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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 20: 01/04/2026



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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week, we will first examine the second reading from Saint Paul, since the first reading from Isaiah and the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew must be studied together in light of Paul's insights. The second reading is Ephesians Chapter Three, where Paul unveiled a mystery hidden throughout the ages until after Jesus' First Advent, which we just celebrated at Christmas. As you read this section of Ephesians (without all of the skipped verses), try to select the single verse that

Saint Paul provided that summarizes this mystery.

Second Reading:

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

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

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted into the people of God through the Church (Romans 11:17). It is essential to understand, at least at a high level, Paul's background as we discuss this mystery revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who, from all accounts, would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strict Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be the children's game in which the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respective holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole, regardless of how forcefully a person went about it, their talent, or their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted it would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day that the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, who will stand as a signal for the peoples, and His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in

Isaiah, in the section covered in today's first reading, which, with the benefit of history, we find was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

> *1 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth, And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you, And His glory will appear upon you. 3 And nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)*

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v. 2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v. 3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in this previous study. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but we know it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation described in the Book of Revelation, Chapters 6–18. During this period, God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second, He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles

remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him. At the same time, the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

Note the types of gifts that the future Gentile leaders will bring to King Jesus. "They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6d). Throughout history, gold has been the most valuable of all metals. It's a rare and valuable treasure, a perfect gift that never degrades, making it an excellent offering to Jesus, who reigns as LORD. Frankincense is very familiar to any Catholic, as this material produces a most pleasant aroma when burned and smells of perfume in its native form.

I was an altar boy for most of my younger years and was frequently in proximity to the priest burning this sweet-smelling material. The burning of incense symbolizes the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven (Revelation 5:8). Future world leaders will present their gifts of gold and incense directly to the Source of their salvation, the Lord Himself! What a joyous occasion this will be!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." 3 And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL*

> *SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." 9 And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. 10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)*

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

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

Finally, when they arrived in Bethlehem and located Jesus, they presented their *three* gifts to him. The Magi's gift of gold would have been beneficial to the holy family during their subsequent flight to Egypt, which was necessary to flee King Herod. Notice the similarity of their gifts mentioned in the first reading from Isaiah 60, but with one glaring addition: myrrh. Myrrh was something used throughout the eastern world as an embalming agent. These kings of the east presented Mary and Joseph with a precious gift for the future burial of their Son. Look at it this way. One day, you

attended the baptism of an infant in the church, and afterwards, one of the guests presented the happy couple with a beautiful new coffin for the child. Yes, the coffin could be sold, and the money could be used to raise the child, but what kind of message would the gift's presentation give the parents? The magi, unbeknownst to themselves, predicted the death of the Messiah. Little did they know that His death was a necessary part of the redemptive story so that you and I might have eternal life. In a future age, Gentile believers will present gifts of gold and incense to Jesus; the need for myrrh has been done away with because Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death for you and me.

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

Reflection Questions

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

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