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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 12-25-202



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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading from Isaiah deals with what Bible commentators and theologians call the "Millennial Reign of Christ." This is the period of time during which Jesus returns to the earth to restore His rightful rulership taken from him as a result of Satan's usurpation (refer to Genesis 3) and the subsequent crucifixion. Jesus willingly handed over His life as a Victor of sin, He is nowhere portrayed as a victim. Isaiah's prophecy deals with Jesus' future literal reign after the Great Tribulation period. During this time God reveals His special plan for the Nation of Israel with the

capital city of Jerusalem along with the Gentiles ("nations") who believed in the name of the Lord Jesus. "*The nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name Which the mouth of the LORD will designate*" (Isa 62:2).

First Reading:

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

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

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

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

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-25-2016



Christmas Day, Mass at Dawn. Merry Christmas and welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week in this brief edition, we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's been an interesting couple of weeks for me as I write this in December, 2016. Although I have been very busy at work due to a colleague on leave to help his wife with their new son (praise God), my heart has been moved by the loss of two friends in recent days. The first, a dear saint of the Lord was taken after a brief illness brought about as the result of an auto accident. I am thankful that his suffering only lasted a few weeks and am very grateful for his Christian testimony that he left behind. I went to school with David from kindergarten to 12'th grade. Although his funeral was held

on the other side of the country, through the wonders of technology, I was able to watch it live online. The second one was a former coworker who fought a decade long battle with breast cancer. The passing away of friends is always hard, but when it happens at Christmas it's worse. All that we can do is to look forward to Jesus' eventual return to destroy death forever. This is how we can look at today's readings. We seek to understand their challenges and learn how they too looked forward to the eternal reign of the perfect Messiah on a perfect earth with people made perfect by God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Isaiah is a continuation of God's promised blessings that were to come upon the land. Isaiah's words looked far into the future to a point during which "The sun shall be nor more your light by day" (Isaiah 60:19a). We see this same era described by John in the closing section of the Book of Revelation. "And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). Isaiah transcribed events given to him by God such as to collapse near and far terms events together, and spoke of events that have both a near term and distant fulfillment, such as the prophecy of the birth of the child in Isaiah 7:14. There we see the birth of a son to Isaiah as a sign to King Ahaz, as well as the prophecy of the birth of The Son Jesus to the Virgin Mary. The opening verses of this chapter continue the explanation of how the Hebrew nation, exemplified in His holy city Jerusalem, will be a light to *all* of the nations, not just to those in our current age who believe.

First Reading:

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

Isaiah proclaimed God's message about how God would bring salvation to the ends of the earth through a Person, with God's people and holy city as a beacon displaying His holiness and beauty. Verse 11 is the case were with the benefit of hindsight we see a dual fulfillment, First, we see salvation as coming in the form of a Person, "Behold His reward is with Him," prefiguring the beginning of the Lord Jesus' ministry. Second, we see the promise of the completion of the Messiah's ministry that Scripture says will happen at His second coming when He will establish His kingdom reign on earth. The proclamation in this verse is directed towards God, something that we also see in a similar way in Cyrus' proclamation to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (see 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). The Lord has proclaimed to the ends of the earth that His Righteous One will come and bring His rewards to all who believe with Him. In Isaiah's day, the temple in Jerusalem was the beacon of God's holiness to His chosen people the Jews. One day, Jerusalem, the holy city and beacon of God's chosen people, will no longer be called "forsaken," but "sought out" (v. 12).

What does Isaiah's message directed to the Hebrew Nation back in the eighth century BC mean to us today? Although we too may feel forsaken as we endure pain, suffering and death, we too can

focus upon and believe that God will one day fix everything! Although we may struggle today, we are promised by God with a proclamation that reaches until the ends of the earth that our future restoration is coming. God proclaims a message to everyone so that they will believe, and "is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Second, as Christians we too are called to be beacons of God's good news like the Jews. We too are the "sought out" (v. 12) ones, a people who God went selected to believe through the free gift of faith in His one and only Son Jesus. Although in our era we cannot relate to how God's holiness was manifested in the temple in Jerusalem, we have to remember that when Isaiah wrote this although the temple was standing its destruction and ruin was in the near future. God spoke through Isaiah as if the eternal temple of God was already manifested to His people. God calls us in a similar way to remember that although the "temples" of our bodies will be destroyed, God's holiness will be displayed through our future restoration to a kingdom in which there will be no pain. There we will be God's eternal beacons of His holiness forever.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Titus is Paul's teaching on the characteristics of godly leaders in the church. In verses 1 – 2 of this chapter Paul gave a list of things that leaders were to do, followed by a reminder of the evil ways in which they used to live before they found faith in the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

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

Today's reading opens with the phrase, "But when," which provides a linkage back to the list of ungodly characteristics which God had delivered them from as the result of His indwelling Holy Spirit after they had believed. Paul went on to explain in today's reading how God saves people not because of their good works, "but according to His mercy" (v. 4c). He delivers us from our former sinful state through "the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" Who was manifested to us through the person of Jesus Christ (v. 6) so that "being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (v. 7).

The "But when" phrase in the opening harkens back to what Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." But for God all of us would be dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). As Paul did in Ephesians, he explained in today's reading how good works do not earn a person merit with God that counts towards their earning their way into heaven. Rather, salvation is a free gift of God for everyone who believes. Good works flow out of a heart changed by God as evidence of the Holy Spirit's transformation ministry.

This reading along with many others reveals the nature of salvation as a free gift, not something that we can earn, no matter how hard we try. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Our justly deserved payment for our sins is death, "for the wages of sin is death but the **gift** of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23, emphasis added). Saint Paul also said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the **gift of God**; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). How appropriate it is to understand during this Christmas season if we are fortunate enough to open presents that salvation is the greatest gift of all that comes only through our faith in the risen Lord Jesus! May we recognize this grandest of all gifts and share this gift with others by telling them about Jesus' plan for their lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Luke and records the details just after Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem. The "Angel of the Lord" had just appeared to a group of frightened shepherds in the field and brought a message to them. "But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12). Next, "suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased'" (Luke 2:13-14).

Gospel Reading:

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

The shepherds were so deeply moved by their experience with the angels that they went immediately to Bethlehem, the City of David, as told by the angel. Here they found the baby Jesus lying in a manger just as the angel said it would be. How fitting it was for Jesus to be born here, "the Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), since this is where all of the sacrificial lambs had to be born. In the closing verses, Dr. Luke records how Mary quietly "treasured all [of] these things" (v. 19a), while the shepherds went off publically proclaiming the miracle and praising God. This differing response reflects Mary's self-reflective nature, although many commentators have made much discussion concerning it. Regardless, the shepherds began the proclamation of the good news of Jesus' birth in a way that glorified God (v. 20). We can only wonder about the joy that Mary and Joseph must have felt in their hearts!

Perhaps the shepherds weren't the most unlikely group to whom the angel would reveal the prophecy about the birth of the Lord Jesus in nearby Bethlehem. Although they were a group of people who were considered some of the lowest in the society, Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Therefore, what better way for God to reveal His plan to the world than through a group of shepherds near Bethlehem?

We too come like lowly shepherds seeking the Lord Jesus Christ. As we saw in today's readings, Jesus is the free gift about Whom the prophets and shepherds proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Let's pray that today that no matter what comes upon us this Christmas season that we maintain our focus upon this greatest gift that was ever given, the Lord Jesus Christ who died to take away our sins. Merry Christmas.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do you feel that you are trying to earn your way to heaven? How does the second reading help you to understand God's truth about the way one comes to possess eternal life with God?

2. If Jesus was to be born in our present day, who would be the group of "shepherds" in our society? How does understanding the revelation of Jesus through this lowest social class in the ancient society help us to relate to how Jesus reveals Himself to us today?

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