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 open with the Old Testament reading that describes King Solomon's prayer for wisdom. Our New Testament reading describes God's vision for each follower to be conformed to the image of His Son, Jesus. This is truly wise living. In the Gospel lesson, we continue with more of Jesus' teaching on parables from last week. He provides short stories of wise people who valued the Kingdom of Heaven above all else and inherited life eternal.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context for this story is after the death of King David. Israel was in its "golden era" having subdued its enemies and established itself as a nation. Solomon was David's son by Bathsheba and succeeded David on the throne. We catch a glimpse of his heart as he begins his reign over Israel.

First Reading:

> *5 In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night; and God said, "Ask what you wish me to give you." 6 Then Solomon said, "You have shown great lovingkindness to Your servant David my father, according as he walked before You in truth and righteousness and uprightness of heart toward You; and You have reserved for him this great lovingkindness, that You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7 Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king in place of my father David, yet I am but a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. 8 Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted. 9 So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" 10 It was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing. 11 God said to him, "Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, 12 behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. (1 Kings 3:5-12)*

These verses show us the beginning steps of King Solomon. Some important observations include:

- God came to Solomon in a dream
- God invited Solomon to ask Him for whatever he wished
- Solomon recognized God's great loving-kindness (fiercely loyal love) before answering
- Solomon also recognized his finiteness and sense of inadequacy for the important role that he was being placed in
- Solomon asked for an understanding heart to judge the people of Israel and to discern between good and evil
- God granted this request and blessed him with wisdom

If you know the rest of the story, you may be confused with how a person could be granted a wise and discerning heart and yet end up being led astray by all of the women (700 of them) he was married to (1 Kings 11:3). I wonder if his great wisdom came through the school of hard knocks. For at the end of his life he confesses: "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments,

because this applies to every person" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). No matter how much wealth, power and status, the wisest man on earth concludes that fearing God is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10).

You may not be a king, but we can all come to God and ask Him for wisdom. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." We all have roles in life that are challenging. We can follow Solomon's lead and recognize God's fiercely loyal love and our inadequacy. This should lead us with humility and desperation before the true King of kings as we ask our Heavenly Father for what we really need: wisdom.

Introduction to the Second Reading:
The second reading is from the New Testament, Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, which is a continuation of what we read last week. Paul is in the middle of declaring the victory that believers have through Christ. But the victory comes through the back door of recognizing our weakness as humans. This echoes King Solomon's prayer for wisdom in the earlier reading. For it is in our weakness that we find help from the Holy Spirit, who is interceding for us according to the will of God the Father (Romans 8:27).

Second Reading:

> *28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)*

This passage, in its context, casts an inspiring and hopeful vision for followers of Christ. For it declares that God uses all things for His good purposes. While not all things that happen in this life are good, God is able to use every circumstance (pleasurable and painful) to accomplish His predestined will: to conform us to image of His Son. He wants us to look like Christ. That's what this life is all about. That is God's vision for us as His followers. The question for us is, how badly do we want His vision for our lives? Are we willing to let God conform us to the image of His Son and work all things together for good, or are we wanting to just "get enough of God" in order to go to heaven when we die? There is a foundational condition for having all things work together for good: this comes to one who loves God and allows Him to work out His good purposes in his or her life. What this implies is trust and surrender to God's bigger purposes. He knows what is best for us. Someday we will agree wholeheartedly with Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
In the Gospel lesson this week we continue with Jesus' teaching to His disciples through parables that we looked at the past two weeks.

Gospel Reading:

> *44 "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, 46 and upon finding one pearl of great*

value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. 47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; 48 and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away. 49 So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, 50 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 51 Have you understood all these things?" They said to Him, "Yes." 52 And Jesus said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old." (Matthew 13:44-52)

Jesus is away from the crowds (Matthew 13:36) and now teaches His disciples in parables, something which He previously did only when the crowds were present. The main subject is the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus paints a few broad brush strokes to entice His followers to continue their costly pursuit of being a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price. In the parable of the hidden treasure the man isn't searching for it, in contrast the man in the parable of the pearl is on an active search to locate valuable peals. Both parables, though, require a sacrifice on the part of the would-be owners of the precious goods. But the sacrifice is insignificant for the joy of obtaining the truly valuable treasure. Jesus is helping us to see that the Kingdom of Heaven is worth every seeming sacrifice that is made in order to walk with Him in this world. Jesus' kingdom is only partially here, and these parables illustrate the great value of this down payment on the full kingdom, the mystery of life eternal.

The apostle Paul understood clearly the surpassing value of a discipleship relationship to Jesus: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Phil. 3:8).

The last illustration of the Kingdom of Heaven is very striking. It is that of a dragnet that is tossed out to catch fish. In the end of the age, the fish will be sorted out. The good will go to containers and the bad will be thrown out. Jesus gives the explanation clearly. The wicked will be sorted out from the righteous and will be thrown into the furnace of fire (referring to a literal Hell). The prospects of an eternity with weeping and gnashing of teeth is almost too much to fathom. But Jesus, in His kindness, gives us insight into eternity. In this life we have a lot of choices to make, but the most important one is where we will spend eternity. Based on our sin, we have only one label that we can claim: wicked. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). We cannot claim the label "righteous," no matter how good we try to be. But Jesus, who was righteous came to give us the label and identity of "righteous" by taking the punishment of our wickedness on the cross and giving us His righteousness. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). So while we don't deserve the label of righteous, we can choose to have it, if we will receive God's gift of eternal life. It's a gift, though. It doesn't count until you receive it. Have you placed your faith in God's gift of eternal life through Christ? Are you counting on this for your salvation?

If so, you are a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said that each one who is following Him into His Kingdom brings out treasures that are new and old. This means that we have a growing testimony of God's valuable work in our lives. We can speak of the current work that He is doing and the past work that He has done. We are cooperating with His vision to conform us into the image of His Son, for we know that the Son is our most valuable treasure indeed.

Reflection Questions

1. What does it really mean to be a disciple of the "Kingdom of Heaven?" What are one or two ways in which this played out in your life this week?

2. What "sacrifices" have you made to be a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven? How do these parables help you to know that it is worth it?

3. How does the story of Solomon asking for wisdom illustrate the parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price? In what areas do you want God to help you become wise and discerning about your own life and pursuits? Spend some time in prayer, asking Him for His perspective and wisdom for your life. Let Him know that you want to surrender to His vision for conforming you to the image of His Son.

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