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 first reading from the Book of Isaiah where we see a prophecy about a future world leader that was fulfilled some 150 years later. Then we move to the second reading from Paul's Letter to Thessalonians and include a general introduction to that Book. Finally, we conclude with another of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees from the Gospel of Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, which is a book filled with an amazing series of prophecies especially regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. His prophecies include many detailed predictions about the Messiah including that He would be born of a virgin and even that He would be named Immanuel meaning God with us (Isaiah 7:14). The reading today also contains a prophecy about a world leader who like Jesus wasn't born yet and the prophecy also includes his future name although he wouldn't be born until a century and a half later. A lead-in to the message for today was given one verse before the beginning of today's reading. God said through Isaiah:

> *"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isaiah 44:28).*

Cyrus was the King of Persia (in present day Iran) who reigned over that country from around 559 BC to 530 BC. God used King Cyrus as his shepherd to "regather" the Jewish people (Ezra 1:1-4) after their deportation to Babylon in three waves in the years 605, 597, and 586 BC (2 Kings 24-25). King Cyrus gave the order in 538 BC to rebuild the Jerusalem temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The rebuilding of the temple under the direction of Nehemiah marked the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy above. As we move onto the text of today's reading we will learn more details about Isaiah's predictions regarding Cyrus who was named even though he hadn't yet been born. *Note: Verses 2-3 were included for context.*

First Reading:

> *1 Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:*
> *Omitted verses (2-3):*
> > *2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.*
> *4 For the sake of Jacob My servant, And Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; 6 That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other," (Isaiah 45:1-6)*

God called Cyrus His "anointed" in English or transliterated from Hebrew as "mashiyach" that means "the anointed one or Messiah." This is the same word used for the "Messiah the Prince" Jesus in Daniel 9:25. This language makes it clear that God meant Cyrus to prefigure the later Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was God's true and final Shepherd of His people (Isaiah 44:28, above). God said in verse 1 that although Cyrus would not be a believer in God (v. 4d "Though you have not known me") He would be used as God's "right hand" to "subdue nations before him" and subdue and kill kings ("loose the loins"). This prophecy was fulfilled after Darius the Mede, who was Cyrus' maternal uncle, overthrew the Babylon Empire as recorded in Daniel 7:30-31. Cyrus proclaimed himself King of Babylon in 540 BC after the great battle in that city. The biblical record of these events is backed up and further details are given by secular accounts including the famous "Babylonian Chronicle," a clay tablet that was found showing details of Babylonian history during the period.

You may ask why God would prefigure the Messiah through an unbelieving, civil king like King Cyrus. God provided some insights into this in the verses that were omitted from the reading:

> *2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. " (Isaiah 45:2-3)*

Cyrus was a king that God set apart by His divine providence to use for His purposes. The power that Cyrus had to "shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars" (v. 2) was given by God Himself. God said that it was He who would give Cyrus "the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places **So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name**" (v. 3, emphasis added). God promised Cyrus these victories for the purpose of revealing His divine power. God used nonbelieving people throughout the Old Testament for this purpose, including men like the Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. God not only uses men but even animals such as Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21-39).

Contemplate how God may be using unbelieving rulers even in the present time. Even though you may disagree with the actions of the rulers, consider whether it is possible that God is working out His larger plan even through these ungodly leaders. Although Cyrus was an ungodly type of Christ, we can rest in the fact that God used even this ungodly leader to accomplish His purposes. When you consider these things, you can find comfort that since God was able to predict with exact precision who the ruler would be that would "regather" the Israelites after their deportation to Babylon He will superintend all of human events in order to accomplish His purposes. You can also praise God for raising up godly spiritual leaders such as Saint Paul who we are going to be reading about in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. This Book is one of the earliest Letters written by Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:1), penned sometime around the year 51 as confirmed by an inscription found in the temple of Apollos at Delphi (near the town of Corinth). Paul's two Letters to the Thessalonians are sometimes called the "eschatological epistles" because of the wealth of content in them regarding the end times, but were primarily Letters dealing with people in the local church in Thessalonica. Paul's occasion for writing was to show his concern for the believers there after he had visited them on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1). He had a variety of purposes in writing to them including instructing them in holy living, commending them for their significant progress made in

implementing the biblical truths he had given them, and correcting a misunderstanding that they had about the return or the Lord Jesus.

Read the text and ask yourself, what key points jump out at you?

Second Reading:

> *1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)*

They key point that jumped out when I read this passage was Paul's overwhelming thankfulness to God for how the Thessalonians had embraced and lived out the Gospel truths. First, Paul thanked God for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (v. 3). Second, Paul was thankful that they didn't just mentally embrace the truths of the Gospel but they also lived them out "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Finally, Paul was thankful for how they had emulated him (v. 5). The example of the Thessalonians faith provided comfort to him as he endured troubles from the Jews and Gentiles as he traveled on his missionary journeys. Paul said in Chapter 3, "we were comforted about you through your faith" (1 Thessalonians 3:7b).

A final observation of the reading is how Paul honored all three Persons of the Godhead in the very opening verses of this Letter. Paul commended God the Father and God the Son in verse 1, and God the Holy Spirit in verse 5. Paul indicated to the Thessalonians that the source of their power was God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (v. 5). The word translated "power" in the English is the Greek word "dunamis" from which we also get the word "dynamite." The Holy Spirit provided the dynamite to the Thessalonians but they had to set and light the fuse. Paul rejoiced because the Thessalonians took advantage of God's power. As we move to the Gospel lesson we will see how the religious Pharisees **didn't** take advantage of God's power but instead took the Scriptures for their literal "word only" (v. 5).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is another of the interactions that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Last week we studied Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast that is found just before today's reading. In this previous study, we saw how Jesus told the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders how the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to the Gentiles. In the reading this week a new group is introduced called the "Herodians." The Herodians were a group of secular, non-religious Jews that held the political power in alliance with King Herod Antipas (reigned 4 BC to 39 AD). Their alliance with King Herod and secular worldview set them at odds with the ultra-religious Pharisees. As you read today's Gospel lesson you will discover a new alliance that emerged to fight a common threat.

Gospel Reading:

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. 16 And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodian's, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. 17 Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" 18 But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:15-21)

The Herodians and the Pharisees allied themselves to fight their common threat, Jesus Christ (v. 15). Their plot was to trap Jesus by asking Him some question (v. 15) that would reveal Jesus' opposition to the ruling Roman authorities and therefore make it easy for them to bring an indictment against Him. They began their attack by patronizing Jesus by calling Him by the title "Teacher," a word meaning Rabbi (v. 16). Their plan backfired. When they asked Jesus about the lawfulness of paying taxes to the Roman government, Jesus amazed them with His answer. Matthew said in the next verse after the end of today's reading, "And hearing this, **they were amazed**, and leaving Him, they went away" (Matthew 22:22, emphasis added). Jesus told them in effect that He had not come yet as a military leader. Jesus not only spoiled their plan to entrap Him with their question, but He also validated the legitimacy of the Roman government in collecting taxes, something to which the Pharisees would have been deeply opposed. The irony of it all was that the Pharisees took the lead in collaborating with their former enemies for the purpose of defeating Jesus. But what ended up happening was that Jesus defeated their beliefs about the illegitimacy of the Roman taxation system. In yet another irony the whole account was recorded by none other than Saint Matthew, the former tax collector!

Sometimes the easiest way for us to learn is when a teacher provides us with a clear contrast between two conflicting positions. The message that God gave us in the Gospel lesson today illustrated two opposing forces that came together for the purpose of defeating the Messiah Jesus. During our study, we saw that these forces weren't really in opposition at all. Instead they were both aligned with false religion. The Pharisees strived to obtain a righteousness through the Law, and the Herodians found their faith in aligning themselves with the right group with the necessary influence in the Roman government.

What does this mean for us today? First, we can trust that although Jesus didn't come the first time as a military leader, He will do so the second time He returns, as chronicled in the Book of Revelation. John said in that Book, "And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war" (Revelation 19:11). Second, Jesus' answer revealed that during the intermediate period between his first and second comings we will have obligations to obey civil governments. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). Finally, we must recognize that God owns everything, and even though we may have to give to Caesar that which bears the resemblance of Caesar, we are to give to God the things that are God's (v. 21). This means that unlike the Pharisees who only gave lip service to doing God's work, as we saw in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians we are to emulate God by giving back to Him what is His own. This includes the stewardship of our time, talents and treasures far beyond what is required by our civil government. Paul praised the Thessalonians for emulating his character, and Paul strived to emulate Jesus Christ. Paul said:

> *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, (Philippians 3:8-9)*

May we find our righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and not in our political power, like the Herodians, or through our good works in obedience to an elevated and false interpretation of religious laws, like the Pharisees.

Reflection Questions

1. Since humans are made in the image of God, what did Jesus mean when He said to give to God what God's?

2. How do you live this truth out in your own life each week?

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