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, 10-30-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians and then the Gospel reading from Saint Luke. The first reading is from the Apocrypha and will not be covered.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

It was a very windy midsummer day in northern Michigan as I raced my windsurf board across the Straits of Mackinaw on my way back from Mackinaw Island, Michigan. Earlier, I sailed between the towers of the mighty Mackinaw Bridge and then returned to the shore of Lake Huron to make a few adjustments on my sail. Next, I sailed seven miles across the Straits to Mackinaw Island and was on my way back towards the campground where we were staying. At this point the wind began calming and shifting in a direction that was going to make it very difficult to return to the spot from where I had launched. Eventually I made it back to the sandy shore on Lake Huron, but was a few miles down from where I launched. I walked up the hill, borrowed a cell phone from someone, and called my wife to pick me up. I heard a strange silence on the other end and she said, "You're alive!" As it turned out someone had given some bad information to the police who then called the Coast Guard thinking that I had gone down somewhere in the Straits. This led to a series of cascading events including a large manhunt with a helicopter, rescue divers, and local police operating from a command center in a marina in Mackinaw City. Evidently, a fellow camper had been watching me from the shore and at some point, she couldn't locate me. She then proceeded to tell one of the

authorities at the campground who then called the police. The police then alerted the Coast Guard and the manhunt was on! The whole affair began by one piece of bad information. [*If you are interested you can read the story online here:*

http://www.cheboygannews.com/article/20130720/NEWS/130719421]

In the same way that a false report led to a series of cascading events that day while I was windsurfing, false information in the church can lead to a plethora of serious effects in the Christian church. This was the case in the second reading today from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. This was Paul's second written communication to this group of believers who had believed some false information concerning the timing of and events surrounding the return of the Lord Jesus. The overall purpose of the letter also included the encouragement of the believers in Thessalonica during their ongoing persecution for their faith.

Read the text including verses 3 – 12 which were skipped in the lectionary and are necessary understand the context and the points which Paul were addressing.

Second Reading:

11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2:1 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, 10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2 THES 1:11-2: 12 NIV)

The key verses that revealed the context of Paul's address in this section were chapter 2 verses 1-2. "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to

have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come." Evidently, the people had believed a false report from a forged letter reportedly written by Paul that Jesus had already returned. This news was very disturbing to the Thessalonians because they were enduring persecution for Jesus and if He had already returned then they had possibly been suffering for nothing. Paul had explained in his first letter to them how believers would meet the Lord Jesus upon his return. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). The phrase "caught up" in the original language is the word "harpazo" which means to snatch or take away. The same word translated in the Latin is "rapturo." Although the timing of this biblical event is unknown, Paul's teaching provided hope for the Thessalonian believers who were undergoing persecution. Paul was clear that Jesus' return wasn't something that they possibly could have missed since every single believer would be affected.

The Day of the Lord (DOL) is a very significant topic in both the Old and New Testament. The DOL is the time when Jesus will return for His Church and the Father will pour out His wrath on unbelievers. The interpretation of the meaning of DOL depends upon the theological grid from which you view the events of the end times. Most scholars believe that the DOL occurs in the middle of what is called the tribulation period, what the Book of Daniel calls this period the 70'th week. "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city" (Daniel 9:24). The DOL marks the beginning of the second half of the period known as the Great Tribulation. Joel said about this period, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand–a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come" (Joel 2:1-2). He also said that this was a time of redemption, for many people (especially Jews) will come to faith. "And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls" (v.32). Like the "catching up" from 1 Thess 4:17, the DOL wasn't something that the believers wouldn't notice. The purpose of Paul's writing to the church in Thessalonica was to correct this erroneous belief.

Paul continued with a very detailed explanation of the series of events that would lead up to the return of the Lord Jesus to carry away His Church. Paul said that a "man of lawlessness" would be revealed, a future world leader known throughout the Scripture as the "Antichrist." This satanic person would "oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (v.4). The lawlessness of this end time will be held back by the power of God until the time that the man of sin is revealed (vv.7-8). The man of sin will be accompanied by "the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (v.9). The people that remain on the earth during this time will "refuse to love the truth and so be saved" (v.10b). This leads to a terrible conclusion. "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be

condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (vv. 11-12). The powerful delusion is partly the counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders brought about through satanic powers that are allowed to rule the earth during this terrible period of time. The satanic deception of the Antichrist, the person known as the False Prophet, and Satan constitute an unholy trinity that will wage war upon the people left on earth during the end times. To read about these three evil personalities read Revelation Chapters 12 and 13.

After the believers in Thessalonica read Paul's prophecy about what would happen around the time of the Lord's return, they would have been comforted to know that they hadn't missed Jesus as they had heard among the rumors that had been circulating. Paul's teaching about the end times helped them to view their suffering in light of the epic battle that would rage in the era when the Lord Jesus really did return. The "battle" though is no battle at all, for "the Lord Jesus will overthrow [him] with the breath of his mouth" (v.8). That shows us the undisputed ruling power of our Lord, which should bring us hope and comfort, just as it did for the Thessalonian Church.

Our take away from this passage is to heed Paul's warning. Don't be deceived – the Day of the Lord is still to come. Therefore, love the truth and let it lead you to safety. Many books have been written on the subject of the end times and we hope that everyone investigates these matters for themselves by carefully reading and studying the Bible. The brief introduction that we gave today perhaps raises more questions than it answered! We will close this brief introduction to *eschatology*, or the study of the things of the end, and move onto the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson for today is from Luke Chapter 19. It is essential to survey the context of the verses we are studying today in order to understand the full context and therefore the meaning of the text. If we back up to Luke 18:18 – 27 we found an occasion where Jesus was confronted by a certain person that was both a ruler and chief tax collector. This ruler asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 18). Jesus explained to him the requirements of the Jewish Law, and then addressed wealth, the particular obstacle to finding God that existed in the ruler's heart. "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (18b). Read the subsequent verses in this section.

23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:23-27).

Jesus mentioned the impossibly of a camel being able to pass through the eye of a needle. Throughout the ages, a story circulated that goes something like this. Somewhere along the wall in Jerusalem there was a gate called the "eye of the needle" which required a man to dismount his animal in order to pass through at night when all of the other gates were closed. As the saying goes,

the existence of this certain gate meant that when Jesus spoke of a camel going through the eye of a needle he was referring to this particular feature in Jerusalem. The legend went on to say that in this Gospel story Jesus wasn't actually saying that it was impossible for a rich man to enter heaven because he was referring to this certain pint-sized entrance along the wall of Jerusalem. What he meant was that for a man to be saved he would have to prostrate himself before God and crawl on his knees in the same way that he could fit through the tiny gate. God does require a humble and prostrate heart in order to come to faith and to a certain extent, this legend is helpful if interpreted that way. Many people have researched this matter and have found that no such gate has ever existed in Jerusalem. Jesus gave an even better explanation of the whole matter in the text itself. Jesus knew that this young man was relying heavily upon his wealth and that it would be very difficult for him to lay it down in order to rely only upon Jesus for salvation. Jesus clarified that it wasn't impossible for rich people to be saved, but this could *only happen through the power of God*.

With this context in mind, let's move onto the Gospel lesson in Luke Chapter 19 in which Jesus encounters an unusual rich man that *does* receive salvation through the power of God. He didn't even have to locate the fictitious "eye of the needle" in Jerusalem!

Gospel Reading:

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" 8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus' statement about giving away his wealth and repaying those he had cheated provided a glimpse into the true condition of his repentant heart. Jesus, who through the power of the Holy Spirit was able to read people's minds, understood that Zacchaeus truly did turn from pursuing wealth as his god rely upon God for his salvation. With the exhibition of his faith, Zacchaeus revealed that he was saved through belief in God. Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (v.9b). Once again, we saw that Jesus chose someone to pursue whom everyone in the community knew was a lost sinner, to "save what was lost" (v.10b). As we have pointed out in last week's study notes, good works and intentions do not make us a Christian, they merely reveal the condition of our heart. In this case, Zacchaeus' good works indicated that his heart had truly been changed by God's power.

What does it take for a person with power, privileges and wealth to become a Christian? The story about the Philippian jailor in the Book of Acts helps to shed light on what it takes for a person of authority like Zacchaeus in Luke's Gospel to be saved. In this particular story, the gates of the prison flew open after an earthquake, and the jailor feared for his life because he was responsible for the security of the men inside. If one person escaped, it might mean the death penalty for him. After the jailor awoke from the earthquake, he was sure that the prisoners were gone. Instead, he found Paul and Silas inside. "He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved– you and your household'" (Acts 16:30-31). Rich people and people in positions of authority such as this jailor can have a very difficult time coming to faith in Jesus Christ. However, through the power of God even the hardest hearts can be broken. The conclusion of the story is as follows. "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had *come to believe in God*— he and his whole family" (Acts 16:32,34 emphasis added). The Philippian jailor was saved in the same way as Zacchaeus, through faith in Jesus Christ by the hearing of the Word of God.

Reflection Questions

1. Paul told the Thessalonians not to be deceived but instead to love the truth that will save them. Read the following list of false beliefs. With which of these false beliefs can you identify? Pick one and then study the corresponding verses such that you understand the corresponding truth.

A. False Belief: All religions lead to God. Anyone that acts according to their conscience, even if they don't trust in Jesus, will go to heaven.

John 3:16-21 NIV 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Acts 4:8-12 NIV 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man

stands before you healed. 11 He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

John 14:6 NIV 6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Matthew 13:40-43 NIV 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Mt 25:41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

B. False Belief: God doesn't provide salvation to people who "just" repent and believe, salvation can only come through the authority of the Church.

Luke 23:32-43 NIV 32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals– one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

C. False Belief: I'm basically a good person. If I go to church every Sunday and Holy Day as well as adhere to most of the teachings of the Church, I will go to heaven.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

John 14:6 NIV 6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

John 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

2. Now that you see these false beliefs contradict the truth, meditate on the following scripture. Then, take some time to talk to God, confess any false beliefs that you may hold, and ask God the Father to help you love the truth.

Romans 10:9-13 NIV 9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. 11 As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile– the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

For Further Study

Sam was a devout Jew who was a gifted piano performer. He was very religious on the outside, however on the inside, his heart was bent on sin and he knew something was terribly wrong. Listen to Sam's compelling story (25 minutes, Words to Live By radio program):

http://words.net/2013/10/25/no-man-in-human-history-ever-said-words-like-that-sams-story/

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Keywords: Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 153, misunderstandings, DOL, Day of the Lord, repentance, faith, salvation

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-13-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **3-13-2016**. This week we open with the Old Testament reading from Isaiah in which we see his foretelling of an aspect of the New Covenant. In the second reading, we learn about Paul's passion in running the race for Jesus in opposing the false teachers of his era. We close with the story of the woman caught in adultery from the Gospel of John.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Let's review the background of the Prophet Isaiah from which the first reading was taken. Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah shortly after the Northern Kingdom (called Israel) was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. Isaiah brought a dire message to Judah that God was going to use a foreign nation to judge them, like what had just happened to Israel. He also proclaimed a

message of hope and restoration including a promise that a Messiah would come to restore all that would be taken from God's chosen people. He is one of the most important prophets because of all of the information he provided regarding the coming Messiah. He said regarding this future Ruler, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (7:14). He continued, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). His writings then moved onto the near term prediction about the coming invasion by Babylon and closed with a series of messages with a very long range view including the time during which Jesus will reign on earth during the Millennial Kingdom.

Today's reading is from a section in which we see how God reminds the people of Judah about God's greatness as well as His sovereignty. Chapter 43 opens with, "But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine!" (Isaiah 43:1). God reminds the people of His unique covenantal relationship with them. He shows how He is with them during their hardships that He allowed to overtake them in order to accomplish His purposes. The second verse in the chapter says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you." We see similar wording in today's reading.

First Reading:

Isaiah 43:16-21 NAS95 16 Thus says the LORD, Who makes a way through the sea And a path through the mighty waters, 17 Who brings forth the chariot and the horse, The army and the mighty man (They will lie down together and not rise again; They have been quenched and extinguished like a wick): 18 "Do not call to mind the former things, Or ponder things of the past. 19 Behold, I will do something new, Now it will spring forth; Will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, Rivers in the desert. 20 The beasts of the field will glorify Me, The jackals and the ostriches, Because I have given waters in the wilderness And rivers in the desert, To give drink to My chosen people. 21 The people whom I formed for Myself Will declare My praise.

Isaiah is providing comfort to those in the future who will return from the Babylonian Captivity some 150 years in the future. He reminds them of who God is because it will be hard for them to understand God in the midst of their discipline that came about through the exile. God reminds them of He acted powerfully during the first Exodus under the direction of Moses (vv. 16 – 17). Moses was the one to whom the Law was given (Mosaic Covenant). The Mosaic Covenant included the Ten Commandments and the other requirements, which the Jewish people had to fulfil in order to show their covenant relationship with God. Isaiah brings out a contrast in the next verses. In other words, he is saying something like, "if you through the Exodus was amazing just wait until you see what I do in the future." To which future event is Isaiah be referring, has it already happened or is it yet to transpire? Here are some characteristics of this future event.

- It comes on suddenly (v. 19b).
- It is undetected (v. 19b), the Jewish people will miss it.
- It is something supernatural because it defies the natural order of things (streams in the desert, v. 19c).
- Everything and everyone will praise the Lord, right down to the wild animals, jackals and owls (v. 20).
- It will completely satisfy people's spiritual thirst (v. 20, see also Isaiah 55:1-3).

Based on what Isaiah predicted, it becomes clear that he was referring to the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus. This is a new and better deliverance (and "exodus") which outshines the original Exodus from Egypt and the Mosaic Covenant. It started at Jesus' First Advent (His death and resurrection), but it will be fully realized at His Second Advent when everything will be made right.

In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews made the superiority of Jesus very clear as we see in the following verses.

Hebrews 10:12-18 NAS95 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

What does this mean for our lives? Since God has been powerful and trustworthy in the past, we can trust Him to be powerful and trustworthy in the future. Even if our circumstances seem to be a desert experience, He will sustain us and eventually make all things right but it may not happen during our natural lifetime. As part of God's family through which we have been in-grafted (Romans 11:17) we can bring praise to God (v. 21) as we trust Him and sense Him working in our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Philippians, one of the "Prison Epistles" since it was written while Paul was under house arrest (Philippians 1:13) in Rome (Acts 28:16). Paul viewed this time of captivity as a special ministry of service to Jesus Christ as we see especially in Philippians 1:12-14. Paul said there, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (v. 12). Today's reading is from chapter three in which Paul discusses the great value of following his leader Jesus through the use of an athletic metaphor.

Second Reading:

Philippians 3:8-14 NAS95 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count

them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul surrendered everything that he had on earth in order to serve Jesus Christ (v. 8). Paul was clear that even his most admirable achievements fell far short of earning his way into the kingdom of heaven, this came only through faith in the Lord Jesus (v. 9). This revealed Paul's heart for the people to find their true righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ alone which comes not by striving but through God's power (v. 9). This was in contrast to the false teachers plaguing the church (see Philippians 2:21, and Philippians 3:2). These "dogs" as he called them in 3:2 just before today's reading, were those who interfere with spiritual matters about which they didn't have true knowledge. These "Judaizers" sought to impose the Old Testament Law upon the Gentile church, something which Paul wrote an entire epistle against in the Book of Galatians. The bottom line is that it is a distortion of the true gospel of grace given by Jesus Christ when anyone attempts to impose requirements for salvation outside of faith in Christ alone. In contrast to the false teachers who hoped in obtaining power and success in this life, Paul looked toward the eternal future. His hope was in gaining perfection through his personal resurrection from the dead (vv. 11-12), the first fruits of which we see in Jesus' resurrection from dead.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul used an athletic metaphor in saying that while running towards the future he was striving to forget what was behind him while racing ahead towards this future hope of resurrection "for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14). Paul frequently used such terminology in his letters as a means of connecting with his readers with symbolism with which they would have been familiar. He liked the Christian life as a race towards the finish, rather than a walk in the park in which we slouch our way towards the finish that is coming upon us whether we want it to or not. As an athlete, we take an active role in running the race, and are not just spectators on the sidelines as the others run by us.

What does this mean for us today? We are not to look to things like what the New Testament Jews desired like political power. We are also not to think that we can find righteousness through good works in obedience to an elevated (and false) interpretation of the Scriptures, as did the Pharisees. Believers are called to shift their focus not upon the things of this world but to "press on" in order to accomplish God's purposes. All the while we have to remember that the righteousness that we do finally obtain is from God, not our works. Paul said clearly in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are to take our Christian lives seriously in the same ways that an athlete competes in a race. Although we can cheer others as they run, we too are called

to compete in the event of the Christian life. During the race we can remember that Christ is the One from Whom comes our power, as Paul said "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 8 in which we see Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery. The event happened in the temple court after Jesus began to teach there early in the morning (John 8:2-3). As you will see in the reading we are not told about that other half, the man involved in the adulterous affair. In the early New Testament culture, the society tolerated a larger degree of sexual sin among men. In our day we might say something like, that is what men do. In that day we would expect more scrutiny upon the sexual sin of woman, especially one in Jerusalem that was outside of the sexual activities considered normal in the cults of the Roman pagan culture. So it is in the reading that the sin of the woman is brought front and center to Jesus who is placed in a kind of judge position, something for which Jesus was appointed before the creation of time.

Gospel Reading:

Note: This particular section of the Gospel of John is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and was first added to by Jerome in the year 382. If you are interested, we encourage you to research the findings on this matter.

John 8:1-11 NAS95 1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, 4 they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" 6 They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. 7 But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. 10 Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

The two opposing groups known as the scribes (the scholars and lawyers) and Pharisees (legalistic lay people) had strong evidence against the woman, the evidence revealing that she was "caught in the very act" (v. 4). Jesus doesn't question the weight of evidence that they have against the woman. However, rather than responding to their legal question which was nothing more than an attempt to trap Him, Jesus simply stoops downs again begins writing on the ground "v. 6). Evidently He had changed his risen from His earlier seated position, since it says in verse 2 that "He sat down and began to teach them." One can imagine Jesus in a submissive, kneeling position with His head held

low such that he could reach the ground on which to write. We are not told what He wrote on the ground, but it seems evident from the reaction of His listeners that it affected them deeply. The scribes and Pharisees expected an answer, and evidently grew impatient when Jesus failed to answer. After the lawyers questioned Him a second time, He responded by straightening up and saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7), after which He went back to His writing. This was the answer to their question regarding what should be done with the woman caught in adultery. The oldest in the crowd responded first by leaving, until one by one Jesus was left alone with the "convict." Jesus then admonished her to leave and "sin no more" (v. 11). The completely vulnerable woman who had previously surrounded by a covey of rapt prosecutors bearing overwhelming evidence which would certainly have convicted her was set free by the supreme judge of all the universe (2 Timothy 4:1).

The reading makes it clear that when we examine our lives we understand that we too are sinners in need of Jesus' forgiveness. We have committed adultery of the heart by going after things other than God in which we find our pleasures. Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Sin is a serious matter, and God teaches us that the natural end of a non-believer living out their life of sin is death. Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a).We can identify with the woman caught in adultery; a person who in that society stood condemned and squarely caught in her sin. We can heed Jesus' warning to her in which he says, "From now on sin no more" (v. 11c). We don't naively think that the woman left the interaction with Jesus and become the most saintly figure in Jerusalem. However, we can imagine that after being set from the consequences of her sin that she was deeply affected by the "Word of God." During those times in which the Spirit of God indict us for our sin, we too can find healing from the eternal consequences of sin even if God doesn't deliver us from the temporal ones. In each incident in which we find ourselves confessing the depth of our sinfulness we can celebrate that as believers in the Lord Jesus we will be delivered from the eternal consequences of our sin.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. When was there a time in which you were caught in the very act of sin? Based upon what you learned in the Gospel lesson, how can you imagine that Jesus would have addressed you?

2. In what ways does the story of the woman caught in adultery help you to avoid your own sin? What about certain besetting sins that you keep committing, a cycle of sin / repent / sin?

3. How does the following verse speak to you about your own sin?

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Readings for the Week

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Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/031316-fifth-sunday-lent.cfm

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, 12-6-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **12-6-2015**. This week's reading begins with a passage from the Apocrypha. We begin our exposition with the second reading which is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi then conclude with the Gospel reading from the third chapter of Luke. The Philippians passage allows us to see into the heart of the Apostle Paul and the mutual affection he shared with the believers in Philippi. The Gospel account introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. The reading includes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which foretells something about both John's ministry and the work of the one whom he introduced. [By Jesse Deloe]

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The beginning of Paul's ministry in Philippi is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 16, beginning at verse 11. Philippi was a leading city in the Roman colony of Macedonia, and became the location of the first Christian church in Europe. While there, Paul and his companions were mistreated because of their preaching and were imprisoned. Paul and Silas were miraculously released during an earthquake and had the opportunity to bring about the conversion of the jailer and his family as a result. The missionary team departed the city and continued what is regarded as Paul's second missionary journey.

Paul wrote the letter to his converts in Philippi to express his gratitude for their financial support in his time of need. The letter was delivered by Epaphroditus, Paul's companion. This is a very personal letter that encourages the church to live with joy and in unity.

Second Reading:

Philippians 1:4-11 NAS95 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Typical of his letters, Paul tells his readers about his prayers for them. He is joyful because of their involvement with him in the sharing of the gospel from the very beginning of their relationship with him. They can have great joy, he writes, because of his confidence that what God started in them at their conversion will be completed. They will be preserved and kept until the "day of Christ Jesus," no doubt a reference to the second coming of Christ to establish His eternal kingdom, about which Paul writes in many of His epistles. That

confidence should encourage today's believers, also. If a person has placed his trust in the work of Christ to provide salvation, he can be assured that he will be saved until the very end.

Verses 7 and 8 assure the Philippians of Paul's great affection for them. He tells them, "I have you in my heart." That is true, in part, because he considers that they have been a significant part of his life through their gifts and prayers and during his imprisonment and the difficult times he has had in proclaiming the gospel. His feeling for them is so great that he describes it in strong terms of longing and affection.

The specific elements of Paul's prayer reveal his concern that these converts grow in their spiritual lives. He prays that their love may increase continually. It is not just a feeling, however; it is a love that is based on "knowledge" and "discernment." In the 20 centuries since Paul wrote those words, current society seems to have lost the real meaning of love. Today, it seems to be either a fleeting sentiment based on passing emotions or a purely physical attraction. But true love requires knowing the loved one well and the ability to discern qualities worthy of affection.

Such discernment enables one to choose what is truly best ("excellent" is Paul's term). He writes in a later chapter that Christians should "let [their] mind dwell on" things that are honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good report "if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise" (4:8). Why? So that until the end of life on earth they will be "sincere and blameless." It is only by filling our minds with those kinds of things that we can live a holy and righteous life. It must have been difficult for believers to live such godly lives in their godless society. What a challenge that is for 21st century Christians with the constant influences of evil through the ever-present media of our times.

Is it possible to live such holy lives? To be sure, it is difficult. But the final portion of today's reading reveals the secret. It is possible only because the believer, as Paul writes, has "been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ." Apart from the indwelling Christ, it would be impossible to be blameless, but while we are still in our present bodies and are incapable of perfection, we do have the power within to increase in holiness and righteous behavior. And, Paul reminds us that all such spiritual progress will be "to the glory and praise of God."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we begin the next reading, we should remember that Luke's Gospel is the result of careful study so that he can present an accurate review of the life and ministry of Jesus. He introduces his story by assuring the readers of "having investigated everything carefully

from the beginning." Luke's perspective, not in contrast with the other Gospels but as complementary to them, focuses on Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human.

Although Luke seems to be writing mainly to Gentile Christians, he makes it clear that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He seeks to add to the knowledge of those early Christians confirming that what they already believed was true and trustworthy. Today's reading follows the first two lengthy chapters which relate the stories of Christ's birth and surrounding events. As we approach the Christmas holiday, it might be good to re-read those familiar passages before looking at today's text more carefully.

Gospel Reading:
Luke 3:1-6 NAS95 1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. 5 'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; 6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'"

Verse 1 of today's reading gives very specific details of the political and geographical environment into which John the Baptist was to come. Verse 2 introduces the religious leaders of the immediate area. Furthermore, it states that "the word of God came to John" as a simple fact without indicating how or under what circumstances except that it came "in the wilderness" where John seemed to live (Matthew 3:1-5). Zacharias is noted as John's father. The unique story of the announcement and birth of John is recorded earlier in Luke's Gospel (1:5-25).

John the Baptist's message was very clear. Luke says he came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." We should be reminded that repentance means a lot more than just being sorry for your sin. The New Testament word actually means "changing your mind," and it's not just a mental attitude. Genuine repentance involves a change in behavior that results from the renewed mind. John must have been a powerful preacher (enabled by the Holy Spirit, of course), because many responded to his message, repented, and were baptized. Elsewhere, we read that John's message of repentance included his preaching that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This is the same message

Jesus preached (Matthew 4:17).

All of this was predicted centuries before by the prophet Isaiah (ch. 40) as repeated by Luke in today's reading. The first prophesied statement is obviously fulfilled in John. Clearly, he was a voice "crying in the wilderness." In an apparent allusion to the preparations that were usually made for a dignitary's travel, John is to make the way clear for the promised Messiah by his teaching. The next several clauses are thought to be poetic ways of saying that the way for Messiah will be advanced, and obstacles will be removed. These clauses may also be metaphors suggesting that the proud and arrogant will be humbled.

Verse 6 quite clearly has reference to the ministry of Messiah, not John the Baptist. In the preceding chapter (2:30-32) Luke had quoted other Scriptures indicating that salvation ultimately would be for both Jews and Gentiles. This is a message that Luke particularly emphasized since he was writing primarily to a Gentile audience, and the Jewish population often mistakenly thought that salvation was for Israel alone.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What did you learn today about having confidence that God has begun a good work in you and will complete it? That is possible only if you have put your personal trust in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to atone for your sin.

2. In what ways are you filling your mind with the "excellent" things of life that will honor God and build your Christian character?

3. During the past year, what are some specific circumstances when you acknowledged your sin before God, and change your mind and behavior so that you can live a life of holiness?

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/120615.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at:
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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday 7-12-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-12-2015**. This week we open with Amos 7: 12-15 as Amos, a simple farmer, is called by God to prophesy in Israel. Then we move to Ephesians 1:3-14 where Paul explains all the blessings that are available to those who are in Christ. Finally we conclude with Mark 6: 7-13. Here Jesus sends out His disciples to minister and instructs them to trust God for their daily needs as they call people to repentance.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Imagine you are an ordinary farmer, minding your own business, tending your sheep and your crops. Suddenly God commands you to go to a neighboring land and pronounce judgment on its rebellious people. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news. Yet sometimes God called men to be prophets, foretelling God's plan and delivering God's words of warning and judgment. God's intention was never to simply punish people. His ultimate desire was to restore His wayward children back to Himself. Amos, however, was not a prophet, nor even the son of a prophet. He was simply a farmer trying to make a living in Judah during the time of the divided kingdom.

You may remember that the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms due to the sin of King Solomon. Ten tribes became the Northern Kingdom and were collectively called Israel. The remaining two tribes made up the Southern Kingdom and were known as Judah. In a strange twist, God called this farmer from Judah to go to Israel and prophesy against them.

At first, Amos pronounced God's judgment on Israel's enemies. No one objected to that. But then he began to recite the sins of Israel. Amos first reminded them of all God had done for them. He had released them from bondage in Egypt, defeated their enemies, given them land, and raised up prophets among them. Yet Israel rebelled. It wasn't that they had completely forgotten God. They still performed their religious rituals. But while claiming to belong to God, Israel oppressed the righteous, deprived the poor of justice, worshipped idols, and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

Religious ritual unaccompanied by love for God and concern for the oppressed does not impress God. He despised Israel's religious hypocrisy. When He used His plumb line (standard of holiness) to evaluate Israel, her crookedness was revealed. Amos warned them that God's judgment would surely come. Their king Jeroboam would die by the sword, and Israel would be taken captive by its enemy.

In the First Reading, Amaziah, a priest of Israel who should have been open to the message of the Lord, instead commanded Amos to cease prophesying and go home. Though Amos conceded he was a farmer and not a prophet, he knew God had called him to prophesy. He would prove faithful to that call despite opposition.

First Reading:

Amos 7:12-15 NAS95 12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! 13 "But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence." 14 Then Amos replied to Amaziah, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. 15 "But the LORD took me from following the flock and the LORD said to me, 'Go prophesy to My people Israel."

We are prophets in a sense, bringing God's message of salvation to those around us. This message is a mixture of bad news and good news. The wages of our sin is death, St. Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, and if we continue in our rebellion against God, we will surely die. That is very bad news. But the good news is in that same verse: "*…the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord*." God has called each one of us to bear this news to the whole world. Will we be faithful to the call?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

I enjoyed visiting Moody Bible Institute in Chicago when my daughter Emily was a student there. Because Moody is located near the center of one of the largest cities in America, the security on campus is tight, especially in the areas where students live and hang out. Students carry a pass card that allows them access to all the restricted areas. I was an outsider there, but as long as I was with Emily I could enjoy free access to all the college offered: I could visit the dorms, go to chapel,

attend classes, eat in the cafeteria, and have coffee at Joe's Coffee Shop. Nothing was kept from me as long as I was with Emily. Without her, I would be on the outside separated from the rich experience Moody offers. I could claim no right to these blessings. But as long as I was with her, all the blessings that were hers were mine, too.

Abundant blessing and privilege exists in the spiritual realm, but in ourselves, we have no right to it. Without Christ, we are on the outside and without hope. In the Second Reading Paul tells the church in Ephesus that God's plan from the foundation of the world was to include them (and us) in these great blessings.

As you read the Second Reading, notice the richness of these spiritual blessings which can be ours in abundance. Note the words *every, all, riches, lavished, fullness.* Observe the words that indicate how intentional God was to bless us—*He chose us, He predestined us, He purposed, according to the kind intention of His will.* And notice how many times the words *in Christ* are used for it is only through Christ that we have access to His abundant blessings.

Second Reading:

Ephesians 1:3-14 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Can you fathom the blessings that are ours in Christ?

v. 5 adoption as sons – When we trust in Christ and His death on the cross for us, we become members of God's family with all the rights and privileges of adult sons.

v. 7 *redemption through His blood* – Redemption has the idea of buying someone from the slave market and setting them free. We were slaves to sin, but God paid the price for us by sending

Jesus to die in our place. He has purchased us with His blood and set us free to serve Him.

v. 7 *the forgiveness of our trespasses* – We don't deserve forgiveness, but this is evidence of His abundant grace which He lavishes upon us.

v. 11 *an inheritance* – This is ours because in Christ we have been made a child of God. This inheritance, St. Peter explains in 1 Peter 1:4, "is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you."

v. 13 *sealed with the Holy Spirit* –We are sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit who comes to live in every believer. Our position in Christ is secure.

St. Paul explains the *pass card* that gives us access to God's abundant blessings:

"…after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14)

We hear the message of salvation, we believe it, and are saved and sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Christ's standing before God is our standing, His inheritance is our inheritance, and His riches are our riches. God lavished them on us, because we are in Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Jesus sent out the 12 disciples two by two as His representatives and under His authority. Their mission was a spiritual one. They would be taking the good news of Jesus to the lost. Naturally Satan and his demons would be opposing them at every turn, but Jesus gave his disciples power over these dark spiritual forces.

The disciples were to take nothing for their journey—no food, money, or extra clothing. Commentators have posed three reasons for what seems to us a strange command. First, extra possessions are an encumbrance. We have probably all experienced times when, instead of owning our possessions, they owned us. Our possessions require care and maintenance, consuming time and money and distracting us from more important matters of life. Are my possessions being used to serve God or are they distracting me from ministry? The disciples were to take nothing extra that could encumber them.

Second, the disciples were to go out in complete dependence on God's power and provision. One of the hallmarks of Jesus' life on earth was that He lived in complete dependence upon the Father (John 5:19, 5:30, 7:16). The disciples were to do likewise, depending on God for their daily provisions.

And third, Jesus established the principle that the minister of God is to be supported by the people to whom he ministers. It was appropriate for the disciples to enjoy the hospitality and provision of the ones who were receiving the blessings of their ministry.

If a city or household rejected the disciples and their message, the disciples were to shake the dust off the soles of their feet as they left. *Jews sometimes shook the dust off their clothing when returning from Gentile lands as a sign of contempt.** When the disciples did it, it was a sign of judgment. The disciples' message of salvation was often accompanied by miracles. Rejecting the message in the face of supernatural authentication indicated an intractable heart. Those who rejected the disciples were ultimately rejecting the One who sent them. And when people reject Jesus, they are rejecting the only provision for their sin. By shaking the dust off their feet, the disciples were communicating a warning: *We offered you what you needed for salvation, but you turned it down. The responsibility for your sins remains on your shoulders. Judgment is coming. We have nothing more to offer you.*

It is a moment none of us would want to face. And we don't have to if we repent and believe.

*https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/reformation-study-bible/Matt.10.14-Matt.10.15

Gospel Reading:

Mark 6:7-13 NAS95 7 And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; 8 and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff–no bread, no bag, no money in their belt– 9 but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." 10 And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. 11 Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." 12 They went out and preached that men should repent. 13 And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Which of the blessings listed in Ephesians 1 are you most thankful for and why?

2. If God were to send you out to minister, which of your possessions would be most difficult to leave behind? What could you do this week to decrease your attachment to things and increase your dependence upon God?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site:

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/071215.cfm

First Reading AM 7:12-15

Second Reading EPH 1:3-14

Gospel Reading MK 6:7-13

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 4-19-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-19-2015**. This week Marla shares the study of the readings beginning with Acts 3 where Saint Peter explains the meaning of the death of resurrection of Jesus. The second reading in First John also clarifies the importance of our relationship to Jesus Who is our Advocate in the face of our sin. Finally, the Gospel lesson from Saint Luke relates one of the stories of Jesus' appearance to the disciples after His resurrection.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

When my son Cole was a little boy, he was often oblivious to what was going on around him. I remember one time we were anticipating the visit of a beloved aunt and uncle. My husband and I spoke of it for weeks ahead of time around the dinner table. But when the day came and his aunt and uncle arrived, Cole was surprised to see them and more than a little perturbed with us. "Why didn't anyone tell me they were coming?" he wanted to know. We assured him we had spoken of it numerous times in various ways in his presence. But somehow he didn't get the message.

Turns out the Jews were a little like Cole. They had heard of the Messiah for generations. Moses and all the prophets from Samuel on had spoken of Him saying the Messiah would come and would suffer for their sins. Yet when Jesus came on the scene, they didn't recognize Him. And when a miracle was performed in front of their eyes in the power of Jesus name, the people were astonished.

A man lame from birth was well known by the Jews who came to the temple. For as long as they could remember this man sat at the temple gate begging for money. This day, though, Peter and John, disciples of Jesus and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, healed the man (see Acts 2: 36-47). His walking and leaping and praising God caused quite a stir in the temple that day, and the people came running to the men they thought responsible for the miracle. In the first reading, Peter denies being responsible and points the people to Jesus instead. In addition he points out that though the Jews heard the prophets, they somehow didn't understand the message. Instead of receiving the Messiah, they had disowned Him and killed Him. Devastating words! Yet it was not too late to respond. They could repent and turn to God and their sins would be wiped away and times of refreshing would come from the Lord (v. 19).

First Reading:

Acts 3:12-19 NAS95 12 But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. 14 But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. 16 And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. 17 And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. 18 But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;

It is important to note that in this passage Peter is speaking to "men of Israel," i.e. Jewish people (v. 12). He appeals to their heritage of "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers"

(v. 13). Then he uses multiple terms to identify Jesus including:

- [God's] servant (v. 13
- The Holy and Righteous One (v. 14)
- The Prince of Life (v. 15)
- The one whom God raised from the dead (v. 15)

These are some strong statements about who Jesus is. When we believe in Jesus, it is because we are convicted of our need for a Savior. This leads us to repent of (or turn away from) our sins. Peter invited them to turn from their sin and return (to the Lord) so that their sins would be wiped away. This same invitation is extended to everyone who is willing to believe in Jesus.

It is possible to attend Mass, hear that Jesus died for your sins, but not fully understand the message. It is not too late for anyone. Peter says to repent of our sin and then to turn to God so that our sins will be wiped away and that times of refreshing will come to us. God has promised, and He always keeps his promises.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

I know shopping on line is popular, fast, and convenient. However, how many of us have purchased something on line and ended up with an inferior product? Sometimes I prefer to go into a store, see the product with my own eyes, and handle it and try it out with my own hands. Only then can I be sure that what I am purchasing is the real deal.

St. John the apostle testified that Jesus was who He claimed to be—the Son of God and Savior of the world. And how did John know that? Because he was an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus and with Peter and James was part of Jesus' inner circle. Here is how St. John spoke of his relationship with Jesus:

1 John 1:1-4 NAS95 1 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life– 2 and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us– 3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

St. John had seen Jesus with his own eyes, heard Him with his own ears, and touched Him with his own hands. He knew from firsthand experience the real Jesus and wanted others to know Him, too. However, false teachers—the Gnostics—were teaching error, calling the body evil, denying the true humanity of Jesus, and living immoral lives. St. John reminded his readers that those who claim to be real followers of Jesus would live as Jesus lived not like the Gnostics, indulging in immorality. He explains:

1 John 1:5-8 NAS95 5 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is

Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

This idea is expanded in the second reading.

Second Reading:

"1 John 2:1-5 NAS95 1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. 3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him:"

The big idea in this reading is the importance of having a personal relationship with Jesus, rather than living hypocritically by claiming knowledge of Him with no fruit. If we claim to know Jesus and do not follow His commands we are liars and His truth is not in us (v. 4). Anyone can claim to be a Christian but John gives a clear guideline to assess ourselves. Keeping Christ's commands shows the sincerity of our claim to be a Christian. Obedience from the heart is a byproduct of coming "to know Him" and an outward manifestation of an inward reality.

Even while we are in Christ, we recognize the ongoing struggle we have with sin. The good news is that when we sin we have an advocate—an advocate is someone who has authority and uses that position on our behalf. God hates sin and as a good judge must punish sin. The Bible says the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23A). But Jesus is the propitiation for our sins (v. 2). Propitiation means "satisfaction." God is propitiated—satisfied—with Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus pleads our case before the Father. He died and shed His blood for our sins so we don't have to. And when we truly believe in Jesus, we will walk in His ways, demonstrating that our faith is real.

Introduction to the Third Reading:

My son Cole was not the only one who failed to fully comprehend what was going on right before his eyes. The disciples, too, often heard and saw things that they did not fully understand until later. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up the third day, some thought He was talking about a building. It wasn't until after Jesus was raised from the dead that the disciples understood He was referring to his death and resurrection.

Maybe that's why two disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize the resurrected Jesus when He joined them along the way. The disciples told their fellow traveler about the Nazarene who was crucified three days prior and how puzzled they were at the report from eyewitnesses that His tomb was empty. What could it mean? Then Jesus said to them:

"*O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*." (St. Luke 24: 25-27)

Their hearts burned within them when He spoke, but it wasn't until later, when the three of them broke bread together, that the disciples recognized Jesus. A moment later, He vanished from their sight. They hurried to Jerusalem to find the apostles and to testify that they had seen the risen Lord. As they spoke, Jesus appeared in their midst.

Third Reading:

Gospel Luke 24:35-48 NAS95 35 They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. 36 While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst. 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. 38 And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. 41 While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; 43 and He took it and ate it before them. 44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things."

Notice what great effort Jesus made to demonstrate that the One who stood before them was not a spirit or a conjuring of their grieving imagination. It was the real flesh and bone person of Jesus. They could actually see and touch the nail prints in His hands and feet. And in a final convincing proof, Jesus ate a piece of fish, something no dead person or disembodied spirit could do. It was really Jesus, raised bodily from the dead.

Because He was raised from the dead, we have the hope of a new life also, not just in heaven someday but here and now (Romans 6:1-8). The disciples were to proclaim to the whole world the message of repentance, forgiveness, and resurrection to new life. And now it's our turn to proclaim this life-giving news to our generation.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Even when we read the Bible we sometimes miss the message. What message about Jesus did

you learn from the reading today that you hadn't noticed before? How can understanding that message change how you live today?

2. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we have the hope of new life also, both now and for eternity. What is one way you can begin to share that message with those around you?

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/041915.cfm

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 1-25-2015



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 1-25-2015. This week we open with the first reading

from the Prophet Jonah who wrote about events that happened just before the Northern Tribes of Israel were taken captivity by the people about whom he was writing. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark.

The first reading is from the Book of Jonah. Jonah was a Prophet who came from the region near Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The context of the reading is the fulfillment of God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to his foreign Gentile enemy. You may be familiar with what transpired in the first two chapters before Jonah finally obeyed God. His disobedience included getting on a ship going in the opposite direction at which point a fierce storm arose that threatened the lives of all of those on the ship. The sailors threw Jonah overboard where he was swallowed by a great fish. After being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights it finally vomited him up on the shore. This is where we enter the story. *Note: All of the verses in the range from 1-10 have been included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. 4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-10)

What does this story teach us about God, the human condition, and our life in the world. First, we see that God is a God of second changes. Verse one says, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the **second** time." Second, God is a God of compassion and mercy. He sent Jonah to Nineveh as a mission of mercy to inform the people that Nineveh was going to be destroyed. Thirdly, we learn that God rewards faith (Hebrews 11:6). Verse 5 says that the Ninevites believed God and showed that in their actions. Fourth, we learn that God responds to their repentance by not destroying them. Finally, we learn that God's plan of salvation extends beyond the Jews to the Gentiles (Jonah 4:11).

Jonah was reluctant to bring this message of salvation to the Gentiles who were also his enemies. This story provides insight to the human heart. Even though Jonah had received a direct revelation

from God as a prophet, he was at first unwilling to share that message with those whom he deemed unworthy. There is a little bit of this in all of our hearts, it is called spiritual pride. In contrast to Jonah's hard heartedness we see the surprise responsive hearts of the Ninevites (Gentile enemies of Israel). The Lord is no respecter of persons. We have this concept corroborated in Acts 10, "Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). The story of Jonah reminds us to reflect God's heart, which loves all people (John 3:16).

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is that Paul is answering questions that the Corinthian church had asked him. In this particular section, he deals with marriage, singleness, circumcision, and buying one's freedom from indentured servanthood. This passage relays the criteria for making decisions that drastically changes one's life.

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; 30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; 31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

The criteria for making life-changing decisions is to have an eternal perspective. Paul gives certain examples about what that may look like for the Corinthian people. He is not encouraging singleness for the sake of holiness or an emotionless existence. He is saying however that we must view our circumstances in light of an eternal perspective. If this world in its present form is passing away, how now shall we live?

The Gospel reading is from Mark Chapter 1. The context is immediately after Jesus' baptism and subsequent temptation by the devil in the desert.

14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." 16 As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." 18 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 19 Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him. (Mark 1:14-20)

This passage records the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that includes His message and the calling of His messengers. First, His message is one of good news, which is what the word "gospel" means. Jesus came to let people know that it was now time for them to respond to His invitation to enter into the kingdom of God. Instead of the kingdom of God being far away and only for a few elite people, Jesus let them know that the kingdom of God is actually among them (v. 15). The proper response to this good news is to repent, which means to turn from their sin, and believe in the

gospel. This is the same response He asks from each one of us today.

The second part of this passage is the calling of His messengers. Simon, Andrew, James and John were all hardworking fishermen. Jesus invited them to be His disciples, which meant leaving their nets and following Him. In the case of James and John, this also meant leaving their father in the boat to carry on the family business without them. Jesus' disciples were not rabbinic students but were rather common tradespeople who would have been considered unclean by the religious authorities.

What we can see about God's heart from this passage is that He reaches out to the least likely candidates. First, Jesus proclaimed the Good News to the common person. One would believe that the Messiah would choose an elite class of religious leaders who show great promise in leading the kingdom. Instead, just as we saw in the first reading, God is no respecter of persons. The prerequisite for life in the kingdom is repentance and belief, not religious pedigree. In addition, God chose the lowly to be His representatives.

In my life, I have had to reconsider my beliefs regarding who would or would not come to believe in Jesus Christ. I worked in a state prison where I saw convicted criminals give their heart to the Lord that provoked deep change in their lives. Someone who would have been manipulative and self-seeking became trustworthy and sacrificial. One man in particular was a practicing Muslim and had even adopted a Muslim name. Over the years, his heart became softened and one day another of the professors led him to express faith in the Lord Jesus. This is just one example of people who are often marginalized by the Christian society thinking that they will never come to the Lord. How we treat people is a reflection of God's heart for them and that He wants all men to come to the knowledge of everlasting life in Him (2 Peter 3:9).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. As we saw in the lesson the word "gospel" is a word that means "good news." Do you see the message of the Bible as good news? If so, how is the kingdom of God being "at hand" good news in your life? How might this be good news to others in your life? Is there anyone with whom you would like to share the good news of Jesus Christ this year?

2. In the first and last reading we saw how God is no respecter of persons; He does not show partiality. How does the fact that God reaches out to the hearts of people who we may consider unlovable and impossible to reach challenge your beliefs about sharing your faith with others? Are there people that you are quick to judge? Pray that God would open your eyes to their potential and change your heart so that you can reflect His generosity in bringing unlikely people into the kingdom.

Readings for the Week

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Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/012515.cfm

First Reading JON 3:1-5, 10

Second Reading 1 COR 7:29-31

Gospel Reading MK 1:14-20

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 12-7-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 12-7-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah in which we see a prophecy about the coming of the forerunner who would announce the Messiah. Then we move to the second reading from Second Peter and close with the Gospel lesson from the first chapter of Mark.

The first reading is from Isaiah chapter 40. This section of Isaiah focuses upon the preaching of the

Gospel as well as prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). In the first verse, "Jerusalem" refers to the Nation as a whole. *Note: Verses 6-8 that were skipped in the reading were included below.*

> *1 "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. 2 "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." 3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Call out." Then he answered, "What shall I call out?" All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, When the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever. 9 Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him And His recompense before Him. 11 Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:1-11)*

In this passage, some timeless principles emerge for our lives today. A key point is that while humans are finite, God and His Word stand forever. If this is the case, then it is wise for us to study God's Word and to orient our lives around its truth. This passage also shares the two-sided nature of the Messiah's coming: "The Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him" and "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock . . .He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (v. 10-11). We see that God is gentle with those who need and accept His care, but He is also authoritative with those who are not willing to bend to His ways.

Another main theme in the reading is the prophecy of the future redemption of the Nation of Israel through the coming of the Messiah that will be announced by a forerunner. Although God disciplined Israel "double for her sins (v. 2), He began the restoration process first by sending John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus as predicted in verse 3. Isaiah's message was a picture of the manner in which the Messiah Jesus would be revealed to the world through a spokesperson as a forerunner who sends a clear message:

> *Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (vv. 3b – 5)*

The forerunner, who in retrospect we know was John the Baptist, prepared the way for the coming of the King Jesus. John "cleared the way" by **preaching** the good news (the Gospel) telling the people that they needed to repent of their sins. John was removing the obstacles that lay in people's paths in order to receive the subsequent message from Jesus that He was the only way to God (John 3:3, John 3:16, John 14:6). John was "leveling the mountains and smoothing the ground" so the world could receive Jesus' Gospel. Like many prophetic writings, verse 5 has an "already not yet" sense in that although Jesus did come and His glory was revealed, in some future day He will return and all flesh will see the glory of the Lord.

Isaiah's message was also a picture of the literal, eschatological (end times) restoration of the Nation of Israel. In the last days, God will make Jerusalem the capital city of the universe and remove both the physical and spiritual obstacles standing in the way for people to come to the Lord in Jerusalem. Verse 3 says, "Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." We see something similar to this in Revelation 16:12 where God says that He will make a way for the "kings of the east." Although the interpretation of this passage is difficult, it seems to mean that national leaders from regions to the east of Jerusalem will be converted to the true faith of God in the end times. Like many prophecies in the Bible, a day will come when we will be able to look back and understand the fulfillment of the prophecy in hindsight. Until then the best we can do is to "study to show ourselves approved" (2 Timothy 2:15). We must endeavor to utilize the prophecies to the best of our ability in a way that calls the world to repent of their sin and place their faith in the one and only means of finding an eternal relationship with God, faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Isaiah's message, we see the kindness of God who granted us salvation by His free grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). A caveat is that we must be willing to repent of our sins and turn from our former sinful behavior. This means to turn from, or agree with what God says about the seriousness of our sin.

The second reading is from the Second Epistle of Peter. The context is Paul's teaching on the return of the Lord which will occur at the conclusion of the period known in the biblical text as the "Day of the Lord." In this Epistle, Saint Peter described how the people in the future would say that since their daily lives were continuing as had been happening throughout all the previous generations that the Lord wasn't going to return. They would say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). Paul informed his readers that Jesus would indeed return and reminded them of the flood that God unleashed upon the ungodly world during the days of Noah (2 Peter 3:4-7). What he was saying was that the coming Day of the Lord's judgment would unfold in a similar way as it did during the days of Noah. Our Lord had previously said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37). The reading for today picks up in verse 8.

> *8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the*

> *earth and its works will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! 13 But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:8-14)*

As we said in the introduction to the reading, Peter said that in the future, scoffers would come saying that the Lord was delaying His return (2 Peter 3:4). Peter corrected this false teaching by explaining that God, Who exists in eternity, does not count time the same way people do on earth (v. 8). Since with God "a thousand years is like one day," the return of the Lord will come in an instant in the mind of God, quickly, "like a thief" (v. 10a). The reason that God has delayed isn't because He is not returning, but because He is longsuffering ("patient" v. 9c) and "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (v.9d). This is the message that was preached by John the Baptist, the message that we will hear later in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark. Peter went on to reveal some as yet untold prophecy about events that would happen in the universe sometime after Jesus returned. He said that the earth would be destroyed (or renewed) by fire (vv. 10b-11), and a new heaven and earth would be created "in which righteousness dwells" (v. 13b). Peter concluded the reading with the crux of the matter. "**Therefore**, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (v. 14, emphasis added). He told them that since the Lord **was** going to be returning soon along with terrible events on the earth, and the earth would then undergo a purification process in which all unrighteousness would be removed, they needed to be behaving in a manner befitting of this knowledge. Jesus said, "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into" (Matthew 24:43). The reality of Jesus' soon return should encourage us to live in a manner that is consistent with His character and ways.

As we move to the Gospel lesson, let's summarize what we have covered so far. We saw in the first reading how God in His grace would send a forerunner whom we know as John the Baptist to prepare the hearts of the people to receive the message of Jesus Christ. In the second reading, we saw that Peter warned the people that scoffers would come in the future saying that the Lord Jesus had delayed His return, and they would go on about their ungodly business as if the Lord was never going to return. Peter corrected this false theology and said the Lord was going to return and that we we should not mark time the way that it is done on earth, for God exists outside of time and with Him "a thousand years is as a day." No, Peter said, the Lord would return in an instant "as a thief in the night." Since He was coming quickly people needed to act in godly ways befitting of the imminent return of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16).

The Gospel reading is from the opening section of the Gospel of Saint Mark. Mark, known as John Mark (Acts 12:25) had a bit of a checkered past because he was the man that deserted Paul and Barnabas during Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). During Paul's second missionary

journey Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but this caused a strong disagreement with Paul (Acts 15:38-40). In spite of these events, John Mark went on to prove himself to be an extremely valuable co-worker in the Lord, and was even vindicated by Paul (Colossians 4:10). Mark was evidently a close disciple of Saint Peter because the latter described him as his son (1 Peter 5:13). Mark's Gospel was written for Roman believers, primarily Gentiles because of some nuances he used in translating certain words from the Aramaic and his use of Latin instead of Greek in some places. The main theme of Mark is the presentation of Jesus as the suffering servant of God as portrayed in Isaiah 53. He emphasized Jesus' humanity much more than the other Gospel writers including his emotions (for example Mark 8:12) and human limitations (for example Mark 11:12). Mark, unlike the other Gospel writers such as Luke, did not include lengthy genealogies of Jesus likely because these are not as significant to his intended Gentile audience.

> *1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; 3 THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" 4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:1-8)*

Mark, obviously very familiar with Isaiah, quoted from his Book in the very first verse of his Gospel. The coming of John the Baptist marks the fulfillment of verse 3 from Isaiah 40 that we studied in the first reading. John was described as a most unusual man "clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist" (v. 6). The key point of this verse is now that John the Baptist had come, he would point the way for the coming of Jesus Christ (v. 7). John the Baptist said, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I" (v. 7a), then humbly said, "and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals" (v. 7b). John the Baptist then foretold how Jesus would not only baptize with water, such as he was doing, but would send God's Holy Spirit (v. 8). John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, having been born to Elizabeth (Luke 1:34-37, Jesus' disciple John, the one whom Jesus loved, was also Jesus' cousin). Note that John's diet was indicative of his reliance upon God, the same way that Elijah relied upon God when he fed him by the ravens as told in 1 Kings 17:6. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy about the coming of a "forerunner" that was saw in the first reading. His coming was also the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the return of the Prophet Elijah given in the Book of Malachi. God said in that Book, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6). The future fulfillment will be when Jesus returns with His church at the end of the age as we studied last week.

What does all of this mean for us as we live out our lives as Christians? First, like John, we also are called to "prepare the way of the Lord" by preaching the Good News to the world that if they repent of their sin and place their faith in Jesus Christ they will have eternal forgiveness in eternity with God. God is "patient and not willing that any should perish" to the extent that He uses unusual people like John the Baptist and even more unusual people like you and me to do His work! Finally, since the return of the Lord Jesus is imminent we need to accelerate our proclamation of this message, as well as live in a way befitting of His soon return.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The Gospel reading said that "all of the country of Judea was going to [John the Baptist] . . . and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). What do you think motivated the people to confess their sins to him? As a clue, what word is repeated in verses 4 and 7?

2. As we look towards Christmas coming up in just two and half weeks, pray and ask God if there is anything standing in the way between you and the relationship with Him that He desires with you.

> *Dear God, is there anything that you would have me to do during this Christmas season? What mountains needs to be made flat, and hills need to be leveled in order for me to accomplish your will this Christmas season?*

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/120714.cfm

First Reading IS 40:1-5, 9-11

Second Reading 2 PT 3:8-14

Gospel Reading MK 1:1-8

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB