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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-01-2023



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week begins with an Old Testament reading that expresses a wonderful benediction on God's people. The second reading is most appropriate for this season of the year. Paul writes to the church in Galatia and encourages them with the marvelous truth that God sent His Son, Jesus, to be the promised Messiah, and He did so at just the right time. The Gospel reading reveals one of the prominent features of the Christmas story, the shepherds, who were the first to hear of the newborn child.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Book of Numbers takes up the story where Exodus left it; Leviticus was parenthetical with lots of teaching about the law that had first been noted in Exodus. Numbers is a book of order, preparing the people for the wilderness wanderings. Its theme is service, how God's people should worship and walk in a life of purity.

First Reading:

Numbers 6:22-27 NAS95 22 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 23 "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: 24 The LORD bless you, and keep you; 25 The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; 26 The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.' 27 "So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them."

There are three triplets in vv. 24-26. Could that be a hint of the Trinity? In any case, there are five blessings that the priest is to share with the people. "The LORD bless you" is the first. The term means merely that God will show favor to His people. That would have been a great encouragement to this multitude of people wandering in the wilderness. "… and keep you." God promises to guard, protect, and preserve His people. "The LORD make His face shine on you." This was the request of the psalmist many years later, "Let the light of your face shine on us" (Psalm 4:6). You will recall that after Moses met with the Lord on Mt. Sinai, his face shone with the reflected glory of God (Exodus 34:30). And Paul tells us that "the knowledge of God's glory [is] displayed in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

"And be gracious to you." God is the God of grace; He continually gives to His people what they don't deserve (that's grace). "The LORD lift up His countenance on you" is another way of saying "make His face shine on you." It's a comfort to know that God is always looking at His people and seeking to provide for them. "And give you peace." The Old Testament word for peace is still heard today in many parts of the Middle East. It's "shalom," and it means far more than the absence of hatred and war. It suggests health and wholeness, harmony. And, of course, it is only God who can give that kind of peace ultimately.

To make this text relevant to believers today, remember that if you are in Christ, God extends these same blessings to you: favor or grace, protection and provision, shining His face on you, and giving you spiritual health and wholeness.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's letter to the Galatians is an argument against falling away from the faith. It's a challenge to recognize our position in Christ and conduct our lives as people of faith. The portion we're reading today has some really deep theological content that is important for the believer to understand.

Second Reading:

Galatians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.

The first verse of our study takes us to the Christmas theme, "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman." It's the fulfillment of centuries of the promises of the Old Testament prophets. And it occurred at exactly the right time; Paul describes it as "the fullness of the time." The known world at the time of Christ's coming was largely centralized with the Roman Empire in control. There was a trade language that was known worldwide, so the message of the Gospel could be circulated and understood within a few years of Christ's life. Many of the religions of the day were expecting some kind of "savior." During the 400 silent years between the Old and New Testament God was preparing men, nations, and civilizations—unwittingly to them—for the Messiah's arrival.

In fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, Jesus was born. And Paul gives the reason for His coming: "that He might redeem those who were under the law." He came to be the sufficient sacrifice that God demanded as the penalty for our sin. But, there's more than that. Paul speaks of "the adoption as sons." In the culture of that day, a lad had no legal rights or standing until he reached a certain age. He was a real son of his father, but he was not entitled to an inheritance or standing as an adult son until he reached that age, and then he was "adopted" legally as the heir of his father. God, in His grace, has given to the believer today the Holy Spirit ("Spirit of His Son"), and we can call God "Father" or "Papa." As the young men in Galatia, once they were adopted, they were no longer like slaves, they were legitimate sons, heirs. So are believers today; no longer slaves to sin and the law, but free, adopted sons of the Father. And it's all of God's doing out of His amazing love and grace.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Among the many "Christmas" passages in the Bible, Luke 2 is probably the most often read. As told there, the story is filled with the miracles associated with the coming of Messiah, with a report of the first to be told, the shepherd. On the other hand, Matthew 2 tells of the wise men from the East who were led by a star to find the promised Jesus. We would do well, however, to read Philippians 2, also,

which in a way tells the Christmas story from Jesus' point of view (vv. 5-8) and what it cost Him. Today's reading begins after the birth of Jesus and the shepherds hearing the announcement from the angels.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:16-21 NAS95 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. 21 And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision,

His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb.

In our passage today we read that the shepherds, after hearing the announcement from the angels, "came in a hurry" to check out the story. Isn't it interesting that the announcement was made to men who were considered to be pretty low on society's register? But, it was to them that the announcement was made. We don't know all that they had been told, but they obviously believed the angels' message. They came and saw, and then they left to spread the good news, all the while "glorifying and praising God." As a result, many heard the story and wondered about it.

We're told that Mary also pondered about what had happened. The birth had been foretold, so she knew that this little baby was to be the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32). There is a popular Christmas song that asks, "Mary, did you know?" Well, she knew a lot. The angel had told her that this baby would be "great" and would have "the throne of David" and "reign over the house of Jacob forever in a "kingdom [that] will never end." (Luke 1:32-33). Even his name was given Mary and later to Joseph: Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). So, Mary knew a lot about God's purposes for this baby, but she couldn't understand it all. Thus, she wondered about what it all meant and how it would work out.

According to the custom and the practice laid down by God for His people, Mary and Joseph presented the child to God; He was circumcised on the 8th day, and He was given the name Jesus,

which means, "God saves." Thus began Jesus' human life on earth, one that He would eventually offer as the only sacrifice that can take away the sins of the world forever.

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Reflection Questions

1. Jesus, as the Son of God was truly God in the flesh, whereas we as children of God are adopted into His family. In what ways have you yourself understood what it means to be an "adopted" son or daughter of God?

2. As adopted children of God, not under the Law but under grace, in what ways to you rejoice in being free from the law and enjoying this father-son type of relationship with God?

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