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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-09-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we will learn about the fall of man and God's plan to redeem His fallen creation. In the second reading we will see how God provides us with a calling to examine and understand the need to have an eternal perspective. Finally, we will see a continuation of the divine / demonic battle in the Gospel lesson that runs throughout each of the three readings.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading from Genesis records the event known in biblical history as the "fall of man" during which humankind went from a state of innocence and walking with God to a state of sin and separation from God. Today's reading records not only the Fall, but also the first time that God revealed His plan for the redemption of humanity. This "protoevangelium" or first Gospel isn't perhaps evident from a cursory reading of verse 15 as we will see below. The context is just after the fall itself when the woman was deceived by the serpent, took of the forbidden fruit, ate it, gave it to the first man to eat, and the man then willingly ate of it (Genesis 3:1-6). Satan, in the form of a serpent, deceived the woman by telling her that eating of the fruit would make her like God,

possessing the knowledge of good and evil. This was partially true, as the woman already had the knowledge of good by walking with God in perfect fellowship prior to the fall. Second, by eating of the forbidden fruit she would then obtain the knowledge of evil. However, we know that Satan's offer to become like God, knowing good and evil was false because God cannot know evil or be the source of it (James 1:13). Immediately after the Fall, the first action that man and woman took was to create clothing to hide their shame and to hide themselves from God (Genesis 3:7-8). Again, note that the woman was deceived by the serpent, but that man willingly sinned.

In my Bible I have a small illustration drawn in the margin next to these verses. The image is that of a stick figure person which a very large head trying to hide behind one very skinny tree. The image came to my mind through the Peanuts comic character of Charlie Brown by Charles Schulz. Image Charlie Brown hiding behind his precious little, scrawny Christmas tree while trying to escape the prying eyes of Lucy. This is the scene that unfolds as God addresses the first couple in today's reading.

First Reading:

> *Genesis 3:9-15 NAS95 9 Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself." 11 And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" And the woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." 14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you will go, And dust you will eat All the days of your life; 15 And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."*

The reading opens with God Who knows all, seeking Adam and Eve in their hiding place. Here, God makes the first move towards forgiveness by asking them to come clean and confess their sin. The man was the first to answer and his first response was to blame the woman. The woman then answered and blamed the serpent. God's response was to first pronounce a curse upon the serpent, Satan, and his line (the demons who followed him). God's curse placed the line of Satan at odds with the line of the woman, her seed (v. 14f). God told them that in addition to the enmity between humanity Satan, that One would (by implication) would inflict a fatal wound to the head of Satan (bruise your head, v. 15c), while He would only suffer a "bruise on the heal" (v. 15d). Reading verse 15 again we see, "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and

her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." What are the implications of this divine war raged by Satan against us? These are many, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual [forces] of wickedness in the heavenly [places.]" (Ephesians 6:12).

As humans subject to the fall, we "all fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Like Adam and Eve, we are beset by guilt and shame as a result of our sin. The good news is the Gospel, the meaning of that word. Jesus came to pay the penalty owed to God for our sins. God sent Jesus into the world to redeem the world. Paul said, "But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). God made the first move after **our** sin, as we saw that He did for the first man and woman in the reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Second Corinthians. Saint Paul is the author of the this Letter written to the worldly Corinthians, perhaps people much like ourselves in some sense. This church was dealing with many issues related to having a worldly perspective. The culture of Corinth is likened to present-day Las Vegas, with a bit of Wall Street thrown in. While people came to believe in Jesus as Savior, it was a long process for them to orient their lives around His teaching and value system. One of the values that Paul communicated to them in this letter was the need to have an eternal perspective.

Second Reading:

> *2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1 NAS95 13 But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe, therefore we also speak, 14 knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. 15 For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. 16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 1 For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

An eternal perspective provides a foundational orientation to one's life and circumstances that is grounded in faith. In the previous verses, Paul talks about persecution and the obvious weaknesses of the human condition. We are finite human beings, having the treasure of who Christ is "in jars of clay." But, this was actually not an impediment, for God works through what is weak in order to show His surpassing greatness through us. We do not get glory, but God does. Paul continues in this vein, highlighting the supremacy of faith in Christ as the most important orienting foundation in a believer's life.

This faith is what gave Paul, and therefore by extension all believers, hope that there is more to this life than what can be seen. It was his belief in Christ's resurrection power that allowed Paul to see beyond the overwhelming circumstances of his present sufferings. Paul knew that this life was not all there is—and that one day those who have put their trust in Christ would be raised to eternal life, just as Christ was raised from the dead after his death and burial. This faith is a grace given to humankind by God, and was spreading to more and more people until it has reached to us today. Because of this grace and faith, Paul did not lose heart in the midst of his own challenging circumstances. He acknowledged that thought the outer body was decaying and in constant danger of being destroyed, this world was not all that he was living for.

In the midst of "unchosen" suffering, God can be up to something very unique and strategic in the believer's life. If we allow it, the suffering can help us grow more and more detached from feeling like this world is our home, which allows us to resist the subtle temptation of being squeezed into its mold. Paul said that these light and momentary trials (see 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 for a list of what he considered "light and momentary" trials) were actually producing something unseen in his life. He expounds on this later in the letter in 2 Corinthians 12, where he says that his suffering was doing the good work of keeping him humble and dependent on Jesus. He was finding that Christ's strength was being perfected in his weakness. The world says that weakness is terminal, but God says that weakness, when turned over to Him, can actually produce a weightier thing than all of the world's superficial riches. There is a glory that God is refining in us, attaching us more deeply to Himself and bringing us more closely back to His original design of being made in and reflecting His image in the world.

This eternal perspective does not come naturally. Paul encourages his readers to "fix our eyes" on what is unseen—which implies intentionality and purposefulness. This type of perspective will not come by osmosis, in fact we'll have to fight against the natural pull of gravity that keeps our gaze on things that we can see. Instead, he encourages the saints in Corinth to develop the eyes of faith, evaluating life's circumstances on God's eternal value system.

If we think that this life is all there is, we will live by one of many inferior and purposeless mottos. A popular one is what we've seen on bumper stickers: "He who dies with the most toys wins." I've seen the answer to this with another bumper sticker that says, "He who dies with the most toys, still dies." The finite nature of human existence has kept philosophers actively postulating what the meaning of life could be. Paul definitively answers this in his letter, clarifying that the meaning of life on earth is to find eternal life in Christ, so that our sins can be forgiven and we can live for eternity with the Father. This is the eternal glory that outweighs all other pursuits. May this be the orienting priority of our own lives, which then encourages God's grace to reach more and more people as they see our "peculiar" lives founded on eternal principles.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark. The context is Jesus' early ministry of healing the sick and demon possessed. Jesus' power over the Satanic spirits was displayed in its full power. "And whenever the unclean spirits beheld Him, they would fall down before Him and cry out, saying, "You are the Son of God!" (Mark 3:11).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 3:20-35 NAS95 20 And He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal. 21 When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, "He has lost His senses." 22 The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons." 23 And He called them to Himself and began speaking to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished! 27 But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house. 28 Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — 30 because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" 31 Then His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. 32 A crowd was sitting around Him, and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." 33 Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" 34 Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."*

The scribes were accusing Jesus of casting out demons through the power of Satan, "the ruler of the demons" (v. 22). Jesus explained to them that this wasn't logical, that "a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand" (v. 24a), reminiscent of President Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech. Jesus, at least at this early point in his ministry, reasoned with the scribes and further explained to them that no, He was not casting out demons through the power of Satan. He explained this to them by the means of a parable. In this story, Jesus expressed how God was all powerful and reigned over the demons and their leader Satan. Next, Jesus in his willingness to see the scribes convicted of their sin such that they would repent, explained the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. This sin is not one of attributing the power of God to Satan, although that is an implication, but is rather the conscious and ongoing sin of rejection of the Holy Spirit of God in calling people to repent of their sins and turn to the only solution offered by God: faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus revealed in John chapter 8 how the scribes committed this great sin when He told them that they "were of [their] father the devil," and that "[they" to do the desires of [their] father" (John 8:44). In the closing of the reading, Jesus' mother and kin came to Him while he was "working" such that they stood outside, and others told him that they were seeking Him (v. 32). Jesus' answer to them wasn't disrespectful, but rather was a message sent to them perhaps reminding them of the urgency of His work and the need to focus upon the spiritual battles on His hands. Remember that Jesus perfectly completed the Law, and as such was bound to honor His mother (Exodus 20:12).

Today's Gospel reading reminds us of the spiritual war that is raging against all believers and how God has won the victory for us through Jesus. We can rest assured that as believers we can never commit the unpardonable sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, as this is on ongoing, conscious rejection of Jesus as the only means of salvation. Jesus reminds us in the reading of the urgency of spreading this message, even when it means the short-term reprioritizing of certain pressing issues, such as in Jesus case putting off an inquisitive and concerned family. We see in all three readings how God desires to give us an eternal perspective. He has won the battle for us and what we need to do is to receive His power through faith in His Son Jesus.

The spiritual battle is real, whether or not we sense or truly believe it. I remember back when I was renting a nice little lakefront home from an old lady who at first seemed very pleasant. But as our relationship continued I began to sense a spiritual darkness in her that came about through her coming to know things about me that she had absolutely no way of figuring out on her own. I came to understand that the same demonic forces that had been watching me during my life had in some way been able to provide her with deep seated information that they knew would be harmful to me. This landlord had developed a way of bringing this information to me at the worst possible times. It is highly likely that the same demons that controlled her would one day be released after her death, and go about seeking others to torment These are very likely the spirits that the world knows as "ghosts." Paul said that we are to "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Have you ever noticed

that you never hear about the ghost of a kind, loving Christian woman who lived in the old house on the corner? Rather, aren't ghost stories made up by unkind, evil people who lash out at people who try to turn them towards the good?

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw the use of the term "protoevangelium" or first Gospel. Looking back on your life, when was the first time that you heard the Gospel and understood God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? How does knowing that God provided a way help you to deal with your own guilt and shame that you encounter in your daily life?

2. Having an eternal perspective does not come naturally. What are some things about God (attributes) that you have learned today that will help you to strengthen such a godly mindset?

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