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 Sunday, 8-14-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **8-14-2016**. This week the three readings follow the theme of persecution of believers and the need for us to assess our allegiances and alliances with those other than God. As believers we should expect persecution in light of the fact that others who walked with God before us experienced these things.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading is the harsh imprisonment of Jeremiah, for the second time. This was as a result of the administration's "kill the messenger" approach as God brought the truth to southern kingdom of Judah about their certain destruction at the hands of the Chaldeans unless they repented. After he had been held in the dungeon (Jeremiah 37:15-16), King Zedekiah sent for him there and spoke with him before releasing him to the "court of the guardhouse" (v. 21). In the reading we will learn about the increasingly harsh treatment given to God's prophet Jeremiah. In reading the text we can begin to understand why Jeremiah became to be known as the "weeping prophet."

First Reading:

Jeremiah 38:4-10 NAS95 4 Then the officials said to the king, "Now let this man be put to death, inasmuch as he is discouraging the men of war who are left in this city and all the people, by speaking such words to them; for this man is not seeking the well-being of this people but rather

their harm." 5 So King Zedekiah said, "Behold, he is in your hands; for the king can do nothing against you." 6 Then they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern of Malchijah the king's son, which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud. 7 But Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, a eunuch, while he was in the king's palace, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. Now the king was sitting in the Gate of Benjamin; 8 and Ebed-melech went out from the king's palace and spoke to the king, saying, 9 "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet whom they have cast into the cistern; and he will die right where he is because of the famine, for there is no more bread in the city." 10 Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, "Take thirty men from here under your authority and bring up Jeremiah the prophet from the cistern before he dies."

Zedekiah's ungodly officials advised the king to put Jeremiah to death because of his discouraging words (v. 4). In their wicked eyes Jeremiah committed treason by supposedly weakening the war against the invading Chaldeans by calling for them to surrender rather than to resist. At this point the king surrendered Jeremiah into the custody of the "officials," using the term loosely. Once King Zedekiah surrendered his authority over God's prophet the people then took drastic actions against Jeremiah by lowering him into a cistern, an action obviously intended to bring about his death. It took the actions of a Gentile, Ebed-melech (whose name means "servant of the king") to bring about Jeremiah's rescue.

There are many parallels between the suffering that Jeremiah endured to that of Jesus during His earthly ministry. Jeremiah, a type of Christ, pointed the way to the future suffering of our Lord Jesus as the hands of the officials of His day. Because they persecuted God and His prophets, we should also expect persecution in our lives when we act against the ungodly officials in our day. Stephen said just before his own death, "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" (Acts 7:52).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study in the Book of Hebrews and picks up after the section known as the "Hall of Faith." Today's reading relates to what we read about in Jeremiah concerning hostility against believers of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 12:1-4 NAS95 1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. 4 You have not yet resisted to the point of

shedding blood in your striving against sin;

Taking into account what we learned from chapter 11 ("therefore," v. 1a), we are called to focus upon the ultimate goal of Jesus Christ and forsake our sinful ways (vv. 1-2). We are to do this through using Jesus as our example. By focusing upon Jesus' illustration of resisting sin we too can be faithful in accomplishing the purpose that God has for us. However, in the same way that Jesus and the prophets were persecuted we too should expect to experience trials when we stand up for the things of God. The author of Hebrews makes it abundantly clear that by taking the testimony of Jesus along with the great cloud of witnesses into account we can persist through the inevitable trials that will come upon us. The reading closes by saying that we haven't taken outrageous measures to eliminate sin in our lives (v. 4). This points the way to the subsequent teaching where the author explains how God brings chastening into the lives of believers because as sons of God this correction is for our ultimate good (Hebrews 12:5-11). In the same way that God allowed persecution in the life of Jeremiah, He may also allow it in our lives. As we move to the Gospel reading we will see some similar teaching from Jesus on the need to assess our personal alliances in light of God's plans for us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke follows a theme I will call "Forsaking allegiances and alliances for Jesus." Jesus was clear that His ministry would be one of division. For John said in the infamous verse regarding the division of the people over Jesus, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). In today's reading we see another of Jesus' 6-6-6 moments, this time in the teaching to His disciples after Peter drew near to him amongst the crowds to ask Him a question. Peter had asked Jesus regarding His telling of the Parable of the Wedding Feast whether this parable was addressed to just His disciples or to the crowd as a whole. As Jesus was fond of doing he didn't answer Peter's question directly but did so by asking another question, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time?" (Luke 12:42). Jesus then provided yet another parable about the absent master and the behavior of the slaves while he was away (Luke 12:43-48). Jesus' teaching at this point culminated with an extremely important principle. The punishment of the wicked will be according the degree of knowledge that the person possessed (v. 48). This was obviously addressed to the Pharisees among the crowd, and Judas the betrayer who would have been among the twelve disciples. By application the teaching leading up to today's reading brings with the idea of everyone's call to exercise godly stewardship of the resources which they have been given. The call to godly stewardship may even involve the forsaking of friends and family for the sake of the Gospel.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 12:49-53 NAS95 49 "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished! 51 Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; 52 for from now

on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

In the very first season of the television series *Survivor*, Richard Hatch orchestrated the idea of a voting alliance. The "Tagi Alliance" as it was called, was a brilliant strategy that paved the way for future seasons of the program and showed the necessity of working together to accomplish the impossible in dire conditions. One of the most notable things about an alliance in general and this one in particular is that it excludes members outside of it. As viewers saw in the series, the Tagi Alliance resulted in considerable controversy with non-members as the show played out. In this case the issue that comes into play is that as the season winds down the ultimate conclusion requires the banishment of alliance members from the island. In today's reading we see how Jesus warned about the dangers of stubbornly clinging to an alliance which in effect makes a pledge of allegiance to someone other than God.

Jesus told His disciples along with large crowd how from now on families would be divided because of Him. By application, true followers of Jesus are called to examine their alliances and allegiances and be willing to forsake anything that leads them away from following God's plan for their lives. This may include stepping back from any relationship in which the other person attempts to lead you astray spiritually while praying for the opening of that person's eyes to the light of the Gospel.

Muslim background believers (MBB's) are one shining example of a group whom would readily identify with Jesus' teaching as well as what we learned about persecution in the first reading. Many MBB's have been forced to forsake their mother and father and even their own lives in order to follow the true teaching found only in the God of the Bible. Other readers of Mass Notes will also be able to identify with Jesus' teaching when they too found themselves marginalized or even outright reject by family members (and others) for their faith in Jesus. All three of today's readings point to a single verse from the second reading in Hebrews. "For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:3). God calls us to focus upon Him to the extent that we are willing to assess any alliances or allegiances we may have that call us away from His plan. This may mean leaving the fellowship of a certain church or losing a relationship with a loved one. Through it all God calls us to never lose our focus upon Him.

Would you be willing to share your testimony with us for posting on the web site about the particular alliance or allegiance you were forced to break?

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways does the things that happened to Jeremiah in today's reading mirror the Lord Jesus Christ?

2. What is a particular situation in your life in which you felt called by God to break an alliance or allegiance in order to accomplish God's purpose?

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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/081416.cfm

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 120

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_08-14-2016.pdfDownload

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



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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/

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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



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
- 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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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-1-2015

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **11-1-2015**. This week we open with a reading from the mysterious Book of Revelation where we will explain in detail some of the background and context to bring out the meaning of the text. Then we move to another reading written by John from the Book of First John. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew from the section called the Beatitudes. I remember reading those passages many years ago in Mass and feeling that I needed to be a better person and to try harder to please God. Find out what God's Word says about my feelings and what would have been a more biblical response to them.

I know someone that has been a Christian for a very long time while a certain uncle of hers was resistant to believing in Jesus Christ right up until near the end of his life. As he grew older, he steadfastly refused to bow his knee to Jesus Christ although almost everyone around him were followers of Jesus including his niece who told me the story, and her husband was a pastor. One night he went to bed expecting to awaken the next morning just like every other day. However, God had a different plan for him. As I was a new believer in Jesus Christ myself when I heard this story I remember how it profoundly impacted me as I listened with baited breath about what was going to happen next. The next morning when the man arose and looked at himself in the mirror, he found a depression in the bone of his forehead in the shape of a cross. He instantly recognized this as a miracle as a seal of God calling him to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ which he quickly obeyed. As others encountered him throughout the last years of his life, he testified of God's grace in marking him in this unique way such that he could no longer deny the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. This marking remained on his forehead for the rest of his life as a seal or marking of him as a follower of Jesus Christ. This week we will read about how God will in some future day "seal" a group of Jews in order to protect them from the wrath of the Antichrist who like many others before him will persecute God's chosen people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Revelation. This Book tells the story of the unfurling of a series of judgments upon the world culminating with what the Old Testament calls the "Day of the Lord." Throughout the Book, John moves his focus back and forth from events happening upon the earth and those in heaven with frequent parenthesis (or pauses) in the chronological progression of events. Understanding of Revelation requires a thorough understanding of the Old Testament and especially the Book of Daniel. John uses much symbolic language throughout the Book, and the reader is challenged to understand the meaning behind the symbols as well as to what extent the language is meant to foretell literal events in heaven and on the earth.

In order to understand the Book of Revelation and today's reading, it is necessary to understand from a high level the primary events that will transpire during the end times. The order of the main events that will unfold are as follows. The sin of the world will grow worse and worse (Matthew 24;12), and many false christs will come. (2 Timothy 3:13, Matthew 24:5). The world will be consumed by "wars and rumors of wars," there will be "famines and earthquakes" (Matthew 24:6-7). This will mark the beginning of the end times. (Matthew 24:8) The AntiChrist will come on the scene and falsely claim to have been resurrected from the dead (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, Revelation 13:3). A peace treaty will be made with Israel providing for resumption of animal sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:27). Large-scale persecution of believers will escalate leading many false believers to fall away (Revelation 13:7, Matthew 13:9-10). This point marks the unfurling of the scroll of the first six seals of Revelation. As the AntiChrist rules the world with terror, at some point the believers in God will be reunited with Christ and taken to heaven at His second coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18). Somewhere during this time a group of elect Jews will be protected by God as described in today's reading. The final stage will then begin with the unbelieving world left behind and then God will unleash His judgments during the final "Day of the Lord" completing the total destruction of the AntiChrist's worldly and religious empire of mystery Babylon. This is the time when God unleashes His judgments upon the world as stated just prior to today's reading in Revelation 6:17, "for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand." At the conclusion of these events, Jesus will return to set up His reign on earth.

The particular context of today's reading in chapter 7 is the divine protection of a believing remnant of Jews alive during the time when the AntiChrist will be unleashing increasing persecution upon believers in God. God will protect this surviving remnant in order to complete His promises to them.

First Reading:

Note: Verses 5 – 8 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Revelation 7:2-14 NAS95 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who

were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: 5 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed. 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10 and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." 13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

In the days before Jesus' return (see Acts 1:11), a powerful world ruler will emerge called the AntiChrist who will persecute any believers alive during this time including both Christians and Jews. As the AntiChrist hurls his bloodshed upon the Christians, God will protect a remnant of the Jews who through this terrible persecution will come to faith in the Lord Jesus (Zechariah 12:10). To do this God grants His authority to an angel to set His mark upon this group of Jews from the twelve tribes of Israel – except that some of them were designated by different names because of the curses pronounced in the Old Testament. (Astute readers can find out more information about this by studying Deuteronomy 29:16-10). In ancient days, the kings used their signet ring to emboss a special marking into wax or clays seals that were placed upon documents in order to show their sign of authority and authenticity. In the last days of the devils reign over his current world empire, the angel of God's divine marking provides protection to the believing Jews from the wrath of the AntiChrist. The Prophet Malachi said about this, "I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). Whether this is a literal number of people or it is symbolic of a large but finite number isn't readily discernible in the text. However, they will have been regathered for the opening of the rebuilt temple and the resumption of the sacrifices. During the first three and half years of the peace treaty that the AntiChrist makes with national Israel, the Jews will resume their sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem while large scale persecution of Christians accelerates around the world. As time moves to the midpoint of this treaty, the AntiChrist will set an image of himself up in the temple and command his worship as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). This "abomination of desolation" (Matthew 24:15) will greatly provoke the Jews to rebel against the AntiChrist to such an extent that without God's divine protection all of them would be consumed by this evil end time ruler. It is only through this horrific series of events that unfold upon the earth that the collective group of the Jews will finally recognize Jesus Whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10) as their Messiah.

As the reading continues, beginning in verse 9 John changed his focus from events happening on

earth to things occurring in heaven. This is one of the frequent parenthesis that occurs throughout the Book. John saw a second group of people, a "great multitude which no one could count," (v. 9) who are believing people martyred up until that point during the great tribulation. John didn't understand who these people were at first, but the angel answered his question about them by describing how they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14). It's not often when someone can wash their robes in blood and make them white, but that is exactly what Jesus offers to anyone who trusts in Him. Although the believers in heaven were not delivered **from** the tribulation and persecution on earth, they were delivered **through** it to be with Jesus in heaven.

What does this mean for us today? We as Christians must expect that as God's prophets we will increasingly face persecution. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Later in the Gospel reading we will see how Jesus likened the persecution of believers to the persecution of the prophets that came before them (Matthew 5:12). There Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile against you and persecute you." As God's persecuted prophets we can look for our fulfillment not in the things of the world but look heavenward towards our ultimate purpose in serving God. Finally, as we continue to march onwards towards the last days described in Revelation, we can expect to see a growing distinction between the true people of God and the rest of the world. The Prophet Malachi said about these days, "Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve Him" (Malachi 3:18). Although we may not be saved from tribulation, we can be assured that God will deliver us through it.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First John. The context is Saint John's teaching on the characteristics of true believers, something that we will encounter later in the Gospel lesson.

Second Reading:

1 John 3:1-3 NAS95 1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

John said that God has so loved love those that believe in Him that He calls them His children (v. 1). Nonbelievers do not understand believers because they cannot know God and didn't know His Son Jesus (v. 1d-ff). During our mortal lives as believers, we do not yet understand what we will become when we either get to heaven or meet Jesus when he returns to regather His church as we talked about in the first reading (v. 2). When we do finally meet Jesus our eyes will be opened, and we will see Him for what He truly is without the veil of sin covering our minds. Finally, we have hope that God will bring these things about. While living with an eternal focus as true believers we strive to

become more and more like Jesus by leaning upon God's power that He has placed within us. As we become more pure by maturing in our walk with Jesus, we become more like the true believers described by John in the reading. This provides an excellent lead-in to the Gospel lesson in which Jesus lists some of the qualities of people whose lives have been transformed by God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount because of the location from which Jesus addressed the crowd in Galilee. The context is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry just after His temptation in the desert for forty days and the calling of the first disciples including Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus was beginning to draw large crowds and was telling the people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). This is the beginning of a much longer discourse that spans Matthew Chapters 5 through 7.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 5:1-12 NAS95 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

In this reading, Jesus announced a total of nine blessings, each opening with "Blessed are." Jesus is fulfilling the role of Prophet by providing a series of blessings, a word which means "happy." This contrasts with the usual words given by the Old Testament prophets who announced a series of curses and woes against those who refused to follow God. Jesus came to announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and this is what the kingdom looks like. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of new things that people have to do in order to be right with God, but rather it is a list of defining qualities of people who have been transformed by God.

Jesus is redefining the blessed life. Think about how these traits contrast how the world defines blessing. Someone living the blessed life:

1. Is poor in spirit, meaning humble which leads a person to recognize their spiritual need for God.
2. Mourns, meaning they recognize that this world is not their home and looks to God for comfort.
3. Exhibits gentleness, meaning they don't have to be aggressive to get things done because their

heart is established in Christ's power.
4. Hungers and thirsts for righteousness meaning they prioritize eternal things over finite satisfaction in the world.
5. Shows mercy, because they were offered mercy themselves through the forgiveness given them by God and can extend it to others.
6. Is pure in heart, meaning they are not entangled with the evil ways of the world including lying, deceiving and manipulating people in order to get their own way.
7. Is a peacemaker, not just someone who tries to keep the peace at all costs. They actively seek peaceful solutions even in difficult situations which forces them to rely upon God more deeply.
8. Endures persecution with a vision toward eternity knowing that it is better to suffer than to succumb to temptation to compromise.
9. Endures insult because of their proclamation of truth (Word of God) just like happened to the prophets.

In summary, Jesus raised the bar of understanding to show the people that righteousness was not a bunch of behaviors that came by trying harder, but rather were qualities of the heart that were only possible through God's transforming power. These nine traits are the result of being born from above (John 3:3). Instead of being depressed that we can never be this good, Jesus delivered this sermon in order to invite us into a new way of life. This new way of life recognizes that our self-righteousness is as filthy rags before the LORD (Isaiah 64:6). We must come to the place where we receive Christ's righteousness into our hearts as a substitute for our former way of life (Romans 3:21-22).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How do you respond internally when you read the Sermon on the Mount? Does it feel like another list of impossible feats that you must accomplish in order to win God's favor? Or, have you responded to Jesus' invitation to life in the kingdom (where He is the King of your heart), and the Sermon on the Mount is a reflection of the work that He is doing in your life? If your response is more the former, that this is another list of impossible feats, you can turn to God in prayer and ask Him to give you His life from above and so be born anew.

2. In the first reading we read about how God appointed an angel to "seal" a group of Jews during the end times in order to protect them from the events that were going to unfold as described in the seven seals of Revelation. In what ways are you already "sealed" by God through your faith in Jesus Christ?

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/110115.cfm

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Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

I know someone that has been a Christian for a very long time while a certain uncle of hers was resistant to believing in Jesus Christ right up until near the end of his life. As he grew older, he steadfastly refused to bow his knee to Jesus Christ although almost everyone around him were followers of Jesus including his niece who told me the story, and her husband was a pastor. One night he went to bed expecting to awaken the next morning just like every other day. However, God had a different plan for him. As I was a new believer in Jesus Christ myself when I heard this story I remember how it profoundly impacted me as I listened with baited breath about what was going to happen next. The next morning when the man arose and looked at himself in the mirror, he found a depression in the bone of his forehead in the shape of a cross. He instantly recognized this as a miracle as a seal of God calling him to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ which he quickly obeyed. As others encountered him throughout the last years of his life, he testified of God's grace in marking him in this unique way such that he could no longer deny the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. This marking remained on his forehead for the rest of his life as a seal or marking of him as a follower of Jesus Christ. This week we will read about how God will in some future day "seal" a group of Jews in order to protect them from the wrath of the Antichrist who like many others before him will persecute God's chosen people.

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 8-03-2014

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass for 8-3-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah 55 that provides a picture of God's grace. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and learn that is impossible for us to be separated from God once we have His Spirit living within us. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew where we study Jesus' miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. We pray that your Bible study this week is enriching to you and helps perfect God's work He is doing in your life.

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah a person who Bible commentators call a major prophet because of the length of the Book that God inspired Him to write. The context of the reading is just after the depiction of Jesus as the Suffering Servant on the cross, something that happened over 700 years after Isaiah penned it (Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12). An interesting note about Isaiah 53 is that it is a forbidden Book in Jewish circles, something the rabbis avoid and the vast majority of Jews have never heard. "Who has believed our report and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed," Isaiah said (53:1). This powerful display of Jesus is followed by chapter 54 in which Isaiah shows God's everlasting kindness. "For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will regather you. With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you, says the Lord your redeemer" (Isaiah 54:7-8). The reading today from Chapter 55 is just before God more fully revealed His plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles who would be in-grafted into His plan of eternal salvation (Isaiah 56). As you read try to keep in mind the context in which Isaiah gave his message in a time when the Jews weren't listening to the voice of God.

> *1 Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost. 2 Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And delight yourself in abundance. 3 Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David. (Isaiah 55:1-3)*

Isaiah's message is a picture of God's grace and provides some important information about God and our relationship to Him. God is impartial (v. 1). "Everyone who thirds" can come to Him. Second, God's grace cannot be earned (v.2), it is unmerited favor. Third, God's Word is life but we have to

listen to it to obtain this life (v. 3). Fourth, God's promises to His people are eternal and specifically the ones in the Davidic Covenant will be fulfilled (v. 3). We can rest in the fact that God will complete the good work that He began with Israel regardless of how hopeless things may appear in the Middle East at any given instant.

As we move onto the next reading from Saint Paul, contemplate how this mighty saint may have felt hearing about the present day attacks by Israel's enemies. Would he rest in God's promises and His "faithful mercies shown to David" (v. 3)?

The second reading is from Paul's Letter to the Romans and is a continuation of the study from last week. Note that we have included verse 36 that was skipped in the reading. This is unfortunate because the verse contains a quote from Psalm 44 in which the Psalmist recounts how he continued in his walk with God in spite of his tribulations. In spite of hardship, "All this has come upon us: But we have not forgotten You. Nor have we dealt falsely with Your covenant" (Psalm 44:17). God allowed these trials to come upon the Psalmist to accomplish His sovereign purposes. "But for Your sake we are killed all day long; We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Psalm 44:22). The Psalmist closes with a call for God's mercy. "Rise up, be our help, And redeem us for the sake of Your lovingkindness" (v. 26). As you read the text, imagine why God inspired Paul to quote from this particular Psalm.

> *35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." 37 But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)*

One word that came to mind when we read this passage was "persistence." Paul said that we can persist and overcome our trials through patient persistence in prayer and trust in God, His nature and His promises. Paul provided a list of things that attempt to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Regardless of what comes upon us believers in the finished work of Jesus Christ we can never become separated from the love of God that flows through our Savior. Paul was no stranger to hardship and it's no wonder that he identified with the Psalmist plea to God for mercy. He recorded some of these hardships in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

> *24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. 26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; 27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and*

> *exposure. 28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)*

Paul didn't boast about his hardships, rather he boasted in the fact that he was weak (2 Corinthians 12:10). He said, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:10). "

This week we received news about a terrible tragedy in our neighborhood. A ten-year boy was riding his bike just before dark and ran through a stop sign in front of a truck. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital, then flown to a children's hospital. In spite of the treatment, he passed away the next morning. His parents, who are strong Christians, made a statement to the media that they wanted to let the driver of the truck know that he hadn't done anything wrong and that he was forgiven. Would you have the strength and compassion to make such a statement in the midst of the most awful trial that could ever come upon a young family? "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 38-39). Or the sudden death of their beautiful son. Please pray that God's love would transcend all understanding during the time of tragedy in northern Indiana.

The Gospel lesson is from Matthew 14 and is Jesus' miracle of the feeding of the five thousand who were gathered to hear Him speak. This is the first recorded incident of Jesus multiplying food to feed a large crowd, the second time happens later in Matthew 15:29-39. The reading opens and closes with something that Jesus was fond of doing, praying by Himself. When you examine the Gospel records closely, you will see that Jesus often retreated to a private place to pray just before performing public miracles. The context of the reading is just after Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist whom Jesus called the greatest man that ever lived (Matthew 11:11). As you read, note that we have included verses 22-23 in order to provide the most insight into the reading.

> *13 Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. 14 When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, "This place is desolate and the hour is already late; so send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat!" 17 They said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." 18 And He said, "Bring them here to Me." 19 Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds, 20 and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. 21 There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children. 22 Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away. 23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.*

(Matthew 14:13-23)

As we saw a picture of God's grace in the reading from Isaiah, so in the Gospel message Jesus' feeding of the five thousand was also a picture of grace. The bread and the fish are a picture of God's grace as we celebrate Jesus' death on the cross for us through the communion meal. Let's examine the reading more closely to find some significant points about both Jesus and the disciples.

Matthew said that when Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist He retreated to a private place to pray. But Jesus wasn't going to have privacy that day as the crowds saw him get into the boat and followed Him (v. 13). In spite of His desire to pray by Himself, Matthew said that Jesus "felt compassion for them and healed their sick" (v. 14c). The word used in the original for "felt compassion" (plagchnizomai) is unique to Jesus and found only in the Gospels. It is used in referring to Jesus some 12 times and mostly in Matthew (5 times) , but also in Mark (4x) and Luke (3x) but not in John. Jesus was particularly moved when He experienced large crowds of people in need. In Mark 6:34 He said, "When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion (plagchnizomai) for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things." This was once again the case in the reading today. Matthew tells us that Jesus "saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick" (v. 14b-ff).

The five loaves and two fish were a meager proportion, image slicing five loaves of bread and then attempting to make sandwiches with it using just two fish. This didn't stop Jesus who fed the crowd so much that they had twelve baskets left over (v. 20). Notice how the number of baskets that were left over coincided with the number of Jesus' disciples, which also coincided with the number of the tribes of Israel. The number 12 in the Bible is used as a picture of perfection and symbolizes God's power and authority. Although the disciples missed the significance of the number, the count of the leftover baskets will be important to the disciples as they look back upon the event. Jesus said later in Matthew, "Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up?" (Matthew 16:9).

Notice how both the disciples recognized Jesus authority over the crowds. In verse 15 Jesus' disciples asked Him to "send the crowds away." Then in verse 19 Matthew said, "Ordering the people to sit down on the grass." Their recognition of Jesus' supreme authority is significant because it shows the great level of faith that the disciples had for Him in spite of them totally missing the concept that Jesus could provide food for the crowd without the people having to return to town at the late hour when the bakeries were probably already closed. Jesus surprised the disciples with the huge miracle, yet the disciples didn't understand it until Jesus explained it to them later (Matthew 16:9).

What does all of this mean for our lives First, as we saw in the first reading we need to listen to God, and this comes from reading the Bible. Second, we like Jesus' disciples, also have to recognize Jesus' authority but at the same time we can rest in the fact that because Jesus has the authority we can place our faith in Him. We can trust that God will provide for our basic needs, such as Jesus did in feeding the crowd, but that He will also provide for our spiritual needs, especially in providing

forgiveness for our sins and answering our prayers. Finally, God calls us to recount the blessings that He was provided to us. The disciples didn't understand the significance of Jesus feeding the crowd until He had explained it to them later. It is helpful to us when we are in the heat of the moment of the trials of our lives to sense how God may be working in that particular instant. This not only gives glory to God but helps us to trust in Him in future situations in which we can recall His past provision for us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. We read in the Gospel lesson how Jesus' disciples underestimated Jesus' power yet at the same time they recognized His authority. Power flows from authority. Think one particular instance in which you underestimated Jesus power in your life. Based upon what you studied today, how would you look at this situation differently in the future?

2. Saint Paul said in the second reading, "38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). What are some things in your life that work to separate you from God? Based upon your study today, list one or two and how God provides power to maintain your relationship with Him for each of these circumstances.

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/080314.cfm

First Reading Isaiah IS 55:1-3

Second Reading ROM 8:35, 37-39

Gospel Reading MT 14:13-21

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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Mass Study Notes for Sunday 6-01-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 6-1-2014. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts just after Jesus was taken up into heaven. Then we move to the continuing study in First Peter, and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 7, which is Jesus' prayer for Christian unity.

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is forty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus had gathered the disciples together and they had just asked Him the question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6c). This was an honest question and indicated what was evidently on all of their minds. Would Jesus now usher in His reign on earth as both a religious King *and* supreme civil ruler as foretold in the Scriptures? They would have been familiar with what the Prophet Micah had predicted regarding His future rulership. "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). Jesus answered their question with something that they probably did not want to hear. He said, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). However, Jesus went on, "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Afterwards, Jesus was taken up into heaven leaving the disciples waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

With this context in mind read the text and keep in your mind the flurry of events that the disciples had just experienced including seeing a fully alive Man ascend into heaven followed by the appearance of two angels (Acts 1:10).

> *12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)*

Several points can be drawn from the reading and especially ones that relate to the Gospel lesson later in this study. First, the disciples of the early church were united in continual prayer. The Scriptures call all believers to pray with the example set by Jesus' first believers. Prayer is one of the ways in which the church is united in their purpose. Some years ago in seminary I took a course in prayer. I wondered how anyone could study prayer for an entire semester. One of the things that I was concerned about before I began the course was that the syllabus said that I had to locate a prayer partner and agree to pray with them for one hour each week throughout the term. Soon after the class began I was able to locate a suitable classmate with which to pray each week. As the semester progressed I noticed for the first time in my life the value of joining in prayer with another Christian. Although I am certain that I didn't pray with the same fervor as did Saint Peter, I did obtain strength through persisting in meeting with my prayer partner which has led me to much stronger prayer life since the conclusion of the class.

Second, the unity of the church included women, who were people with very low status in the culture, not much more than property. Women were the first ones to testify of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, even though in this culture the testimony of women in civil court was often disregarded. Jesus turned society morays on its proverbial ear, he turned the world upside down by valuing women equally with men and even affording them a position of prominence by seeing to it that they were the first witnesses of the resurrection!

Third, note that John said "These all with one mind" (v. 14a). When all of the believers in a group have the same mind, they are united not only in their purpose but also work to align their will with the revealed will of God through the mutual understanding of His Word in the Scriptures. One of the practices that I did with my own prayer partner was that when we ran out of things to say we just read the Bible aloud. Having just experienced Jesus' last 40 days of ministry and also being fresh from the Emmaus Road experience the disciples must have studied the Old Testament Scriptures (as we call them) with a renewed fervor and understanding. This unity of thinking and mission would help the early church to persevere during the subsequent persecution that early on descended upon the Church.

As we move to the second reading and continue with the teaching in First Peter, keep the theme of

unity of all believers in your mind. In this message, Saint Peter taught the early church the importance of rejoicing in spite of persecution, as well as what actions to take during these difficulties.

> *13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (1 Peter 4:13-16)*

Peter said that if you "are reviled for the name of Christ" (v.14a) you are blessed. How can someone be blessed if they are persecuted for Christ? Peter said we are blessed during persecution because "the Spirit of glory rests on you" (v.14c-ff). Jesus promised that He would not leave us as orphans (John 14:18), that His Spirit would rest upon the believers. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to help believers to persist in persecution for their faith. Peter called us to "glorify God in this name" and not to be ashamed because of persecution (v. 16). He contrasted this with someone who suffered for breaking a civil law, or even just being a "troublesome meddler," thing which the Spirit will not comfort us and for which we should expect persecution.

One of the common themes that frequently emerges from the testimony of Christians who experienced long periods of persecution for their faith is the comfort of the Holy Spirit that they found through the unity with other believers. We will see the importance of unity as revealed in Jesus' prayer to the Father as we move to the Gospel lesson.

The Gospel lesson for today has to do with Jesus' call for unity in the Church. John opened the Gospel lesson today by saying, "Jesus spoke these things," and then he prayed to the Father. What were "these things" to which John was referring? If we look back to the previous two verses, we see what John was referring to. Jesus said, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be **scattered**, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:32-33, emphasis added). Jesus knew that the disciples, with the exception of John, would scatter during his tribulation and death on the cross. He also knew that they would scatter because of the persecution that would come upon the young church after he went back to heaven.

> *1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. 6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the*

> *world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; 8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. 9 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; 10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. (John 17:1-11)*

Notice how Jesus made a variety of affirmation while He was praying, and then proceeded to present to the Father his petitions. Jesus affirmed that He had authority over the entire world, "all flesh" (v. 1) and that the Father had given the believers eternal life for the purpose of knowing the "one true God and Jesus Christ" (v. 2). He affirmed that He had manifested the Name of the Father to the believers whom the Father had given to Him (v. 6), Next, Jesus prayed that the believers would become "one even as We are one" (v.11). Jesus call to unity with Himself represented the core of the Gospel message, that believers become one with God through faith in Jesus Christ and the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

What does all of this mean for our lives? First, Jesus' call for us to be united with Himself and the Father comes about through the things we have seen in the lesson today. We are to be united by gathering together in prayer, by praying continually, even when we are by ourselves. We are called to submit ourselves to the will of the Father, and to learn His will by understanding His revelation through the Scriptures. Second, we can find unity with God by accepting persecution for our faith with the understanding that this glorifies God. When we are led by God to take up countercultural positions on certain moral issues including affirming the rights of all unborn children we can have courage that God will glorify His name through our obedience.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Throughout the lesson today we have seen how the disciples were unified in their mind to accomplish Jesus' mission for them. One of the ways in which they both expressed and achieved this unity was through their constant prayer with the group.

I challenge you this week to pray with another believer at least once during the week. Even if it is before a meal or over the telephone, ask the person if they would be willing to pray together. Be prepared to answer the most common objections such as not having enough time, my faith is a personal thing, this makes me uncomfortable, etc.

2. This week we are returning to the United States from our two week long visit to France with a group of college students. We had an excellent trip and as I write this I am in Paris contemplating my visit to a castle that is adjacent to place at which we are staying. The cultural difference have taken some getting used to. I rejoice at the fact that those in France still have a certain reverence

for the people of God although Christians are regarded with a bit of suspicion.

In light of your cultural experiences, how does your faith in Jesus Christ help you in overcoming the cultural differences that you experience in your own life and work? How does what you learned today help to inform you on some of the ways in which to attack these cultural challenges?

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/060114-sunday.cfm

First Reading ACTS 1:12-14

Acts 1:12-14 NAS95 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Second Reading 1 PT 4:13-16

1 Peter 4:13-16 NAS95 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

Gospel Reading JN 17:1-11A

John 17:1-11 NAS95 1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. 6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; 8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. 9 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; 10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep

them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are.

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB