romans. Romans chapter 9 through 11 mark a section in which Saint Paul outlines Israel's past (chapter 9), present (chapter 11), and future (chapter 12).

Second Reading:

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

The big idea is that Paul was a Jew, "my kinsmen according to the flesh" (v. 3) born into the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5) and is greatly distressed that as a Jew his fellow Israelites haven't believed in the Messiah Jesus. We can learn several things from this passage. First, may we be grieved over those we care about who don't know Jesus Christ. Are we willing to make even minor sacrifices to reach the lost with the Good News of the Kingdom? Second, this section about the Jewish people reminds us that God chose this specific people group to be a blessing to the rest of the world. It was through the Jews that God established His covenants (relational commitments), gave the Law (moral, dietary, religious and code of conduct), set up a place and avenue for worship (the responding to God's worth), and the promises (God's record of faithfulness). Their lineage includes the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), King David, and ultimately Jesus. Finally, Paul emphasis who the Person of Jesus Christ is: God over all forever praised. This is clear evidence that the early church had a solid sense of who Christ is (Christology) which includes His deity. His followers worshiped Him as God, and we would be wise to do the same.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone. 24 But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." 29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. 30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus stretched out

His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. 33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!" (Matthew 14:22-33)

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading from the Prophet Daniel follows the incident in Chapter 6 when Daniel was thrown into the lion's den but safely delivered through the divine providence of God. Chapter 7 opens with Daniel's visions of four beasts representing successive world rulers. If one studies world history the identity of the first three is readily apparent, with the fourth, future empire shrouded in mystery. These begin with the Babylonian Empire represented by a lion (Daniel 7:4). Next, the Medo/Persian Empire is represented by a bear (Daniel 7:5). The third empire is that of the Greeks and is represented by a leopard (Daniel 7:6). Finally, the fourth future empire is represented by a terrifying beast with ten horns but existing alongside another "little horn" which came about after the demise of three of the ten horns (or kingdoms / rulers). This future eschatological empire was at least partially fulfilled by the historical Roman Empire with its ruling city of Rome, the city on seven hills. It is apparent from studies of the biblical Books relating to the end times (the study of eschatology) that this last "Roman" empire will be much different from the one that preceded it. This final empire

is the one displayed in the Book of Revelation. In a similar way that God exists as a Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this last world empire is represented by three leaders: The Beast, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet. The beast represents Satan, the filthy, unholy father of them all. The Antichrist is the world leader that will emerge in the end times falsely claiming to be the Messiah, and the Jews along with the whole world will be deceived. The third figure that will emerge at the conclusion of the present world is a figure known as the False Prophet. This person will function as a false "holy spirit" and will work to deceive and unite the world against God and His believers (Christians and Jews).

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

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

First Reading: (Including Skipped Verses 11-12)

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

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

The reading flows this way. Thrones were set up, notice the plural "thrones." Next, details were provided concerning the identity and characteristics of the Judge of the Universe, God the Father.

The court proceedings were opened resulting in the slaying of the AntiChrist and deliverance to his eternal sentence in hell. This is the one spewing forth "boastful words" (v. 11) against God and His people. The reading closes with the return of the Lord Jesus, "One like a Son of Man" whose dominion "is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (v. 14).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

"Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth

about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

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

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