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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-10-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-10-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from the book of Deuteronomy, which means "second law" or "copy of the law." A whole new generation had grown up since Moses first gave the law, so the new generation is given a review of the history of Israel since the Exodus and a modified and expanded review of the law. The second reading, from Paul's letter to the Colossians contains an essential explanation of who Jesus is. The final excerpt for this week is the recording of Jesus telling the very familiar story of the Good Samaritan. The story itself is amazing, but its application to the hearers (and today's readers) is most significant.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Colossians is one of the so-called "Prison Epistles," because the Apostle Paul wrote them to various churches in Asia Minor while he was jailed in Rome. His writings usually include a succinct but rich theological passage, explaining doctrine for the benefit of young believers and their leaders. Those deep teaching passages are most often followed by very practical instruction about Christian living. Today's reading is a primary statement of who Jesus is. One New Testament scholar notes, "In Colossians we have the most thorough presentation of Christology in the New Testament." The substance of the epistle may be summed up in a key verse (3:11), "Christ is all and in all."

Second Reading:

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

cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

Luke 10:25-37 NAS95 25 And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" 27 And he answered, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH, AND WITH ALL YOUR

MIND; AND YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 28 And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." 29 But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. 31 And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, 34 and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' 36 Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" 37 And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

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

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

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

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

We should also observe that the lawyer's initial question assumes that he—or we—can *do* something to inherit eternal life. The action of the Good Samaritan is evidence of a heart that is right before God. The heart that has a genuine love for God and serves Him comes to Him by faith and serves by His grace.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/071016.cfm

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 105

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-3-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-3-2016**. This week we learn something about how to find peace and comfort from God during hard times by resting upon His future promises of peace and prosperity in the closing chapter of Isaiah. We learn about the value of humility and how God calls us to reflect upon His works and not our own. In the Gospel reading we see God's early missionary force sent out before His crucifixion in order to spread the word of the kingdom being ushered in through the Messiah Jesus and about coming judgment for those who ignored His promises.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

The Scriptures teach us about the importance of focusing upon God both in the good times and the

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

Galatians 6:14-18 NAS95 14 But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. 16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. 17 From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

In this short message, Saint Paul extolled the value of boasting only in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for us rather than in anything that we do, even if it be of great religious

or spiritual value. God promises the peace will fall upon those that walk humbly in light of this admonition although they may endure persecution for Him (v. 17, the "brand marks of Jesus"). Paul closes the reading and the entire Book of Galatians with a closing blessing in which he calls for God's blessing while affirming the brotherhood of those whom he had addressed so sternly throughout his message.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

Luke 10:1-12 NAS95 1 Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. 2 And He was saying to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. 3 Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' 6 If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. 8 Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; 9 and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10 But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' 12 I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than for that city."

Luke 10:17-20 NAS95 17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." 18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. 19 Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are

subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

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

By application, the power to which Jesus extended to His first ministry force of seventy people extends to us in a certain extent today. As missionaries of Jesus we are called to use discernment in gaging the receptiveness of our audience. We are also to recognize that like the seventy we too possess divine power that comes from God according to the spiritual gift which is given to us (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; and 1 Corinthians 12:28). We are also reminded to keep in mind the urgency of this message because nonbelievers will be judged with a worse fate than those at Sodom. And like we saw in the second reading we need to walk humbly before the Lord and exalt in His works rather than our own. We are to "rejoice that [our] names are recorded in heaven" (v. 20) while using the example of the seventy as guidance in how we are to approach that that may be highly resistant to the Gospel.

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

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

> make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/070316.cfm

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 102

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-26-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **6-26-2016**. A key verse this week that links all three readings together is in the second reading from Galatians, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17). We desire to accomplish great things for God, but our flesh works against us. When we cooperate with our carnal, fleshly desires we may not achieve the full potential that God has for us. We will see how these forces rage among the people in all three of today's readings.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from First Kings is just before the appointment of Nimshi as the King of the Northern tribes of Israel and the replacement of Elijah the prophet by Elisha. Elijah, the great prophet of God, had just killed the prophets of Baal after the great contest at Mount Carmel. When King Ahab's evil wife Jezebel found out about the slaying of the prophets she set out to kill Elijah (1 Kings 19:2). This caused Elijah to flee and he came to believe that he was the only believer left in the entire kingdom. Elijah 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" (1 Kings 19:10). God replied as we see in today's reading and corrected his false assumption.

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First Reading:

1 Kings 19:16-21 NAS95 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." 19 So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, while he was plowing with twelve pairs of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth. And Elijah passed over to him and threw his mantle on him. 20 He left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, "Please let me kiss my father and my mother, then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" 21 So he returned from following him, and took the pair of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the implements of the oxen, and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah and ministered to him.

God gave Elijah specific guidance to appoint Jehu as the king of Israel and to anoint Elisha as his own successor (v. 16). God told Elijah that he wasn't the only believer left and that He had 7,000 true believers left in the kingdom (v. 18). Next, Elijah went and found Elisha out working and placed his prophet mantle (clothing) on him. When Elisha wavered about immediately accepting this responsibility Elijah told him in effect that to forsake this appointment would be an affront to God (v. 20). So Elisha accepted his new position and made a traditional sacrifice to confirm the "covenant" made between him and God to fulfill the prophecy given to Elijah.

The reading points out just how bad conditions had become in Israel such that Elijah believed that he was the only believer left alive. However, it is interesting that while 7,000 believers remained, even that was a very low number in view of the large size of the nation. Evidently most of the people had succumbed to the evil pagan worship practices memorialized in the Bible by King Jeroboam the son of Nabat who is recorded as a standard of evil. We see that standard mentioned earlier in First Kings. "For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and in his sins which he made Israel sin, provoking the LORD God of Israel with their idols" (1 Kings 16:26).

The big idea in the reading is regarding the supreme sovereignty of God. Even when the great prophet in the entire world felt that all hope was lost, God continued making plans for the future of the kingdom and reminding him of His omniscient and long-term view. In our age we can look to this passage to be reminded that God has our best interests in mind, is establishing future plans for us as well as all believers, and even when we feel totally spiritually alone our sovereign Father is superintending the circumstances for His glory and our best interests.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Galatians is Saint Paul's teaching on the freedom believers possess in Christ as contrasted to the bondage that the false teachers were imposing upon the people by

instructing them that they must obey the Mosaic Law. Paul explains further in the reading the battle between a believer's spirit and their flesh.

Second Reading:

Galatians 5:1 NAS95 1 It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:13-18 NAS95 13 For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. 16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Paul reminded the believers in Galatia of their overarching purpose by quoting from the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He cautioned them not to use their freedom in Christ to take advantage of their "neighbors." The Jews by that time had come to understand their neighbor in a very narrow sense such that it only included their fellow countrymen. Jesus had earlier corrected this false teaching in Luke Chapter 10. There Jesus explained the meaning of "neighbor" by telling them the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus explained to His disciples that, of all the people who passed by the man who had fallen at the hands of robbers, the only one who acted as a true neighbor as intended by God in Leviticus 19:18 was "The one who showed mercy toward him" (Luke 10:37). This is extremely important in this context because the Epistle to the Galatians was directed at the false teachers who taught that in order for people to be saved they must obey the constraints of the Mosaic Law making them, in effect, proselyte Jews. Paul and Jesus taught something quite different, that the neighborhood of God included anyone who was in need. Our true family includes those who have come to the Father through faith in the Son (John 3:16). Therefore, instead of trying to follow all of the contours of the Mosaic law, one would fulfill the spirit of the law by being a loving person. The only way a person can be truly loving (self-sacrificing and honoring of others above self) is if their heart is surrendered to God and His Spirit is now in control of the individual. The difference between someone who tries really hard to be a good person and one who is a Christian, is the power of the Holy Spirit alive in one's heart. The Holy Spirit is God's evidence that His life is inside a believer. While a believer is a work in progress and will not be perfect in this life, a fundamental change has taken place when we surrender ourselves to God through Christ. A new relationship has begun and we are under the influence of God's Spirit, which transforms us. We begin to walk in step with the values of God's Spirit. And since God is love, it makes sense that He teaches us how to be more loving. This is not a matter of self-effort, but a growth in the life of God who makes His home in our hearts. Paul was clear that "*if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law*" (v. 18).

One wonders if at times Paul felt marginalized like Elijah as we discussed in the first reading where the prophet had fled from evil Jezebel's murderous plot. Paul, surrounded by false teachers that plotted to drag believers into the strictures of Jewish legalism, expressed God's prophetic word regarding the freedom that was to be found only through faith in Jesus Christ.

In our lives we must ask ourselves in what ways are we attempting to work out our own salvation through obedience to some form of religious law. It's hard not to notice those in our neighborhoods who never seem to leave their houses on Sunday morning to go to church. Do we hold to a false belief system that we are a pretty good person because we have faithfully attended Mass on Sundays and holy days that we are somehow going to be set apart from others who have not so zealously obeyed the commandments of the church? When we place our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins we have moved from darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9). The difference between a person that has truly trusted in Jesus versus the one that is relying upon their own works for salvation is subtle but very real as Jesus explained to Nicodemus. In John Chapter 3 Nicodemus, a legalistic Jew from the group known as the Pharisees, was a Rabbi who came to Jesus at night for fear of the Jews (John 3:2). Jesus explained to Nicodemus how he could only enter the kingdom of heaven through faith in Him. In one of the most important verses in the entire Bible Jesus told him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Jesus went on to explain to him that in addition to the obvious necessity of physical birth, something much less obvious was necessary. In order to become a citizen of heaven one must be born spiritually through faith in God's Son. He told Nicodemus, "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. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." (John 3:16-17).

If you are struggling with understanding the true motives of your heart, the Scripture says that you should call out to God in prayer. Paul 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). As we move to the final reading this week, take a moment to affirm your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the reading is Luke's recording of the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly life just before he gave His life for us on the cross at Calvary. Earlier the disciples had been arguing over who among them was the greatest. Jesus then presented them with a child and told them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great" (Luke 9:48). He then corrected His disciples who had rebuked someone for casting out demons in the name of Jesus, saying "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you" (v. 50). This hints at some of the same tension that Paul was indicating in the second reading between the strict followers of the Law and those that

followed it less closely or held to other religious traditions. Nowhere was this tension more evident than in the region of Samaria where the people were held in contempt by the Jewish legalists. The Samaritans were considered a half breed people since they had been overtaken by the Assyrian Empire during the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. Interestingly, Jesus turned to this despised group for help in making the preparations for the celebration of His last Passover feast. This was the Passover after which the true Lamb of God would be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:51-62 NAS95 51 When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; 52 and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. 53 But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. 54 When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; 56 for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went on to another village. 57 As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." 59 And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father." 60 But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." 61 Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." 62 But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

We see in the reading that the Samaritans didn't welcome Jesus' disciple's efforts in making the arrangements for the Passover feast even though Jesus had sent messengers ahead of time to them (vv. 52-53). Instead, they were forced to travel onto another village, one which was very likely outside the constraints of Samaritan beliefs. When James and John, named by Jesus the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17), were confronted with the rejection of their efforts they showed their passion and love for Jesus by asking Him whether they should command fire to come down from the sky and destroy the Samaritans (v. 54). The disciples were familiar with how Elijah had commanded fire to come down from the sky to consume the sacrifice during the contest with the prophets of Baal, but now they were asking not to burn already dead cattle but rather living people! Jesus quickly corrected their false thinking and reminded them that He didn't come to "*destroy men's lives, but to save them*" (v. 56). This is reminiscent of what we read in our discussion of the second reading from John 3:17 where Jesus said, "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." As the reading progressed, Jesus taught His disciples about true discipleship and answering the calling of God. A true disciple would have to be willing to not only forsake their comfortable home (v. 58) but also to forsake their family in order to follow Him (v. 59). Here we see a clear parallel with Elisha's initial response to God's call through Elijah that we read about in the first reading.

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As believers in the Lord Jesus we are called to forsake the things which hold us back to true obedience of the Lord Jesus. As we saw in the first reading, when God places a calling upon our lives we are to respond in obedience. Our answer must be to forsake the things which may hold us back, whether they be family, as we saw in the Gospel reading, or religious practices as we saw in the second. Like Elisha, even if in our humanness we hesitate for a moment while we count the cost of our obedience, we are called to respond in faith by following the directives given to us by God. As a first step of belief we are called to forsake the false understanding that we are saved from our good works and rather seeing that our deeds flow from our relationship with God. As we enter into God's invisible spiritual kingdom, the "kingdom of heaven" that Jesus explained to Nicodemus in John 3:3, we participate through God's power, as Paul said in the reading from Galatians, being led by the Spirit. At times although we too may desire to command fire down from heaven to consume our adversaries, Jesus calls us to a higher standard by recognizing these people as our "neighbors." This battle will continue for the duration of our life here on earth, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:17).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Most Christians are not known for their love. Instead, the world characterizes us as judgmental, harsh, and angry. Who are the "neighbors" that you regularly interact with? What would it look like for you to walk in the Spirit and change this characterization with your "neighbor?"

2. Jesus illustrated true discipleship as a relationship with Him that prioritized Him above all other priorities. In what ways have you made intentional decisions to orient your life around His Kingdom principles? What has been the cost of discipleship for you? Are there any new ways that He is asking you to follow Him?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/062616.cfm

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 99

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-19-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass Study Notes for **6-19-2016**. One of the main take away points from this week's readings is the role of Jesus as Messiah Who saves peoples from their sins. This is in contrast to the teachers of that age who taught that salvation came through obedience of the works of the Jewish Law. We will also discuss how taking your cross is an invitation to freedom and not a burden.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Zechariah. Zechariah, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, was a priest. He wrote to the exiles in Babylon to comfort them by giving them God's Word that He would fulfil all of the promises He made to His covenant people the Jews.

First Reading:

Note: The reading omitted 12 and 13 which are include below.

Zechariah 12:10 – 13:1 NAS95 10 "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. 11 In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. 12 The land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; 13 the family of the house of Levi by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself and their wives by themselves; 14 all the families that remain, every family by itself and their wives by themselves. 1 In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity."

Today's reading looks far forward to a future day in which God will awaken a remnant of the Jews who return to Him in faith. Saint Paul records this clearly in Romans 11 where he explains how God allowed the hardening of the Jews so that the Gentiles could find salvation. "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" (Romans 11:25). Once the very last Gentile that God has ordained has come to faith in Jesus the next chapter in God's master plan will begin, which is the awakening of the Jewish remnant alive at that time. "And so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB" (Romans 11:26).

In this passage, Zechariah is describing events related to the Day of the Lord, also known as Jesus' second coming. In the affairs at the end of time, Zechariah states that God will pour out the Spirit of grace and of supplication on the Jewish people. What does this mean? God's grace means that the Jewish people are given favor that they did not earn and that they do not deserve. A Spirit of supplication means that people will be given a burden to ask for things in prayer that are on God's heart, and He will answer their cries. Zechariah also describes great mourning as they look on the One that they have pierced. The mourning is likened to Hadadrimmon, where Josiah was slain by the Egyptians. The immense sorrow that was felt throughout all of Israel was a focal point in Jewish history because Josiah was one of the very few godly kings and did much to point Judah back to their covenant relationship with God. Therefore, when Zechariah says that their mourning over the killing of the Messiah will be like this great tragedy, he is clarifying that the Jews will understand and regret their role in crucifying Jesus in his first coming. This grieving will culminate in personal awareness of sin and impurity, so that God's people will see sin the same way He sees it.

Grieving over sin is an important part of growing to be like Christ. As a Christian, we are instructed by this passage to also be aware of the effects of sin in our own lives. Just as the Jews will be shocked and grieved over their blindness, we can ask God to shine His light into our lives and give

us spiritual sight. This spiritual sight may cause grief as we start to see things from God's perspective, but it will ultimately cause cleansing and healing in our relationship with Him and bring wisdom for daily living.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul explains in the second reading, that those who believe in Jesus are the offspring of Abraham and, therefore, heir to the promise given to him in Genesis. The line of thought before the reading delineates that the promise of God was made before the giving of the Mosaic law, and is predicated on faith not works, ethnicity, social standing, gender, etc. This section is a culmination of Paul's main point in the entire book of Galatians, where he explains that justification is by faith, not by works.

Second Reading:

Galatians 3:26-29 NAS95 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

This passage sums up an important message that the believers in Galatia were struggling to understand. While they had received Christ into their lives by faith, there were some who were convincing them that they still needed to follow the Mosaic law. Paul definitively defends the truth that salvation comes by faith, not by works. He describes the law as a guardian or schoolmaster that was in place to point people to recognize their need for a Savior. So now the question is not "Are you Jewish?" meaning, "are you a son of Abraham?"; but rather, the question is "Are you in Christ?" No matter our national origin, socio-economic status, or gender, we can all be sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. The implication, then, is that we are all on the same team, working together to reflect the reality of Christ's life in our lives. We are heirs to God's promise to Abraham by virtue of being born again in Christ Jesus (John 3:3). Part of what it means to grow in Christ is to grow in our understanding of all the rights and privileges of being a son or daughter of God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the Gospel reading from Luke is just after his recording of the miracle of the feeding for the five thousand (Luke 9:10-17). The parallel Gospel accounts reveal that after this great miracle, Jesus retreated in the same boat that they had taken to the "desolate place" from the village of Bethsaida (Mark 6:30, 32, 45). The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and John record an important event that occurred during the water journey. After Jesus had dismissed the crowds, He directed the disciples to take the boat to the other side of the lake, back to Bethsaida while He went up on the mountain to pray (Matthew 14:22). As the disciples attempted to work their way upwind (Matthew 14:24), they saw Jesus walking on the water (v. 25). At this point Peter joined Jesus walking on the

sea, at least for a time until Jesus rescued him and helped him back into the boat (v. 29). Next the group went "up on the mountain to pray" (Mark 6:46) after passing by the "region of Magadan" (Matthew 15:39) where Jesus got into a heated discussion with the Pharisees who came to test Him (Matthew 16:1012). It is after this whirlwind of events that we pick up with today's reading.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:18-24 NAS95 18 And it happened that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, "Who do the people say that I am?" 19 They answered and said, "John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again." 20 And He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God." 21 But He warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone, 22 saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day." 23 And He was saying to them all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. 24 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."

Jesus' inquiry of the disciples: "Who do the people say that I am" (v. 18) evidently took place in Caesarea Philippi as we see in Matthew 16:13 and Mark 8:27. It is interesting that Jesus chose this mysterious place because it was a location that was used for pagan worship. Jesus sought refuge in this unique place away from the crowds ("alone," v. 18) to seek fellowship in prayer with His heavenly Father, which was His practice. The disciples had just experienced the miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on the water. However, we know from the parallel account they continually failed to understand (Matthew 16:9). Therefore, Jesus inquired of them regarding His true identity (v. 18). The disciples said that the people saw Jesus as another John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the Old Testament prophets that rose from the dead (v. 19). Peter, being inspired by God Himself, declared Jesus to be the Messiah (another word for Christ), which means the anointed one of God who would come to save His people (Matthew 16:17).

Why would Jesus not want his disciples to share this with others? Was Jesus trying to hide His identity or obscure His mission in the world? No. We understand this warning in light of the misconceptions that the Jews had for the Messiah. Instead of a civil king that would vanquish the Roman rule, Jesus was a spiritual king seeking to vanquish the enemy of our souls, one heart at a time. He predicted how he would do this, which required his suffering, rejection by the Jewish leaders, crucifixion and resurrection. The call to discipleship to this type of king would require a level of commitment that some would have trouble accepting. Jesus shared an important value of life in His kingdom. Instead of being ruled by self and sin, Jesus saves us to bring us freedom to follow a new way of life that is ruled by His value system. In denying self, we are not building up a treasury of merit; instead, we are being freed up for the abundant life that Jesus came to bring us (John 10:10). In looking at it another way, God does us a favor by freeing us from the oppressive nature of self so that we can live the life He has designed for us to live in Christ. We lose what we thought was

our life, but gain what God defines as true life. This requires great faith. No wonder those who give their life over to Christ and walk by faith are called the children of Abraham.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Just as the Jewish people in Jesus' day had misunderstandings about what they needed to be saved from, what are some misunderstandings that present day people think they need to be saved from? Which misguided notions of Jesus' Messiahship resonate most deeply with you? How does your growing knowledge of the Word of God and relationship with the true Messiah help you to counteract these misguided notions?

2. How does understanding that denying myself and carrying my cross is not about working or merit, but about freedom? How does Jesus' promise to bring abundant life factor into your view of denying the false notions of what this life is about and give you encouragement to take up your cross in a way that brings life that is truly life?

3. When you consider the unity of the family of God through faith in Christ explained in the Galatians' reading, what ways can you contribute to the value that people have for one another and, especially for those who are different than they are.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/061916.cfm

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Lectionary: 90

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-12-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **6-12-2016**. This week we will read about the confrontation and consequences that King David experienced after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, killing Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, and then taking Bathsheba as his own wife. The second reading is from the letter to the Galatians, which reminds us that faith in Christ is what saves us, not works. The Gospel reading illustrates this truth by recounting the story of the unrighteous woman who showed great love for Jesus, for she had been forgiven much. All three readings weave together the redemptive story line of the gravity of sin, the inability of humans to fix themselves, and the beauty of the Gospel, which is embodied in Christ's righteousness that has been given for our salvation.

Introduction to the First Reading:

King David, the second king of Israel, is famous for a few things. One of his most shining moments was his miraculous defeat of the giant, Goliath (1 Samuel 17). One of his darkest moments was his adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (2 Samuel 11). To cover up her pregnancy, David brought Uriah home from battle, so that her pregnancy would look legitimate. However, because Uriah was an honorable man, he would not sleep with his wife while his men were still on the battlefield making sacrifices for the nation of Israel. Instead of confessing his sin, David dug himself in deeper, and instructed the army leader to put Uriah in the fiercest part of the battle and to pull back on him,

so that Uriah would be killed in battle. The once shepherd boy, turned King, had hit one of the lowest points of his life. Instead of coming clean, turning to God, and confessing, King David continued to try to deal with his sin on his own terms. This all came to a climax when the prophet Nathan came to tell the king a story as a way to help David come to terms with his sin (2 Samuel 12:1-6). The story was about a man who was extremely wealthy, who had livestock in abundance. One day a traveler came to him, and instead of killing one of his many animals for the meal, the wealthy man took the one and only ewe lamb of his neighbor to make this man's meal. David's response to this story was one of complete outrage and disgust for the insensitivity and injustice of the wealthy man. In fact, David said "this man" should be put to death. Little did he know that "this man" was him!

First Reading:

Note: This includes verses 11-12 that were omitted from the reading.

2 Samuel 12:7-13 NAS95 7 Nathan then said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. 8 'I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! 9 'Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. 10 'Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' 11 "Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. 12 'Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.'" 13 Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.

It can be difficult for us to read passages like this, which recount God's just consequences for sin. But it is necessary to be exposed to the gravity and weight of sin or else we will try to brush it off, marginalizing its destructive effects. Our key character, David, tried to do this, but it didn't work. We have Psalm 32 that recounts David's internal suffering over his sin which had a crushing effect on him. He states, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away . . . for Your hand was heavy upon me" (Psalm 32:3-4).

In addition to the internal weight of sin, Nathan told of the external consequences that would be experienced as a result of his sin. Nathan's predictions came to fruition in a variety of ways. David not only had conflict with Israel's enemies, but conflict plagued his own household. For example, Amnon, one of his sons, raped David's daughter, Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Then, Absalom, David's son killed Amnon. This severe conflict culminated in an overthrow of David's rulership, where Absalom pitched a tent in the sight of all Israel and had sexual relations with David's concubines, thus

fulfilling Nathan's prediction that David's companion would lie with his wives in broad daylight (2 Samuel 16:21-22). The gravity of sin and its destructive consequences are seen in an unfolding and snowballing way in David's life. There was no way for David to fix the problem of sin in his own life. His only hope was to cry out to the Lord for help.

After Nathan's confrontation with David, we have insight from Psalm 51 into what it looks like to be a man after God's own heart, which is the New Testament's description of King David (Acts 13:22). Here are some key thoughts from Psalm 51, David's response to the Lord after Nathan confronted him that can guide our understanding of sin, confession, and forgiveness:

- He confessed his sin and grieved over the way he had betrayed God.
- He recognized that sacrifices and burnt offerings would never "make up" for his sin and that God was not looking for him to do heroic deeds to off-set the guilt.
- The sacrifice that David brought was a broken spirit. He knew that a broken and contrite heart would not be despised by the Lord.
- He turned to the Lord for forgiveness and trusted in God to take away his guilt. He rested in God's character, not his own righteousness.
- He asked God to "create in me a clean heart" so that his righteousness would come from the innermost being and would reflect the character of God. He basically told the Lord to do whatever it takes to make him clean from the inside out.

David's life is an example to us about the gravity and destructive force of sin. We learn from him that sin is a part of even the most promising and stellar people. Even if we have not committed adultery and tried to cover it up by having someone killed, Jesus said that lust and anger in our heart are equivalent to adultery and murder (Matthew 6:21-48). We all have sinned and fall short of God's glorious standards for the life He has given to us (Romans 3:23). Like David, we cannot fix ourselves with our own moral deeds. It is only God's mercy that provides a way of escape from the destructive force of sin in our lives. The next reading elaborates on this point and provides the clear antidote to our sin problem.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul clarified that a sinner's right standing before God is only achieved through faith in Christ. This passage is one of many in the New Testament that point those who are guilty of sin to the only One who can assuage guilt, namely Christ Jesus. We pick up the passage right in the middle of Paul's defense of his practice not to make the Gentile Christians fulfill the Mosaic Law. The fact that this was a controversial question that needed to be answered in writing allows us, as current day Christians, to have insight into the dimensions of our standing in Christ.

Second Reading:

Note: This includes verses 17-18 that were omitted from the reading.

Galatians 2:16-21 NAS95 16 nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. 17 "But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! 18 "For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. 19 "For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. 20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. 21 "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly."

This passage starts out by saying that man is not justified by following the Law, but through faith in Christ Jesus. In the early days of Christianity, there was some confusion over whether Gentiles who became Christians needed to follow the Jewish laws or whether faith in Christ alone was sufficient for salvation. Paul alludes to this controversy in the opening of this chapter and throughout these verses in the reading. At the Jerusalem council, which is recorded in Acts 15, the question about whether Gentiles have to live like Jews was definitively answered with a resounding "no."

This controversy allowed the key doctrine of justification by faith to be introduced into the record books of the Bible. The word "justified" is a term used in a court of law that is pronounced over one who is declared not guilty. As we saw in the previous reading and explanation of David's life, all have been pronounced guilty, for sin is part of the human condition. Paul shared that having right standing before God is not achieved by working really hard to please God ("works of the Law"—16), but by surrendering to Christ by faith ("I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me"—20).

In verse 16, Paul pointed out that even he, a Jew, was justified by faith in Christ, not in fulfilling the requirements of the Mosaic Law. In verses 17-18, Paul counteracted the implied argument that if Gentiles are not required to fulfill the Mosaic Law, then they will persist in sin and nullify the work of Christ and not achieve the righteous life that God desires for them. In response to this line of thought, Paul stated that the only thing that the Law does is to point out one's sin; it cannot save the law breaker. If he were to go back and build his faith on fulfilling the Mosaic Law, this would only result in being declared "guilty." He explained that he had to die to the Law so that he might live to God, which meant that the Law no longer hounded him to compliance. His compliance to God's standards was now generated from a new place in his heart—a place of surrender, devotion, and union with Christ. Because of Christ's love, he was now free to love God back and be in right relationship with Him. This freedom from the Mosaic Law did not negate God's grace, it actually celebrated it and relied upon it. For if one can fulfill the Mosaic Law from the heart, Christ's atoning death would be meaningless.

Paul realized the gravity and weight of his own sin and encouraged others to do likewise. He found forgiveness and grace by confessing His need for the Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul's new outlook can be ours as well, as we die to the old way of life that is structured according to handling sin on our own; and instead, live out of the new life that God has placed in every believer in Christ, the life of relational dependence on our wonderful Savior.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading paints a vivid picture of what it looks like when one encounters the forgiveness of Jesus in a very personal way. The story of the sinful woman who wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes his feet with her hair, and pours perfume on his feet provides a display of tender-hearted devotion that should characterize all believers.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 7:36 – 8:3 NAS95 36 Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, 38 and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. So which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have judged correctly." 44 Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45"You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. 46 You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. 47 For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 Then He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven." 49 Those who were reclining at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" 50 And He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." 1 Soon afterwards, He began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means.

Right before this encounter in Luke, Jesus' authority had been questioned by the Pharisees. The common people were being convinced that Jesus was a prophet from God, but the religious leaders

"rejected God's purposes for themselves" (Luke 7:20). Therefore, this story of the sinful woman and Simon, the Pharisee serve Luke's purpose in illustrating a sharp contrast between a receptive heart and a hard heart toward God.

Luke sets up the sharp contrast right at the opening of the story. A Pharisee, who had means, invited Jesus to a pleasant evening of eating and reclining at a table of equals. In this culture, the table would be set down low to the ground and diners would lay on their side, propped up on one elbow at the table and their feet behind them, away from the table. Hospitality was a high value and varying degrees of fanfare would have been shown in accordance with the status of the guest of honor. It would have been customary to have a bowl of water at the front entrance, where a servant would wash the guest's feet after walking dusty roads to arrive at the home. Obviously, this did not happen. Simon's passive display of honor is contrasted with the sinful woman's active pursuit of Jesus.

The woman who had a bad reputation came in (uninvited and unwelcomed by Simon) and wept at Jesus' feet. Why would someone weep in Jesus' presence? Why would this woman actively seek Jesus out and come unwelcomed into a powerful and judgmental person's home, breaking all social norms and lavishing a display of devotion that was unprecedented? The clue is in Luke's descriptive term for her. She was a sinner. In Jewish society back then, there were different categories of people. The highest castes were reserved for people of good moral repute and coming from honorable families. The people in the lowest caste of society were those who were ethnically not Jewish and those who had dishonored themselves as Jews by sinning in a public way. This woman was a Jew, but had been relegated to the lowest cast of "sinner" by dismantling her reputation in the eyes of respectable people. The shame she would have endured is probably something that would be hard for us as Westerners to comprehend. Her sinful reputation made her part of an untouchable caste, as if her uncleanness would make anyone she touched unclean by association. Somehow, she had enough understanding and possibly even an earlier encounter with Jesus where she had felt loved and forgiven by him, despite her sinner status.

Put in this context, her boldness in approaching Jesus and touching him shows a level of devotion that is beyond being a fair-weathered "fan" of Jesus. This woman overcame a lot of social obstacles to display this level of gratitude to Jesus. Her heart was on trial before the respectable people, for Simon's revealed thoughts show the judgement and scorn that she endured. In some sense, then, Jesus' heart was on trial too, for Simon's expectation is that a prophet would not let an unclean and sinful woman touch him. Respectable people distance themselves from unrespectable people.

But Jesus did not follow this cultural norm. He broke the social rule and praised this woman for her display of love. He defended her tenderness with a clever story that allowed Simon to see that his sense of respectability caused him to be a self-righteous man, blocking him from having a realistic evaluation of his own sinfulness. The short story that Jesus told had 3 characters and a question. Two men owed the same man money. One man owed a little (about 50 days of work) and the other owed a lot (about 500 days of work). Neither of them could pay the moneylender back. Both of them had their debt cancelled. Which one of them loved the moneylender more? The point was made.

Jesus had corrected Simon's misevaluation of his own sinfulness and this woman's sinfulness. Both debts of sin were beyond human fixing. Simon sheepishly responded to the question with the right answer, softening the blow of conviction by saying "I suppose." The moral of the story is summed up by Jesus' words: "*For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little*" (Luke 7:47).

Have you ever wept in a "holy" moment? Have you ever lovingly "wiped Jesus feet with your hair," so to speak? Have you ever poured out something valuable to show your love to Christ? Maybe you were gripped with the gravity of your own sin and rebellious heart, convicted that you were not able to fix yourself. Maybe you were overwhelmed with the truth of God's love for you, deeply impressed with His desire to risk His reputation to restore you to Himself. Maybe you were struck with the fact that you are just a small dot on the face of the earth and you are amazed that God cares about you. If you have responded to these prompts of conviction by the Holy Spirit, then you are like the sinful woman, who received Jesus' love and actively pursued him to show him her love. If you tend to brush these promptings away, reminding yourself what a good person you are and priding yourself that you are not as bad of a sinner as most people, then you are hardening your heart and you are in a dangerous place, like Simon the Pharisee. This story can be a turning point for all of us as we allow God to show us places in our hearts that are tender or hard towards him.

The last part of this reading recounts the lives of others who had been touched by Jesus and were devoted to him in various ways. It's almost as if the camera pans out from the focused tender moment of the sinful woman's devotion and flashes a wide-angled lens to plethora of ways others responded to Jesus' lavish love for them. For example, The Twelve (disciples) and the women who traveled with Jesus were giving their lives on a daily basis to share the good news of the kingdom of God. Some of these followers had dramatic experiences of rescue from demons and others were considered more respectable by society. But each of them was denying their old way of life, counting the cost and following Jesus. This is the way of true discipleship.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus said that when we serve people in need, it's as if we are doing it to him. You may have never physically poured perfume on Jesus' feet, but if you have served those around you by listening, caring, meeting needs, sacrificing your own reputation and time, etc., then you have shown your love for Jesus in these tangible ways. How does linking your service to others with your devotion to Christ affect your attitude and motives for service? How can this picture of the woman pouring perfume on Jesus' feet provide you with a renewed focus for the moments of obedience that you are being called to in your pursuit of Jesus?

2. All three readings reinforce key truths to which our lives need to respond if we are to be wise. Review the readings and write out what you learned about each of the following themes and how this impacts your life:

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- The gravity of sin
- The inability of humans to fix their sin problem
- Various responses to conviction of sin
- The gift of God's grace, which offers forgiveness for sin
- Various responses to God's grace and forgiveness

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/061216.cfm

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time Lectionary: 93

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-5-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **6-5-2016**. This week we begin with a reading from one of the Old Testament history books, 1 Kings. The passage relates the story of a miraculous healing by the prophet Elijah, who is sometimes thought of as a precursor of the Messiah Jesus. The second reading tells us how the Apostle Paul received the message He preached largely to Gentiles. It comes in the epistle that most clearly differentiates the Gospel message from Judaism. The Gospel reading once more is from Luke. The miraculous event of this episode might very well remind us of the story of Elijah in the first reading.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Anyone familiar with today's story will recall the context. In the opening verses of chapter 17, we read about the prophet Elijah moving on to the region of Zarephath where a famine was raging because of the lack of rain, which Elijah had predicted in verse 1. Here, he encountered a widow who was gathering sticks for a fire to prepare what she thought would be a last meal for her and her son. The widow followed the prophet's instructions, and the flour and oil were multiplied to provide food for the three of them.

First Reading:

1 Kings 17:17-24 NAS95 17 Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!" 19 He said to her, "Give me your son." Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. 20 He called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also

brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?" 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." 22 The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. 23 Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." 24 Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."

In today's episode, the son becomes ill and dies. The widow, forgetting the miraculous provision of food that had sustained her and the boy, blames Elijah for her son's death. Without any argumentation, Elijah takes the boy upstairs, stretches out over him, and prays. He calls upon the LORD to let the child live, and God grants his entreaty. It's a wonderful, heart-warming story, of course. And we should praise God for His answering prayer and restoring life. After all, this is not fable; it is recorded in God's Word, and it is historical reality.

We can benefit from this historical incident by understanding at least two important truths. First, God is the giver of life. As Job said, God gives and God takes away. He remains God. This miracle demonstrates once again His omnipotence and His grace. The widow's response also bears an important reminder. She said that she recognized that God's presence and power were evident in His prophet. Although, we won't likely perform life-giving- miracles as Elijah did, still we should live and speak in such a way that those who observe our life and words will recognize that we belong to God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the opening verses of his letter to the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul argues strongly against false teachers who have perverted the true gospel of Christ. His language is pretty emphatic. He says that even if angels were to teach a gospel that was different from what he taught, they should be "eternally condemned" (v. 8). He, then, proceeds to tell them about his own experience in receiving the gospel from God Himself.

Second Reading:

Galatians 1:11-19 NAS95 11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. 15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and

returned once more to Damascus. 18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

Paul makes it clear that what he had taught the Galatians about Jesus had not come from the teaching of other men. God's gracious provision of salvation by faith through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was revealed to Him by God Himself. It was on the road to Damascus (the story is told three times in the Book of Acts) that Jesus appeared to Paul (then called Saul) and dramatically changed his life.

The writer indicates that his readers knew that Saul, before his conversion, had persecuted the church of God, even trying to destroy it altogether. Because of his zeal for God and Judaism, he had risen high in his religious pursuits, being even more zealous for Jewish traditions than his contemporaries. God intervened in the persecutor's life, and Paul acknowledges that God had chosen him ("set me apart") even before his birth. The Apostle makes it very clear that it was all by grace; Paul had not earned the right to know and serve Jesus. In fact, his pre-conversion life and his sinful nature (like all the rest of us) could earn only God's wrath and condemnation. But in God's mercy—not giving us what we deserve, He offers us grace—giving us what we don't deserve as a gift when we put our trust in Jesus and acknowledge Him as Lord.

Paul continues to relate something of his early experience as a believer. He didn't consult with the church leaders, but he went away for meditation and learning. It was only after three years that he went to Jerusalem where the largest number of Christians was. He became acquainted with the Apostle Peter and stayed with him for two weeks. Paul is telling his readers all of this history so they would understand that the gospel he preached did not come from the teaching of other men but by direct revelation from God.

Perhaps the most important lesson from this reading for us today is to acknowledge that the gospel message preached and written by the Apostle Paul is the continuation of the story of Jesus—His life, ministry, and provision for the salvation of those who will trust in Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This significant event in the life of Jesus reminds us of the earlier reading of Elijah's restoring the widow's son to life. We must keep in mind that miracles in the Bible have great temporal benefit when they occur, but their primary purpose is to certify the prophet (or Messiah) as a bona fide messenger of God and to authenticate their message.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 7:11-17 NAS95 11 Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. 12 Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable

crowd from the city was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. 16 Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" 17 This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district.

The story is simple. A widow's only son has died and is being carried to his burial. Jesus demonstrates once again his compassion for the suffering, and he orders the young man to arise. Immediately, he is restored to life and begins to speak. There is a significant difference in this event from the prophet's raising of the widow's son in the Old Testament. In Elijah's case, he was alone with the boy. There were no witnesses, but, of course, the miracle happened nonetheless. In Luke's story, there were the people in the funeral procession ("a sizeable crowd") and Jesus and His disciples who were accompanied by a large crowd.

We can be sure that the mother was overjoyed at the raising of her son, but this miraculous resurrection brought fear to the crowd. Whether that was basically terror because of the extraordinary event or fright at the power demonstrated by this unusual preacher, we do not know. In any case, whether they understood fully what they were saying or not, they spoke truthfully, acknowledging that Jesus was "a great prophet." Furthermore, they confessed that "God has visited His people." The report of this event spread widely throughout the countryside. One might wonder, then, why Jesus was not more widely accepted by those who saw the miracles and heard the preaching.

Before we cast judgment upon those who did not respond in faith to what they witnessed, accepting Jesus as their promised Messiah, we must examine our own hearts. We have this story and many more recorded in the Gospels. We have the teachings of the New Testament witnesses, which, as the Apostle John wrote, "… were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways do the miracles recorded in the Bible cause you to bow in adoration and worship before the God of the miracles?

2. Have you rejected the false teachings of men and trusted fully and only in the gospel message that Jesus paid the price for your sin and offers you the gift of eternal life by faith?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/060516.cfm

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Lectionary: 90

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-29-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-29-2016**. This week we spend a great deal of time discussing the mysterious person of Melchizedek mentioned in a reading from Genesis. We dedicate so much time to this man because of the way his ministry prefigures the eternal intercession and finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. In the second reading we learn from Saint

Paul's teaching about the celebration of communion and conclude this week's study with the miracle of our Lord's feeding of the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

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

Now, with this wisdom in mind let's answer the question we posited in the opening, why is Melchizedek such an important person, and what application does his ministry has for our lives today? As Christians, we cannot underestimate the importance of what Melchizedek's priesthood teaches us. First, the "Melchizedekian" is eternal, in contrast to the Jewish sacrificial system that passed away after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Truly, the Levitical priesthood died the moment that Jesus died and the veil was torn in two (Matthew 27:51) although the Jews nursed it along for another four decades. Second, the priesthood of Jesus is eternal and is not tied to the life of the priest. Hebrews says, "The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing," (Hebrews 7:23). This is a critically important point because the Scripture says regarding Jesus, "Therefore He is able also to save **forever** those who draw near to God through Him, since **He always lives to make intercession for them** (Hebrews 7:25, emphasis added). Bold text alone does not do provide this quote with enough emphasis, as the implications for the church and the Christian are enormous:

- Since Jesus lives eternally, He is always there for us. His intercession with the Father God is eternal on our behalf. In contrast, human priests died and their ministries ended with their passing.
- Regardless of whatever type of human priesthood was instituted after Jesus' death, the Scripture is clear that the sacrificial system and associated priesthood was eliminated by God forever. The sacrifice of lambs (Exodus 12:5, Numbers 28:7), wine (Numbers 28:7), or bread (Leviticus 7:13) was forever eliminated by Jesus willingly offering Himself and one perfect sacrifice forever, because "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). We can be thankful that Jesus' sacrifice cannot ever be repeated, and will never need to be.
- Jesus declared victor over sin, something whereas the Levitical priesthood left a memory of sin. We see this clearly in the Book of Hebrews.

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

- Jesus is the Victor of sin, and is nowhere in the Bible every portrayed as a victim but He chose to go the cross. Jesus is our Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the One Who suffered on our behalf. Jesus said, "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:18). Because Jesus was victorious over sin, we can be victorious over sin as well. The Bible says, "but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).
- Jesus instituted a new priesthood consisting of all believers, and the old, broken, bloody, corrupt (Matthew 21:13) sacrificial system of the Old Testament has passed away forever. The Scripture says, "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). As believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we offer continual **spiritual** sacrifices to God. "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

What does this reading mean for our lives? First, God calls us not to forsake the assembly together in the communion service (Hebrews 10:25). As we celebrate communion from now until the day the Lord Jesus returns we look back to the one sacrifice that He made for our sins. Second, we can

recognize that we are saved by grace through faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9) the same as Moses and the other believers in the Old Testament. They looked forward to Jesus through the symbols of God's supernatural provision through manna and the healing by faith in God by humbly kneeling before the bronze serpent. The elements of communion are the way in which we remember Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed to pay the debts for our sin. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). This truly is a celebration, for though our sins are scarlet, we have been washed as white as snow through this sacrifice. We now live in response to this great and precious gift. May you not only celebrate communion, but each day, with a joyful and thankful heart.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:11-17 NAS95 11 But the crowds were aware of this and followed Him; and welcoming them, He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing. 12 Now the day was ending, and the twelve came and said to Him, "Send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place." 13 But He said to them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people." 14 (For there were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, "Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each." 15 They did so, and had them all sit down. 16 Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people. 17 And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets full.

As the story progressed, we know from the parallel accounts that Jesus asked Philip (who was from this region) to provide for the crowd. We know from that account that Philip responded to Jesus stating that to buy that much food would require the amount of 200 days' wages. This was a significant amount but worthless that far away from the city and in light of the huge size of the crowd. Nevertheless, the people had followed Jesus some distance away from the city and saw Him as One Who would provide for them, so it was natural for Jesus to accommodate their needs through His disciples. In this case, the people found out that God was the true multiplier of things. Again, we know from the parallel account in John that the people did indeed recognize Jesus as a Prophet, seemingly the One prophesied about in Deuteronomy 18:15. However, they misunderstood the role of the Messiah (John 6: 14 – 15). The people saw in Jesus a political ruler Who could free them from their poverty and Roman oppression. In the end, twelve baskets were left over corresponding exactly to the count of Jesus' disciples. Each disciple was left with one basket to highlight Jesus' ability to provide in the midst of impossible circumstances. God provided the food regardless of the people's faith and used this sign to point to the True Messiah Jesus.

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

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Going Deeper

Another figure that prefigured this ministry was Joseph in the Book of Genesis, then later on King David, also of the tribe of Judah. Do your own study on these people and see what amazing parallels you can draw between them and Jesus.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/052916.cfm

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Lectionary: 169

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-22-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-22-2016**. This week examine a reading from Proverbs and learn something about the Person of Jesus Christ. In the second reading we see how God uses trials in the life of a believer to make them grow in their faith and trust in Him. In the Gospel reading we learn about how Jesus promised His disciples how He would send the Holy Spirit to empower them to accomplish His work and to persevere through the tribulations that He predicted would come upon them.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Proverbs is a Book that provides wisdom from God on a variety of matters. Most of the Proverbs were written by King Solomon. While reading this section of the Bible we have to remember that these biblical principles were delivered to a people bound to the Mosaic Law. Additionally, we must keep in mind that they are general proscriptive principles and not prescriptive in every case. For example, Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it." While this is a good and godly principle all of us are acquainted with circumstances of parents who closely followed this principle but yet had wayward children. Proverbs 8 begins with the personification of wisdom, a common theme in this Book. "Does not wisdom call, And understanding lift up her voice?"

First Reading:

Proverbs 8:22-31 NAS95 22 "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. 23 From everlasting I was established, From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. 24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, When there were no springs abounding with water. 25 Before the mountains were settled, Before the hills I was brought forth; 26 While He

had not yet made the earth and the fields, Nor the first dust of the world. 27 When He established the heavens, I was there, When He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, 28 When He made firm the skies above, When the springs of the deep became fixed, 29 When He set for the sea its boundary So that the water would not transgress His command, When He marked out the foundations of the earth; 30 Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, 31 Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And having my delight in the sons of men."

The reading opens with the idea of the eternity of a certain person, "me" in verse 22. While we can say that God foreknew those whom He also "predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29) and therefore knew us as believers in eternity past, the plain sense of these verses points to the eternality of the Person of Jesus Christ. The wording used by the author aligns with what John said about Jesus Christ in his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The proverb says about this Person that He was established from everlasting, "From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth" (v. 23a). John said about Jesus, "We was in the beginning with God" (John 1:2). The proverb also speaks to the role of Jesus as the creator, while at the same time brings out the unity that exists between the Father God and the Son. Verse 30 says, "Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him." Colossians 1:16 says, "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities–all things have been created through Him and for Him." Yet Isaiah said, "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, "I, the Lord, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself, and spreading out the earth all alone." Finally, in Genesis 1:2 we see that "the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" during creation. Therefore, the Trinity of God was involved in the creation process, we see a sense of this in today's reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from Romans follows Saint Paul's teaching on justification by faith alone. Today's reading opens with the word "therefore," and as always we need to reflect upon what this word is "there for." In the reading that follows, the "therefore" provides the linkage to Paul's persuasive argument to the Christians in Rome regarding how God had justified them through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Paul looked back to how "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Romans 4:3) Paul taught how Jesus "was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:25). Paul's point was that as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ we inherit the righteousness of God through our faith in Him, "just as if" we had never sinned at all. Understanding the legal concept of justification is essential because otherwise it makes our salvation the result of our "good" works. Salvation is something which God has stated expressly we cannot earn. "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). Through our faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross we have a new judicial standing before the throne of God, "just as if" we had never sinned. For once we believe God has "removed our sins as far as the east is from west" (Psalms 103:12). Our faith is extremely important in the eyes of God, for God sees us through the righteousness of Christ (Romans 13;14, Galatians 3:27, Job 29:14, Isaiah 61:10, Revelation 3:4).

[Note: Our online readers will benefit by being able to quickly peruse these verses by the verse lookup feature by hovering over each of them. We encourage everyone to study all of the quoted verses used each week in Mass Notes.]

Second Reading:

Romans 5:1-5 NAS95 1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Paul taught how through our faith we are justified and "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). Paul taught in Colossians how as nonbelievers we were alienated from God (Colossians 1:21). Interestingly, in that same section of Colossians Paul continued with the concept of rejoicing in suffering (Colossians 1:24), which is exactly what Paul did in verse three of today's reading. Paul said, "we also exult in our tribulations" (v. 3a). He said that the reason we are called to do this is because it builds perseverance which leads to godly character, then onwards to hope (v. 4).

In applying today's reading we may ask how tribulation produces perseverance, character, and hope? Tribulation, a word which literally means "suffering," are any type of tests to your faith. This includes things like health problems, broken or strained relationships, persecution by nonbelievers, financial concerns, and the death of a loved one. If we turn to God during our trials, we can expect to experience growth in our faith as we see how God delivers us through them. God may deliver us from them, or sometimes He may. But regardless, the promise in today's reading is that if when we persist in faith God will use our trials to conform us more perfectly to the image of Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant of God (Isaiah 53:1-12).

As I was reflecting upon the ways in which God has worked in my own life (see study question #2), I reviewed some of the thoughts that I had written in one of my prayer journals. In one journal entry dated 9/13/2011 me and my wife had been praying for a man we know to find a godly wife. I am pleased to report that he got married in the summer of 2015 to a very godly young woman whom he met at church. In another entry dated 12/4/2011 I had been praying for God to provide a means for me to pay off a $25,000 surgical bill. In that case God provided through a combination of insurance and provisions through bonuses and my salary at work. As I continued to review my prayer journal I

see how God has worked in so many different people's lives. Yet some of the people whom we have been praying continue to struggle. One in particular has had a half-down year long struggle in her life with chronic pain in her back. Perhaps God desires us to continue to pull together as believer to pray for her, and I am confident that He will continue to work in her life.

More recently however, God has been working in a miraculous way in my life. Men frequently don't share the struggles with their wives that they may have in their thought life. We should however share these both with God and when appropriate with a prayer partner of the same sex who would understand. Recently after watching a Christian movie that focused upon how God is able to produce miracles in the lives of people who pray boldly with faith I sensed a calling from God to present to Him a particular struggle that I was having with my thought life. After I was all pumped up spiritually after watching that Christian film, I brought this matter boldly to the Lord in prayer. After a week went by in which I did not struggle with this particular thought pattern, the thought occurred to me that perhaps God was up to something in my life. After a month had gone by I began to understand that God had indeed intervened in my life, and then began to focus upon ways to prevent myself from falling into this particular pattern again. What are some areas in which you are struggling? We encourage you to bring these to God and expect His answer as you persist in prayer to Him. If you feel your faith is weak, pray that God would first give you the faith that you need. Perhaps He will lead you to study a particular book, or meet with a particular person. But do expect God to show up when you come to Him boldly in prayer.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from John chapter 16 is Jesus' counsel to His disciples about how they will be able to prosper once He leaves the world through His sending of the Holy Spirit. They are to expect great persecution and be "outcasts from the synagogue" (John 16:2). In fact the deception of nonbelievers in world will be so bad that "everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (v. 2b). Jesus promised how then when He went away He would send the "Helper," Who would "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (v. 8).

Gospel Reading:

John 16:12-15 NAS95 12 "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. 14 He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. 15 All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you."

Jesus taught His disciples how the Holy Spirit would "guide them into all the truth" (v. 13b). The prophecy of the Holy Spirit led to the inspiration of our Holy Bible. Peter spoke about this by saying, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). The Word of God is but one of many ministries of the Holy Spirit that we as

believers possess. The Spirit also works to draw unbelievers to faith in the Lord Jesus, convict both believers and nonbelievers of their sin, regenerate our spirits making us "born from above" (John 3:3), sanctify us in the Lord, help us in prayer, guide us in understand Scripture, provide us with comfort through His divine power dwelling within us, and provides us with gifts and fruits of the Spirit. Although Jesus' disciples certainly couldn't understand the implications of His prophecy concerning the coming of the Spirit, they spent their lives living out the fullness of all that the Spirit had to offer them even though they endured unparalleled tribulation in their lives.

We too are called to partake of God's divine gift through the ministry offered to us in the Holy Spirit that lives within us. It is this Spirit that empowers us to live lives pleasing to God. In order to take advantage of the Spirit's guidance "into all the truth" mentioned in today's reading, we must endeavor to become students of God's Word in the Bible. Our prayer is that these weekly studies will prompt you to go further in your study of God's word, and "test all things, holding fast to that which is true" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What is something through which you either are suffering, or have suffered in recent years? In what ways have you seen how God produced in you the character qualities noted by Paul of increased faith, perseverance and character?

2. Perhaps one of the most useful ways in which you can learn from the tribulations allowed by God in your life is to journal about your experiences and then look back upon how God used these circumstances for His eternal purposes and your own good (Romans 8:28). If you have written down anything in past years, retrieve these journal entries and review the changes that have occurred since then. In what ways can you see how God actively used these trials to produce perseverance and character in your life?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/052216.cfm

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Lectionary: 166

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-15-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-15-2016**, Pentecost Sunday. We open with the first reading from Acts that chronicled the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in the early church. Then we move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and discuss the gifts of the Spirit. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint John where we will examine what it means when Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The theme of the readings this week goes like this: In the first reading, we see God's sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the second reading, we see the revelation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from 1 Corinthians is Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts. The opening verses of chapter 12, from which today's reading are drawn make this clear and provide some important contextual information. "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led" (1 Corinthians 12:1-2). It's interesting how Paul wrote about how the Corinthian non-believers were pagans whereas by implication these new believers were non-pagans. Their conversion to Christianity resulted in a change of character, from pagan idolaters "led astray to mute idols," to those transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2). Today's reading opens with the word "therefore" which provides a logical linkage to the people whose lives were transformed by God through their conversion by faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3-13)

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

healing were very important as "sign gifts" that greatly increased the spread of the Gospel to a culture thoroughly immersed in the worship of idols. God used these sign gifts in a powerful way as we can see in the first reading with the empowerment of the disciples to speak in various languages.

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

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

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

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

We see that the forgiveness of our sin is free gift of God that comes by believing the good news of

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading records one of Jesus' post resurrection appearances to His disciples. Let's read what happened that Sunday evening when Jesus made a surprise visit to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

Gospel Reading:

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

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

What do the three themes we discovered in the readings today mean in our lives? First, God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His believers in order to accomplish His purposes. He sent a diversity of gifts to a diversity of people in such a way that it forces the Church to work together as the Body of Christ. Second, God commissioned all believers, not just the ten disciples that were gathered in the

room at Pentecost, to fulfil His Great Commission. This means that everyone that believes is to work to spread the Gospel message and to disciple believers, recognizing that not everyone will be gifted in either of these two particular areas. Some will be called to teach, and some to evangelize. You can rest assured that if you truly commit your heart to the Lord that you won't automatically be called by Him as a missionary in Africa. However, you can be assured that God will call you to use whatever spiritual gift(s) that He has given you to your fullest ability.

As I am writing this week's study, I just returned from the funeral service of a friend back in our hometown. The man who passed away was quite young (his mid-50's) and was a lifelong believer in the Lord Jesus. As I have been reflecting upon his life, one of the things that stands out to me is his faithfulness. Although God gifted the man in various ways, he used these gifts in serving him faithfully up until he got sick and died quickly. Although he was a simple and uncomplicated man, he was always faithful in helping others. Although God doesn't call everyone to do the same things for Him, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

1 Corinthians 12:28-30 NAS95 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

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

2. What is your spiritual gift or gifts? One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other

believers for sometimes we cannot clearly recognize our own gifting. Another way it to use one of the many varieties of spiritual gift tests available online. Here is a link to one that I have found useful: http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1

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

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/051516-pentecost-day.cfm

Pentecost Sunday, Mass during the Day, Lectionary: 63

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-8-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-8-2016**. This week we will see in the first reading the murderous reaction of the Jews to Stephen's message in the Book of Acts. Then we continue the study from previous weeks from the Book of Revelation and conclude with the Gospel reading where we see Jesus' prayer on our behalf.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

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

First Reading:

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

The main point of the reading was the great similarities between the way Stephen died and the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the same way that Jesus' death was filled with miracles (earthquake, darkening of the sky) Stephen's death was also miraculous in that he told how he saw a vision of the Lord Jesus exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven and graciously prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers. In both of these cases, the Council heard false testimony and then rushed to execute the death sentence upon them. Just as Jesus did (Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed right before his death for God's forgiveness of their great sin of killing him (v. 54). As the saying goes, the apples don't fall far from the tree. As Jesus' devout apostle, Stephen followed closely the way of his master including forgiving his tormenters before his death. Ultimately, instead of having the Jews' desired effect of stopping the spread of the Christian message, the persecution of Stephen did quite the opposite. Stephen's example of bold testimony in the midst of persecution emboldened those that went after him as the growing church spread out across the globe.

There are three other points that emerge from the reading. The first is the introduction of Saul, who we know later as the Apostle Paul (v. 58). Here we see Saul assisting in the persecution of Stephen in guarding the cloaks of the people who were stoning Stephen to death. This was just a foretaste because we know that in the next chapter Saul began raging a holy war against the Christians. There Luke records, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging

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

An application of the reading is that as believers we can expect to face persecution. Saint Paul said, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). As we do, we should remember that the church often grows the most during these times, as well as we may experience the most personal growth in these circumstances. We should endeavor in advance to develop a philosophy of suffering under persecution to the extent that when it comes upon us we are prepared to respond in ways that lead us closer to God. The North African apologist Tertullian (c. 160 – 225) wrote much about suffering and persecution. He said, "But go zealously on, good presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent" (Tertullian's *Apology*, Chapter 50).

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study in Revelation that we have looked at for the past several weeks. The context of today's reading is Jesus' closing words to the world as delivered by the angel to John. When John saw the angel, his immediate response was to bow down and worship him (Revelation 22:8). Instead, the angel told John, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation

22:9). Regardless of who brought the message, as you read the words that John recorded from the angel you will see that the message is directly from Jesus Christ Himself. Although the text doesn't state this outright as happens in the Old Testament prophets when they say, "Thus says the Lord," verse 16 says that the message is from Jesus.

Second Reading:

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

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

Jesus' closing message is full of important scriptural truths:

- His return will be quickly (v. 12) in the sense that when it begins to happen the events will unfold quickly. Jesus bookmarked today's reading by closing with this same admonition, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (v. 20). Jesus said about this in the Gospel of Matthew, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). When the end-times events begin to unfold they will be concluded within a single generation.
- Jesus will reward those who served Him by bringing their rewards to them when He returns (v. 12). Justice will be provided by "render[ing] to every man according to what he has done." This means at least in part that He will bring punishment to those who don't serve Him when He returns. Verse 15 makes this clear, "Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying." In

contrast, believers "take the water of life without cost" (v. 17) since they thirst for the ways of God and are the eternal recipients of His grace (unmerited favor).

- Believers are those who "who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city" (v. 14). They are those who "hears the words of the prophecy of this book" without adding to or taking away from them (v. 18) as the false teachers were doing (and are doing today). Countless theological cults engage in practices that either nullify the Word of God (take away from it) or add legalistic, religious practices that their followers must observe in order to be saved (add to it). Jesus provides a clear warning not to do either of these things because otherwise they shall be forced along with all the other nonbelievers to enter into the Great Tribulation. This is the Day of the Lord's judgement spoken of in Revelation and previously by the Old Testament Prophets such as Jeremiah.
- Jesus, in His grace, sent this message specifically to the churches (v. 16) in order that they may receive and learn from Him the only way to the tree of life (v. 19). Those who resist His message of salvation through faith in Him alone (John 14:6) will find themselves eternally locked out of the holy city.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

John 17:20-26 NAS95 20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; 26 and I have made Your name known to them,

and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

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

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

- Jesus is coming quickly
- Jesus is the rewarder
- Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end

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- Jesus is the Root and descendent of David
- Jesus is the bright morning Star

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/050816-seventh-sunday-easter.cfm

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Lectionary: 61

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Going Deeper

The following is the text of Stephen's speech in the Book of Acts:

Acts 7:1-53 NAS95 1 The high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' 4 "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 "But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. 6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 7 "'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.' 8 "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. 9 "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11 "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. 12 "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13 "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family

was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 "Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. 15 "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16 "From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. 17 "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18 until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. 19 "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. 20 "It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. 21 "And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22 "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. 23 "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26 "On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? 28 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?' 29 "At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons. 30 "After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. 31 "When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33 "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. 34 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.' 35 "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. 36 "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' 38 "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. 39 "Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, 40 SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT–WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' 41 "At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 "But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as

it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? 43 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.' 44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. 45 "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. 46 "David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. 48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 49 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE? 50 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?' 51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Questions:

1. Synthesize Stephen's speech into one or two sentences.

2. Why do you think Stephen went into such great detail about Jewish history and did not mention Jesus by name?

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