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 Isaiah in which we see a prophecy about the coming of the forerunner who would announce the Messiah. Then we move to the second reading from Second Peter and close with the Gospel lesson from the first chapter of Mark.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah chapter 40. This section of Isaiah focuses upon the preaching of the Gospel as well as prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). In the first verse, "Jerusalem" refers to the Nation as a whole. *Note: Verses 6-8 that were skipped in the reading were included below.*

First Reading:

> *1 "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. 2 "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." 3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*
> *Omitted section:*
> *6 A voice says, "Call out." Then he answered, "What shall I call out?" All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, When the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.*
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> *9 Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him And His recompense before Him. 11 Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:1-11)*

In this passage, some timeless principles emerge for our lives today. A key point is that while humans are finite, God and His Word stand forever. If this is the case, then it is wise for us to study God's Word and to orient our lives around its truth. This passage also shares the two-sided nature of the Messiah's coming: "The Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him" and "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock . . .He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (v. 10-11). We see that God is gentle with those who need and accept His care, but He is also authoritative with those who are not willing to bend to His ways.

Another main theme in the reading is the prophecy of the future redemption of the Nation of Israel through the coming of the Messiah that will be announced by a forerunner. Although God disciplined

Israel "double for her sins (v. 2), He began the restoration process first by sending John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus as predicted in verse 3. Isaiah's message was a picture of the manner in which the Messiah Jesus would be revealed to the world through a spokesperson as a forerunner who sends a clear message:

> *Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (vv. 3b – 5)*

The forerunner, who in retrospect we know was John the Baptist, prepared the way for the coming of the King Jesus. John "cleared the way" by **preaching** the good news (the Gospel) telling the people that they needed to repent of their sins. John was removing the obstacles that lay in people's paths in order to receive the subsequent message from Jesus that He was the only way to God (John 3:3, John 3:16, John 14:6). John was "leveling the mountains and smoothing the ground" so the world could receive Jesus' Gospel. Like many prophetic writings, verse 5 has an "already not yet" sense in that although Jesus did come and His glory was revealed, in some future day He will return and all flesh will see the glory of the Lord.

Isaiah's message was also a picture of the literal, eschatological (end times) restoration of the Nation of Israel. In the last days, God will make Jerusalem the capital city of the universe and remove both the physical and spiritual obstacles standing in the way for people to come to the Lord in Jerusalem. Verse 3 says, "Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." We see something similar to this in Revelation 16:12 where God says that He will make a way for the "kings of the east." Although the interpretation of this passage is difficult, it seems to mean that national leaders from regions to the east of Jerusalem will be converted to the true faith of God in the end times. Like many prophecies in the Bible, a day will come when we will be able to look back and understand the fulfillment of the prophecy in hindsight. Until then the best we can do is to "study to show ourselves approved" (2 Timothy 2:15). We must endeavor to utilize the prophecies to the best of our ability in a way that calls the world to repent of their sin and place their faith in the one and only means of finding an eternal relationship with God, faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Isaiah's message, we see the kindness of God who granted us salvation by His free grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). A caveat is that we must be willing to repent of our sins and turn from our former sinful behavior. This means to turn from, or agree with what God says about the seriousness of our sin.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Second Epistle of Peter. The context is Paul's teaching on the return of the Lord which will occur at the conclusion of the period known in the biblical text as the "Day of the Lord." In this Epistle, Saint Peter described how the people in the future would say that since their daily lives were continuing as had been happening throughout all the previous generations that the Lord wasn't going to return. They would say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). Paul informed his readers that Jesus would indeed return and reminded them of the flood that God unleashed upon the ungodly world during the days of Noah (2 Peter 3:4-7). What he was saying was that the coming Day of the Lord's judgment would unfold in a similar way as it did during the days of Noah. Our Lord had previously said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37). The reading for today picks up in verse 8.

Second Reading:

> *8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! 13 But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:8-14)*

As we said in the introduction to the reading, Peter said that in the future, scoffers would come saying that the Lord was delaying His return (2 Peter 3:4). Peter corrected this false teaching by explaining that God, Who exists in eternity, does not count time the same way people do on earth (v. 8). Since with God "a thousand years is like one day," the return of the Lord will come in an instant in the mind of God, quickly, "like a thief" (v. 10a). The reason that God has delayed isn't because He is not returning, but because He is longsuffering ("patient" v. 9c) and "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (v.9d). This is the message that was preached by John the Baptist, the message that we will hear later in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark. Peter went on to reveal some as yet untold prophecy about events that would happen in the universe sometime after Jesus returned. He said that the earth would be destroyed (or renewed) by fire (vv. 10b-11), and a new heaven and earth would be created "in which righteousness dwells" (v. 13b). Peter concluded the reading with the crux of the matter. "**Therefore**, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (v. 14, emphasis added). He told them that since the Lord **was** going to be returning soon along with terrible events on the earth, and the earth would then undergo a purification process in which all unrighteousness would be removed, they needed to be behaving in a manner befitting of this knowledge. Jesus said, "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into" (Matthew 24:43). The reality of Jesus' soon return should encourage us to live in a manner that is consistent with His character and ways.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move to the Gospel lesson, let's summarize what we have covered so far. We saw in the first reading how God in His grace would send a forerunner whom we know as John the Baptist to prepare the hearts of the people to receive the message of Jesus Christ. In the second reading, we saw that Peter warned the people that scoffers would come in the future saying that the Lord Jesus had delayed His return, and they would go on about their ungodly business as if the Lord was never going to return. Peter corrected this false theology and said the Lord was going to return and that we we should not mark time the way that it is done on earth, for God exists outside of time and with Him "a thousand years is as a day." No, Peter said, the Lord would return in an instant "as a thief in the night." Since He was coming quickly people needed to act in godly ways befitting of the imminent return of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16).

The Gospel reading is from the opening section of the Gospel of Saint Mark. Mark, known as John Mark (Acts 12:25) had a bit of a checkered past because he was the man that deserted Paul and Barnabas during Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). During Paul's second missionary journey Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but this caused a strong disagreement with Paul (Acts 15:38-40). In spite of these events, John Mark went on to prove himself to be an extremely valuable co-worker in the Lord, and was even vindicated by Paul (Colossians 4:10). Mark was evidently a close disciple of Saint Peter because the latter described him as his son (1 Peter 5:13). Mark's Gospel was written for Roman believers, primarily Gentiles because of some nuances he used in translating certain words from the Aramaic and his use of Latin instead of Greek in some places. The main theme of Mark is the presentation of Jesus as the suffering servant of God as portrayed in Isaiah 53. He emphasized Jesus' humanity much more than the other Gospel writers including his emotions (for example Mark 8:12) and human limitations (for example Mark 11:12). Mark, unlike the other Gospel writers such as Luke, did not include lengthy genealogies of Jesus likely because these are not as significant to his intended Gentile audience.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; 3 THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" 4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:1-8)*

Mark, obviously very familiar with Isaiah, quoted from his Book in the very first verse of his Gospel. The coming of John the Baptist marks the fulfillment of verse 3 from Isaiah 40 that we studied in the first reading. John was described as a most unusual man "clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist" (v. 6). The key point of this verse is now that John the Baptist had come, he would point the way for the coming of Jesus Christ (v. 7). John the Baptist said, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I" (v. 7a), then humbly said, "and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals" (v. 7b). John the Baptist then foretold how Jesus would not only baptize with water, such as he was doing, but would send God's Holy Spirit (v. 8). John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, having been born to Elizabeth (Luke 1:34-37, Jesus' disciple John, the one whom Jesus loved, was also Jesus' cousin). Note that John's diet was indicative of his reliance upon God, the same way that Elijah relied upon God when he fed him by the ravens as told in 1 Kings 17:6. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy about the coming of a "forerunner" that was saw in the first reading. His coming was also the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the return of the Prophet Elijah given in the Book of Malachi. God said in that Book, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6). The future fulfillment will be when Jesus returns with His church at the end of the age as we studied last week.

What does all of this mean for us as we live out our lives as Christians? First, like John, we also are called to "prepare the way of the Lord" by preaching the Good News to the world that if they repent of their sin and place their faith in Jesus Christ they will have eternal forgiveness in eternity with God. God is "patient and not willing that any should perish" to the extent that He uses unusual people like John the Baptist and even more unusual people like you and me to do His work! Finally, since the return of the Lord Jesus is imminent we need to accelerate our proclamation of this message, as well as live in a way befitting of His soon return.

Reflection Questions

1. The Gospel reading said that "all of the country of Judea was going to [John the Baptist] . . . and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). What do you think motivated the people to confess their sins to him? As a clue, what word is repeated in verses 4 and 7?

2. As we look towards Christmas coming up in just two and half weeks, pray and ask God if there is anything standing in the way between you and the relationship with Him that He desires with you.

> *Dear God, is there anything that you would have me to do during this Christmas season? What mountains needs to be made flat, and hills need to be leveled in order for me to accomplish your will this Christmas season?*

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