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 study two readings dealing with the second coming of the Lord. We go into some detail about the signs and events that will precede His coming.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha and won't be covered in Mass Notes today. 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 Book of First Thessalonians concerns Paul's address to the people in this region to encourage them in light of false teachings that had entered the church and to exhort them to practice a godly lifestyle. The fourth chapter open with an exhortation to the latter. "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more" (1 Thess 4:1). It then moves to the former matter, confronting false teaching that the church had experienced.

Second Reading:

> *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NAS95 13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.*

Paul explained to the believers that just as the Lord Jesus promised, He would return first to gather those who had already died (v. 14), then some instant later the believers who remained alive until His coming (v. 15). This second coming (or rapture) would proceed first with a shout from the Lord, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. Students of the Book of Revelation will recognize this description as following the pattern in that Book (Revelation 11:15). There we see how the return of the Lord Jesus will follow a period of momentous persecution of Jews and Christians (Revelation 12:13-17, we encourage you to study it). Paul then told them to "comfort one another with these words" (v. 18). If we look a bit beyond today's reading we will see that phrase "comfort one another" a second time, but in the context of the promise from God that believers will not enter into the Great Tribulation (or Day of the Lord's judgment, "DOL").

It is helpful in understanding today's message to read forward to 2 Thessalonians where Paul provided an insight into why providing comforting words was necessary. In 2 Thess 2:1 Paul said, "Now we

request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (vv. 1-2). He went onto explain that the second coming of the Lord Jesus wasn't something that they could miss because Jesus' return would not happen until the worldwide revelation of the Antichrist, the man of sin (2 Thess 2:3). Before the Lord Jesus returns, a world ruler will emerge who will at some point will take his seat in the temple and proclaim himself to be god (2 Thess 2:4). In this section, Paul told them not to let anyone deceive them as these events would be patently obvious (2 Thess 2:3). When Jesus returns, believers will be unable to miss it! The world however will go on about their daily business (Matthew 24:38).

The Thessalonians were falling for false ideas about Jesus return and the same continues until today. The false religious cult of Jehovah Witnesses has taught over the years this very same doctrine, however with a unique twist. They teach that Jesus returned invisibly. This false doctrine is exactly what Paul corrected in today's reading.
Note, if you would like to learn more about the JW's teaching regarding this matter just place the search phrase "Jesus returned invisibly" into a search engine.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
The Gospel lesson continues the theme of the second coming of the Lord Jesus. Today's reading follows Jesus' famous sermon known as the Olivet Discourse where He explained to His disciples the events that would follow and the signs to expect before His return. He told them that the temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24:2), many false messiahs (christs) would come and lead many astray (v. 5), the world would be filled with war (vv. 6-7), natural disasters would increase with famines (v. 7c) and then great persecution would begin against believers (vv. 9-11), and much of the world would fall away from following the true faith revealed in the Scriptures (v. 12). Jesus taught that believers were to endure all of this until the end at which point the Gospel would be preached to the entire world, an event clearly displayed in Revelation 14. "And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Revelation 14:6). Interestingly, nowhere does Scripture teach that believers will be excluded from the persecution leading up to Jesus' return. Rather, believers in the end times are presented with a message saying, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Revelation 13:10, 14:12). The balance of the previous chapter (Chapter 24) is dedicated to Jesus' teaching about His return, how their will be signs in the sky and on the earth (Matthew 24:29-35), and how His coming will be unexpected for those not watching (Matthew 24:36-44, 50).

The key ideas advancing in the section leading up to today's reading are a call to watchfulness and faithfulness of believers. In today's reading a third theme emerges, that of readiness. With this crucially important context in mind, let's study today's reading. [We encourage you to read all of Matthew 24 before today's reading.]

Gospel Reading:

> *Matthew 25:1-13 NAS95 1 Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. 3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. 5 Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom!*

Come out to meet him.' 7 "Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other virgins also came, saying, 'Lord, lord, open up for us.' 12 But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' 13 Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

The reading is a "kingdom parable," in which Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to an earthly event to present a spiritual meaning. The reading opens with, "the kingdom of heaven will be comparable" pointing to the future, heavenly sense (v. 1). The spiritual kingdom, Jesus teaches, is like a group of ten brides, the first five who are prepared for His coming and the second five who are not. The Old Testament portrays Yahweh of His people (for example in Hosea 2:19), and here in the parable Jesus as the husband of the brides (v. 1). According to Jewish customs, a bride would leave their homes with a group of friends who gather in a procession to meet the bridegroom. The groom who would then join them at the marriage feast but at some unannounced time. Since the feast often occurred at night, lamps were necessary and along with them was required a sufficient amount of oil to keep them burning during the wait of an unexpected length. In our day we can at least partially relate as we often leave the wedding ceremony and wait at the reception hall for the newly united couple to join the group at some unexpected time. After riding around in a limousine drinking champagne perhaps this comes at an even later time than expected!

After a very long wait, both groups of people fall asleep (v. 5). This reminds us of how Jesus' own disciples fell asleep during the night before He willingly surrendered His life to be crucified as a substitute for our sins (Matthew 26:40). This is where the story takes a turn. At midnight, there was shout and both groups got up and trimmed their oil-fired lamps (v.7) but only the prudent ones had sufficient fuel to light the way to the feast with the bridegroom. The imprudent virgins begged for fuel and then had no other choice than to head off at midnight in the dark to buy fuel from some sort of 24-hour Walmart which didn't exist in that era.

In the parable we see the theme of readiness. There are two groups of people, the first ones who are ready for Jesus' return, and those who are not. The first group is qualitatively different from the second in that they are "prudent" in contrast to the second group that is "foolish." The foolish group recognizes the need at some point to barter with the prudent ones upon seeing the imminent signs of Jesus' return, something that we discussed in the introduction regarding the signs of His coming (Matthew 24:1-13) However, in the same way that Jesus described in Chapter 24 regarding those left behind to perish in the worldwide flood in Noah's time (Matthew 24:37-39), the foolish group will be locked out of the kingdom of heaven (v. 10, "the door was shut." We must not make too little of the significant difference between the two groups of people.

There are two groups of people in the world, those who believe and those who do not. God loves the world so much that He gave He sent His only begotten Son to us, so that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Go says, "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). Believers travel along a narrow road filled with obstacles allowed by God to deepen their dependence upon Him, whereas those in the second, larger group follow the broad road carried along by the ways and whims of the world (Matthew 7:13-14). When Jesus returns it will be

too late for those on the broad road to seek faith in the Lord Jesus and they will be eternally rejected from the presence of the King (John 3:36).

As believers in the Lord Jesus we are called to patiently await upon Jesus' return while going about the business building and equipping the kingdom of God. Unlike the foolish who are unprepared for Jesus' return, we are aware of the many signs and prophecies given to us in the Scriptures regarding this imminent event. God calls us not to be believe the false teachings that we have been left behind because the Lord has already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). God has given us a profundity of signs to expect before His return such that we **will** be prepared unless the foolish ones who will be forever locked out of the kingdom of heaven.

I remember well the dark day that lived in infamy, now known as "9-1-1." I was in our office in suburban Detroit that morning, and first heard about the unfolding tragedy when one of the secretaries from the law office across the hall came knocking on our door to tell us about it and to invite us to watch it unfold on the television set that they had in their waiting room. As the tragedy grew worse and worse, me and my Christian coworker were struck by the terror of the whole thing and began to talk to the other two employees in our office about whether this was somehow signaling the end of the world and the return of Jesus. These two people came from a background of nominal Christianity, having been raised in families that attended church services at least on Christmas and Easter, "chreasters" some have called them. Because of the state of shock I was in, I found myself pleading with these two to find faith in the Lord Jesus for protection from the curse that was coming upon the country as the scene in New York and elsewhere unfolded. They looked at me in a state of dumfound amazement that I will remember forever.

In a few days the reality of what had happened settled in and although some people were moved to attend church services and seek God, many slowly returned to the normal paths of their lives. My two fellow employees also returned to their lives, and neither of them, at least as far as I know, ever made a move to find faith in God through faith in His Son. Although these two men are some of the smartest people I have ever worked with, they were not wise enough to read the signs of Jesus' imminent return. For Jesus will meet us one way or the other and we can be in one of four groups, and today's readings greatly inform us about them.

1. Believers who die before the return of the Lord Jesus. These will meet Jesus when they die (John 14:3) at which point they will enter heaven for an eternity only to return with Jesus in the air during the Second Coming where they will receive glorified bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:15).
2. Believers who are alive and meet Jesus when He returns (1 Thessalonians 4:14) and receive their glorified bodies at that instant while still alive.
3. Nonbelievers who die before the return of the Lord Jesus. These meet the Lord Jesus as their judge with inevitable sentencing for their sin with no means of repaying their eternal debts (Matthew 7:23, Matthew 25:41)

The people in the first three groups are the wise servants, those who procured the oil of the Holy Spirit before the coming of their Lord. In contrast, those in the last group were foolish and persisted in their nonbelief until it was too late. Today's message is a call to do the work Jesus has called us to do in reaching out to those in this last category. Perhaps all of could benefit from a sort of personal 911 emergency to motivate us to reach out to our lost friends and coworkers.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does knowing the signs of Jesus' coming help you to be better prepared to serve the Lord Jesus in the area(s) that He has called you? In what ways does knowing the signs comfort you during the significant challenges you face in your life?

2. Understanding the big picture of the end times is essential to be able to recognize the gradual progression of events we see around us leading up to Jesus' return. Read the following summary which provides a high level of some of the things we talked about today but also includes events promised to those "foolish brides" who ignore God's teaching on the matters of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Then, answer the question that follows.

> The return of the Lord follows the conclusion of a period of judgment known as the "Day of the Lord," a prominent theme throughout the Old Testament. This period was first mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah who said, "For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty and against everyone who is lifted up, That he may be abased" (Isaiah 2:12). The Day of the Lord, or DOL, is mentioned at least another 18 times in the Old Testament including Ezekiel 13:5, "You have not gone up into the breaches, nor did you build the wall around the house of Israel to stand in the battle on the **day of the LORD**" (emphasis added). This time, also known as the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) is the conclusion of the period of time during which God will pour out His judgments upon the unbelieving world left after the church has been "caught up" from the earth as described by Saint Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. After Jesus returns with His church (Revelation 19:11,14) the world is restored to a time of worldwide peace under the rulership of the Lord Jesus Christ for a period of one thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

In what ways does understanding the eschatological picture (the end times) help us to reach out to share the Good News of the Gospel with people who don't believe?

Keywords: Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 154