Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

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"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus." 1 Timothy 2:5

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we continue with our studies from last week on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. We will also look at a brief reading from Isaiah. In the Gospel message from the Sermon on the Mount, we will discuss the subject of worry. Has anyone in the Bible ever struggled with anxiety and what did God reveal about whether this was something that was acceptable in that person's life? Is it acceptable for a Christian to worry? We will address these things this week in Mass Notes.

For a helpful insight on the subject of worry, we can turn to the Old Testament Book of First Kings. Elijah was a mighty man of God in this dark era in Israel during the decline of the theocratic kingdom. This period followed the time of the Judges in which the Scripture said, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). There were bright spots in this age and one of them was the prophet Elijah. Elijah was perhaps best known for the incident recorded in First Kings 18 during a time of severe famine in Samaria. According to the Scripture Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal as to whether they could bring fire down on their sacrifice by calling on their god while Elijah would offer his sacrifice to God and ask Him to send fire to complete his burnt offering. The Priests of Baal failed miserably and began calling upon their god and cutting themselves in order to invoke a response. Next, Elijah was so certain the God would act upon his request that he soaked the wood with water (1 Kings 18:33). Here is how the story ended.

> *36 At the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, today let it be known that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant and I have done all these things at Your word. 37 Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that You, O LORD, are God, and that You have turned their heart back again." 38 Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. 39 When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, "The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God." (1 Kings 18:36-39)*

Afterwards, Elijah had the Priests taken captive and then put them to death (v. 40). What an amazing victory Elijah had that day! After such an important victory one would think that Elijah would have continued his momentum and never suffered from any sort of worry. If God could light even wet wood on fire in front of the pagan priests Elijah could accomplish anything by calling upon the only true God in prayer. At least that is what one may think. But soon afterwards the Scripture records that Elijah fell into a period of deep anxiety because of the actions of a certain ungodly woman named Jezebel.

Jezebel was the evil wife of King Ahab, a king of Northern Israel. As a side note, I have always found it interesting that nobody I have ever come across has named his or her baby girl Jezebel. Some have branded their daughters with crazy names like Moon Unit (Zappa) or Alabama Gypsy Rose (Jennings), but not Jezebel. Anyway, immediately after Elijah's victory over the Prophets of Baal, wicked Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time (1 Kings 19:2b). His response was to flee for his life because of Jezebel's threat. "And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the

wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers'" (vv. 3-4). Later, Elijah fled even further into the mountains to hide in a cave (1 Kings 19:9). How could such a mighty man of God, who had just witnessed God's dynamic power in the victory over the Prophets of Baal find himself holed up and worrying in a dark cave? If a mighty man of God like Elijah could suffer with anxiety, it's no wonder that Christians can also fall into patterns of worry.

Introduction to the First Reading:
We will see in the Gospel message some specific teaching from Jesus about worry. First, let's turn to the first reading in Isaiah Chapter 49. The context of the passage was God's promises for the future restoration of Israel. The chapter opens with the restatement of both the purposes of the Prophet Isaiah as well as Israel. God said about Isaiah that "He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver" (Isaiah 49:2). Isaiah was God's chosen instrument to bring the message of His judgment and promise of future restoration to Israel. Next God stated His purpose for the Nation. Isaiah said, "He said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory'" (v. 3). Isaiah was chosen to be God's message to the Jews, and the Jews were chosen to bear God's message of salvation to the world. They were to be a "called out" people who were established by God as salt and light to the surrounding nations. Isaiah continued, "And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength)" (v. 5).

In this week's passage, the people reveal something very telling, which is common when we go through hard times. They ask if the LORD has forsaken them. Read God's answer.

First Reading:

> *14 But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, And the Lord has forgotten me."*
> *15 "Can a woman forget her nursing child And have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:14-15)*

God's answer was a resounding no, made even more clear by the clever use of the imagery of a woman and her nursing child. Of course it was impossible for a woman to forsake her nursing child. Therefore, it is impossible for God to forget His people.

As you think about the importance of this text for your own spiritual journey, consider the times that you have felt forsaken by God. What would it be like to hear God's answer to your feelings in such a resounding way? Well, as New Testament believers we have another clear verse that definitely says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Our feelings do not always match the truth of the matter, just as Elijah's feelings didn't as he sat under the broom tree and wanted to die.

Saint John of the Cross coined the term the "Dark Night of the Soul" regarding times when one experienced the felt absence of the presence of God. If processed through, this God-ordained spiritual crises leads God's beloved on a journey that frees them from being dependent on their feelings and their own mixed motives in their relationship with God. This ultimately leads to a fuller relationship with God if we will let Him do this purifying work in us. What about you, have you ever experienced times in your life in which you felt forsaken by God, your own "Dark Night of the Soul?" Many people of God have experienced similar things. Mother Teresa of Calcutta reportedly experienced a decades long Dark

Night of the Soul. We saw how the mighty Prophet Elijah experienced his own spiritual journey during his flight from Jezebel. It is common for God's people to have to walk by faith and not by sight. Is it possible that the moments of crises that we experience are opportunities to learn this new way of walking and living—which frees us up from the small horizons of this world?

Introduction to the Second Reading:
Now let's return to our study of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In this section, which was a continuation of the idea that began in 3:18, Paul examined the judgmental spirit that was exhibited by some within the Corinthian Church. Specifically, some were proud in their self-righteousness and questioned Paul's authenticity as a spiritual leader. Instead of defending himself, Paul points to his relationship with God, who will ultimately be the final judge of our hearts.

Second Reading:

> "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, he must become foolish, so that he may become wise" (1Corinthians 3:18).
> *1 Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. 3 But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. 4 For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. 5 Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (1 Corinthians 4:1-5)*

Paul was being scrutinized by "super-apostles" that were deceiving the minds of the Corinthian believers. Instead of worrying, or turning to his own resources to defend himself, he turned to God. This is a proper response to the inadequacy that all of us feel in a world that is not our home. If we believe that Christ is our sufficiency, then we do not need to feel threatened by the universal human feeling of inadequacy.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
The Gospel message is a continuation of our study last week of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Verse 25 contained an important prepositional phrase, "For this reason," translated "therefore" in many other versions. As we said last week, we need to ask ourselves what the word "therefore" is there for. In the context of the message today it becomes clear that Jesus has made a linkage between serving the god of money and the presence of anxiety in a person's life. With this thought in mind let's read the text for today.

Gospel Reading:

> *24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. 25* ***For this reason*** *I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? 27 And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? 28 And why are you worried about*

clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, 29 yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! 31 Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' 32 For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. 34 So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:24-34, emphasis added)

Jesus began with an analogy of the two masters, God, and money. By application, what Jesus said was that if you serve the god of money you worry. However, if you serve the one true God you don't have to worry because by seeking the kingdom of God first He will provide for your daily needs. Let's dig deeper into these verses.

There is a principle of Bible interpretation regarding the appearance of repeated words in the same section of a text. In this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the word "worried" (Greek merimnao, "mare-im-nah-oh" or 'anxious' in some translations) is repeated no less than five times in this short space. Jesus is saying emphatically don't worry (v.25), don't worry (v.27), don't worry (v.28), don't worry (v.31), don't worry (34). I wonder if Bob Marley's song, "Don't worry, be happy" got its inspiration from Jesus. But we all know, it's easier said than done.

How does a believer combat worry? The godly antidote to worry is prayer. Does it matter how we pray? Jesus gave us a model for prayer earlier in Matthew 6:9-13. This is the familiar Lord's prayer that you pray in Mass each week.

Pray, then, in this way: "Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." (Matthew 6:9-13)

In order for this to be an antidote to worry, we must enter into the reality of this prayer, not just recite it. The spiritual realities that Jesus invites us into experience include:

- We have a Father (that implies a relationship with someone bigger, wiser and more able to cope with this world than ourselves; we are not orphans).
- Our Father is in heaven (He is above the fray of this world and has power and resources at his command that we cannot even fathom).
- His name is holy (His name refers to his character and essence. If he is holy, then he relates in a way that is set apart from the world's way. You may want to review last week's discussion on holiness. His holiness is what creates a foundation of trust for us to surrender our will to His will, to turn to Him in our time of need.)
- He has a kingdom that is on the move. We can choose to be part of His kingdom and allow His way of heaven to infiltrate this world through my life. Instead of worrying about how I'm going to make it in this world, I am now focused on being used by God to bring His ways to bear on this world.
- He is our provider.

- He forgives us. And in His strength, we can extend forgiveness to others (again a quality of the Kingdom of God that is countercultural to the world's ways).
- He leads us out of temptation and delivers us from evil. Do I really want to be delivered from temptation and evil, or do I want only to be delivered from the negative consequences of sin?
- He has a kingdom, power and glory that will be manifested forever. Do I want to be a part of this, or do I think that doing life on my own is a better option?

These are some amazing realities that Jesus understood and allowed Him to live in a countercultural way, free of worry and anxiety, because He knew who His Father was. He offers that same type of perspective to us, if we will ask Him to teach us to pray in this way.

As we said in the introduction, if a mighty man of God like Elijah could suffer with anxiety, it's no wonder that Christians can also fall into patterns of worry. Yet, for some people worry can become something almost like a ministry in which it is hard to separate their legitimate concern for people from an overarching anxiety that could be classified as worry and therefore something that we are cautioned against in the Scripture. Such was the case with my grandmother. She was a faithful Roman Catholic woman who worshiped at Mass every Sunday and was the picture of love and humility. One day something happened which revealed how she viewed the concept of worry. My brother sensed (in his opinion) her overarching concern over some family member and told her that she shouldn't worry about it. In an uncharacteristic response she shouted, "You can't take that from me!" My grandma expressed herself through showing concern for her family. Was her "ministry of concern" something that was sinful or was it her legitimate, heart-felt care for them?

Over the years I have pondered my grandma's response to my brother's comment to her about not worrying. Here are a few thoughts that help me to understand God's heart for His children as it relates to worry.

- Concern for loved ones is a healthy form of expressing our bond to them in love.
- Because this world is not our home and has "thorns and thistles" due to the Fall (Gen. 3), we all have some degree of fear, inadequacy, and insecurity.
- Worry is a fallen human response to the normal human experiences of fear, inadequacy, and insecurity. Worry only calculates my resources and forgets about God's resources. We should all have a sense of healthy concern for loved ones, but to "worry" takes that concern to an unhealthy place that miscalculates God's heart and resources.
- When we feel worried (for ourselves or loved ones) God wants to use that as a prompt to turn to Him. 1 Peter 5:7 tells us to "Cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you." Phil. 4:6-7 also reinforces this direction to pray in the midst of our insecurities: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
- Instead of feeling guilty over my worry, I can allow it to turn my heart to ask for God's help. What Satan intends for evil (my worry) ends up being used for good (my reminder to connect to my Heavenly Father in prayer). I grow in my faith and I end up pleasing the Lord (Heb. 11:6).
- Unfortunately, we do not always turn our anxiety into relational dependence on our Heavenly Father, as Scripture tells us to. Instead, we internalize it, carry it and feel as if it is our burden to carry, like we are martyrs suffering for a noble cause. Underneath the experience of this martyr complex, is a false formula that believes "**If it's gonna be, it's up to me**," which reveals an

orphan complex. This is the flesh, trying to maintain some semblance of control, which reveals a lack of understanding of God's heart for His children and His abundant provisions. No wonder God wants us to turn away from worry and turn to Him.

So, what became of Elijah after he endured his "dark night of the soul"? During his self-imposed exile, Elijah mistakenly thought that he was the only believer left in the country. But God told him that there were 7,000 people left who had not worshiped the false god Baal (1 Kings 19:18). After he came out of hiding Elijah's first action was to follow God's call to appoint Elisha as his successor (v. 19). After this he received a word from God saying, "Of Jezebel also has the LORD spoken, saying, 'The dogs will eat Jezebel in the district of Jezreel'" (1Kings 21:23). Jezebel came to her end in this gruesome way and Elijah had the great honor of being one the two men in the Bible that have not yet had to die (though they will in the future, see Revelation 11:7-8) the first of whom was Enoch (Genesis 5:24, Hebrews 11:5). Elijah, one of the two witnesses of Revelation who will return to earth (Malachi 4:5-6, Revelation 11:3), went up to heaven this way. "As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). In the presence of God, there is no reason to worry. May we live in light of God's presence so that courage born out of deep trust marks our life day by day.

Reflection Questions

1. The Isaiah passage revealed that God could not forget His people. How do you respond to this truth? What experiences have you had that seem to mock you for believing this truth? You can respond like the man who came to Jesus needing healing for his son. He said, "I belief, help my unbelief."

2. The New Testament passage showed how Saint Paul responded to unwarranted scrutiny and criticism. How do you respond to false accusations and criticism? How might Paul's example give you encouragement when others point out your inadequacies and failure to measure up to their expectations?

3. The Gospel passage reiterated to us the freedom that life in Jesus can bring from the gnawing experience of worry. As you go through the week ahead, try to be conscious of your patterns of worry and anxiety. Ask the Lord to turn your worry into relational dependence on Him, further knitting your heart to His.

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