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 return to Genesis, the first Book in the Bible to see God's unconditional promise of blessing on Abram, whose name God later changed to the more familiar Abraham. Then we will study Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy and conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 17 in which we will see Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.

Let's step back for a moment and talk about how we go about studying the readings each week in order to give you some insights into our method. When we study the readings we use the following procedure counting down from the letter "C" in the alphabet: **C**ontext, **B**ig Idea, and **A**pplication. First, we examine the context of the passage in light of the surrounding passages (the textual context) along with the historical information (the historical context). Second, we determine the theological big idea that emerged from the study of the text. What was God saying to the people in the original context, and what theological principles can we extract from the text? Finally, we determine the contemporary application(s) – what does it mean to us today? As we move through the readings each week try and see what theological big ideas you can garner from the text and how these could then be applied to your life. As you focus upon the **A**pplication, first pray that God would reveal to you what He would have you do with what you learned. You may be amazed at how God sheds light differently on each passage as you encounter and study it again in the liturgical cycle over the years. Perhaps you will find, as my wife likes to say, that you have been ruined for the ordinary!

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Genesis Chapter 12. The context of this section was just after Abram, who later became Abraham the Father of all believers, left with his father Terah from his birthplace in the region called "Ur of the Chaldeans" and settled in Haran (Genesis 11:31). These were the circumstances leading up to God's call of Abram. Looking at the bigger picture, Noah's Flood was in the somewhat distant history, and he had died back in Chapter 9 (v. 28). The era of the city building had begun under Nimrod (10:8), beginning with the city of Babel (10:10). Chapter 10 contained what was called the "Table of Nations" that represented the nations that developed after Noah and his sons departed from the ark. "These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood" (v. 32, emphasis added). The division (or "separated in some versions) happened at the Tower of Babel where God acted to confuse the languages of the nation states for several reasons including their idolatry and unwillingness to spread out and populate the earth (9:1, 11:4). "They said, 'Come, let **us** build for **ourselves** a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let **us** make for **ourselves** a name, otherwise **we** will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4, emphasis added). Many Bible commentators agree that the tower spoken of in verse 12 was a "ziggurat," which was a tall structure associated with the worship of pagan deities. Notice that the focus of the people's efforts was upon themselves (see the five bolded words in the text), rather than upon God's commandment to spread out and populate the earth. As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, they were not setting their mind on God's interests, but on man's, something which Jesus called Satanic (Matthew 16:23). We must remember that God cautions us against building shrines, regardless of the purity of our intentions. Otherwise these shrines, or towers, ziggurats, may become stumbling stones in serving God.

With this context in mind let's read the text. Note that as you read about God's promises to Abram, who was later renamed "Abraham," see if you can uncover the theological **b**ig ideas in the text.

First Reading:

> *1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." 4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4 NAS95)*

This account is the first recorded encounter of God's call to Abram, which was a call to bless him. We don't know how the LORD communicated with Abram, but it seems very clear that Abram understood and immediately obeyed (v. 4). While this call would be one of blessing, it required some sacrifice on Abram's part. He had to leave his country, his relatives and his father's house. The progression goes from more general to very specific. God did not give him the GPS coordinates of the destination; He just told him that He would show Abram the land when he got there. How's that for literally walking by faith? That is why Abram is called the father of faith, since he had the unique privilege of becoming the father of a great nation that was called to walk by faith in God, as a unique light and blessing to the other nations on earth. God's blessing included not only making him into a great nation, but also making Abram's name great. The promise was that Abram would be a blessing to other people groups.

In verses 2 - 3 we see an unconditional blessing of Abraham and all of the future Jews as well. "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Notice the warning that God gave to those who won't bless the Jews. "And the one who curses you I will curse" (v.3b). It's impossible to understand all of the implications of this timeless principle. Although we may not understand how God will deal with those who have harmed the Jews, we can rest assured that God will hold true to His unconditional promises to both bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse them.

God called Abram to make a great sacrifice in leaving his country, his relatives and his father's house. Is God calling you to leave some area of comfort to you? Is it possible that we are drawing our personal identity from our country, our relatives or our father's house? Whatever the case may be, God calls each of us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Romans 4:3 says that Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So this text helps us to understand what pleases God's heart. Our belief in who He says He is and our willingness to walk by faith is what God is looking for in each of our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move into the second reading, ponder for a moment how God speaks to us in the present day in order to call us to take certain actions for Him. In the first reading God spoke to Abram through a clear and specific call. The author of the Book of Hebrews provided some insights into how God spoke in the past and how He speaks to us today. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's final method of communication to His people is through the words and life of His Son Jesus. As you read from Saint

Paul's Second Letter to Timothy notice how throughout this letter, and in all of his letters, Paul's central focus in on the good news of Jesus – the Gospel.

Second Reading:

> *8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, 10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (2 Timothy 1:8-10)*

Paul reminded us not be ashamed of suffering for the good news of the Gospel, Jesus' eternal ministry, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). God saved us not because of our works, said Paul, but for His divine purposes (Titus 3:5). This reminds us of Paul's teaching to the 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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). We can celebrate that when we believe in God's promises through Jesus we have obtained immortality (v. 10b). In the same way that Abram listened to God, we are to listen to Him through the Gospel. You can see why Paul was not ashamed of this good news! We, as well, can learn from Paul's example. Even though the world around us wants us to feel timid about our faith, we of all people can be assured that the free gift of eternal life is something to be excited about. There are people in your life who need to hear this good news, not only from your words, but from your transformed life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate actions. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v.21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v. 222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v.23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he*

> *was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).*

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John 18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence in the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry with the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centered around the Father's message to Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the Father said, "**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!** (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

> "Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to have responded in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we should proceed. As I moved onto the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong, I was only trying to help? What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and to listen.

My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded to

Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v.5c). Peter, though well intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the love of the Father for Him (which by the way is the same love Jesus has for us based on John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own three-point plan.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is God calling you to walk by faith? How are the examples of Abram and Paul helpful to you?

2. Does the fact that salvation comes by grace and not by works sound like good news to you? When we accept this free gift from God, we are exercising faith. How is faith necessary for salvation to be imparted to us? How are you exercising faith in God's grace and not putting your faith in your own good works to bring you eternal life?

3. Jesus' true identity as God was revealed at the transfiguration. His face was radiant, shining like the sun. How can a vision of Jesus' true identity spur you on in your everyday life? What would need to change in your life in order to obey God's voice and "listen to Him"?

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