Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

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We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Roman Catholic Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures.

"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 which is a picture of the coming of the Messiah and the eventual acceptance of Him by all of Israel. Then we move to the second reading from Ephesians in which we see the revelation of the mystery of the church, that salvation had come through Jesus for both Jewish and Gentile believers. Finally we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew in which we study the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The context is a continuation of his prophecy regarding the redeemed Israel after the Nation's full acceptance in the Messiah we know as Jesus Christ. In the previous chapter God told the Jews, "A Redeemer will come to Zion, And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," declares the LORD" (Isaiah 59:20). When the Messiah comes, God said about Him that "My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring, . . . from now and forever" (Isaiah 59:21). God said that eventually all of Israel would recognize the Messiah. "So they will fear the name of the LORD from the west And His glory from the rising of the sun, For He will come like a rushing stream Which the wind of the LORD drives" (Isaiah 59:19). Until then, the Messiah is a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6), the primary people that form the Church – with the exception of the few "completed Jews" who have believed. Jesus is a light to all of the nations during the church age, a period unforeseen by the Prophets (Ephesians 2:3-6), as we will see in the second reading. This Light is the only means of salvation, both for Jews and Gentiles alike (John 14:6, Romans 1:16). Until Israel is awakened to the reality of Jesus Christ as their Messiah, darkness will continue to reign in their hearts along with the rest of the unbelieving people in the world.

First Reading:

> *1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you And His glory will appear upon you. 3 Nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)*

After a prolonged four-hundred-year period of darkness, Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, the light that shined upon the world. Isaiah predicted that Gentile leaders from the nations would bring gifts of gold and frankincense to the newborn King, something we will read about later in the Gospel message that happened with the visit of the magi. Perhaps most striking in Isaiah's message was further insight into the nature of God's provision of salvation. It would be for the whole world, not just for the Jews. God said that "Nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising" (v. 3). Like many prophecies in the Old Testament about salvation, the reading today has an "already, not yet" sense. God has already provided His salvation to all who believe, both for Jews and Gentiles. During the

church age, which is a mystery not seen in the Old Testament, God provides salvation to everyone who will believe (Romans 1:16). However, in a future day all of Israel will come to believe (Romans 11:26). It is interesting to note that Isaiah's prophecy did not include the giving of the third gift, that of myrrh. As we will see in the Gospel lesson, this gift was also given to Jesus during the visit of the magi. Myrrh is a substance used in the preparation of a body for burial. This provided an insight about the nature of Jesus' ministry, that He would have to give up His life for His sheep (John 10:15).

We can read this now with the perspective of a prophecy that has been fulfilled by Jesus' first advent, in that He claimed to be the Light of the world (John 8:12). The question for us is whether or not His light fills our lives. If not, we are still in darkness, lost and alone in the world. If we want Jesus' light to fill our lives, all we must do is ask. He will begin to work in our lives, helping us to become who the Father wants us to be. Then we will be part of those who come to Him to worship Him and so fulfill the prophecy "And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6).

Introduction to the Second Reading:
As we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians we will see more about this mystery of the church of God. The context is Paul's message to the Gentiles that salvation has come to them through Jesus Christ. *Note: Verses 1, 3b, and 4 which were skipped in the Mass reading were included in order for you to obtain the full meaning from the complete context.*

Second Reading:

> *1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, (Ephesians 3:1-6)*

Paul explained to the Ephesians the mystery of the church, that salvation had come both to the Jews and also to the Gentiles through the revelation of the Gospel (good news) brought about by the apostles and prophets (like Paul). The mystery is profound, that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v. 6). As we move onto the Gospel lesson we can catch a glimpse of the drama that was unfolding in the universe as Gentile magi from the east recognized Jesus as a king in fulfillment of ancient prophecies while the majority of the Jews missed the significance of His majestic birth.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
The Gospel message is from Saint Matthew and is the record of the visit of the Magi from the east while Jesus was yet an infant and still in Bethlehem before his family had to flee to Egypt because of the threat from King Herod. The context is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, less than two years old. We can see this from Herod who later in Matthew made a plan to kill all infants two years old or younger. The "magi" were likely people from the Babylonian region along the Euphrates River in present day Iraq south of Baghdad. They were educated people that were part pagan priest, magician, and scribe. They were also

interested in astrology and this was woven into their mystical religious beliefs. According to what we know about the ancient beliefs of the magi and people like them, they would have seen this prophesy of a star as that of a coming ruler, a new King. When the star appeared in the sky to them back at their home somewhere in the east they began planning this journey to locate the new King! Evidently the magi either had some contact with Jews in their region or they had this prophesy handed down through some other source (maybe through Daniel and other Jews who were part of the Babylonian captivity hundreds of years prior to this). Nowhere in the text does it say that there were three of them, this comes from the three gifts. There were likely a small group of them but they would have been accompanied by a large number of guards and servants. This would have made their arrival that much more disturbing to King Herod, who was the current King of the region. He wasn't a Jew but was actually an Edomite (or called an Idumean), one of Israel's ancient enemies. We can trace the region of Edom back to Esau who lived there, but it is probably even older than that. The best one word description for Herod would be the word "scoundrel" because of the way he dealt with the people. Herod bought his way into the throne by paying off the Roman government. He was so bad that he had one of his wives executed and also just before he died he executed his son!

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him." 9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)*

God gave the magi revelation to locate the Messiah through their understanding of the Jewish Scriptures, and they responded to this information by journeying a great distance to present gifts to the newborn King. They went to the most logical place where a King should be born, the capital city and seat of power. But when they arrived in Jerusalem, the newborn King was nowhere to be found. The Jewish scholars were consulted and they revealed that the place of the King would be in an unexpected place, a little town of Bethlehem. Matthew quoted the prophecy about which the magi were made aware from the Prophet Micah some four hundred years before the birth of Jesus. "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). The Jewish scholars may also have been made them aware of another prophecy in the Book of Numbers regarding a sign in the sky. "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons

of Sheth" (Nu 24:17). The magi, unlike most of the Jews, recognized the validity of these predictions and acted upon it when they saw the sign in the sky.

As the story played out, King Herod, who pretended to be interested in worshiping the newborn King was only trying to get information in order to murder him. Later in Matthew's Gospel we find out about Herod's evil plan to locate the Messiah and kill him, something which God thwarted through having the holy family flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:16-18). After the magi had gathered untold information from the Jews, they continued following the star until it stood overhead at which point they found the Child, Jesus in Bethlehem. The immediate response of the magi was first to "rejoice exceedingly with great joy," second to present three royal gifts, and three to worship the Lord Jesus (vv. 10-11). At the closing of the story they were directed by God not to return to King Herod so they went back to their country another way (v. 12). These gifts were very valuable and through God's insight provided the means for Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt to avoid King Herod's attempts to murder Jesus. As we said in the first reading, the last of the gifts was something that was prophetic of Jesus' ministry. Myrrh was something that was used in the preparation of a body for burial. Even though Mary was told about the suffering that she would experience in her life because of Jesus (Luke 2:34-35) she likely never connected the giving of the myrrh with what would happen to Jesus until after He had given his life for the sins of the world.

What does all of this mean for us today? First, God calls **us** to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus. It's not just enough to believe in certain things about Jesus (James 2:10), we are called by God to act upon our beliefs and to follow Him. This means forsaking our old way of life (Ephesians 4:22) and walking on the narrow road following the ways of Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:25-30). Second, when we do believe and follow Jesus our inherent response to God is joy. We may not always be happy, but we will find deep and meaningful joy that is rooted in having peace with God. Finally, when we believe and follow Jesus another response is to fall down and worship Him and respond in giving. During the Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of Jesus we commemorate this historical event by giving gifts to one another. However, the larger picture is that as followers of Jesus Christ our response to the truth of the Gospel message is that God has implanted within us a heart of generosity. Therefore, we can live in the spirit of Christmas all year round.

As we begin a new year, we often think of the past year and how we want to be strategic with the year ahead. We often make resolutions for changes, contemplate goals that we to accomplish and try to wash the slate clean of past mistakes. While these are all noble pursuits, they are not enough to provide the type of life that we were meant to live. Jesus said that he came to give us a different sort of life than one of merely trying harder and forcing ourselves to do things that don't come naturally to us. He came to change our lives, to give us new intentions in our hearts, so that we would want to become a new type of person, one who has love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Instead of making a New Year's resolution on your own strength that will probably get broken in the next few days, why not talk to the Lord and ask Him to make you into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)? Why not take the plunge and lean your full weight on Jesus by asking Him to give you His light for each step of your journey in this New Year? Are there decisions you need to make? Are there relationships that seem chaotic? Are there places of greed or anger that need to get confessed? Why not spend some time talking to Jesus and asking Him to be Lord of your life, to cleanse you of the past and to give you His light for the future? He's willing, are you?

Reflection Questions

1. The Magi diligently searched for the king based upon the information they obtained from various sources including the Scriptures as well as from speaking to the Jews to inquire about where they may located the baby Jesus. What is the primary means that God provides for us to locate Jesus today? During the New Year, how will you make an effort to continue to search for the truths about Jesus in this primary source during your daily life?

2. In what ways can you relate to this summary statement of today's Gospel message?

> "God calls us to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus and when we do our response is joy, worship and giving."

Believe:

Follow:

Respond:

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