Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

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We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate 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 a story from 1 Kings that tells how God provided food in a time of drought for a faithful prophet through a poor widow who trusted God and gave all she had. Then we move to the book of Hebrews and learn how Jesus has provided a superior and final sacrifice for our sin. We conclude with a reading from the Gospel of St. Mark where Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy and commends humble, sacrificial faith.

Introduction to the First Reading:

In First Kings 17, the lives of a wicked king, a faithful prophet, and a poor widow converge when God sends a punishing drought upon the land. As God judges the evil, He simultaneously and miraculous preserves the faithful.

A little review of Israel's history is a necessary backdrop to this passage. The people of God were composed of twelve tribes descended from Abraham's grandson Jacob (renamed Israel in Genesis 35:10). These descendants and the land God gave them for a home were called Israel. From them, the Messiah Jesus would come, and through His salvation all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Despite their privileged position in God's plan for the nations, the people of Israel rebelled against God and went after the false gods of the surrounding nations. They forgot the Lord's commands and worshiped idols. This was the fate of King Solomon when he ruled in Israel after his father David's reign. At first he followed God, and God gave him great wisdom to rule justly. But when Solomon married foreign women, he began to follow after their gods. Because of his idolatry, God said He would take ten of the tribes from Solomon's rule and leave only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah under the authority of his descendants. The ten tribes became known as the Northern Kingdom and were called Israel. The remaining two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom and were called Judah.

A series of kings reigned in Judah. Some followed the Lord and some did not. In Israel a different series of kings reigned, each one more evil than the previous one. Eventually King Ahab came to power, and he "*did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him* (1 Kings 16:33)." He married Jezebel, a foreign woman, and created places of worship for her gods—Baal and Asherah. It was to this idolatrous, evil king that Elijah came as a prophet of God to proclaim judgment on Israel.

Elijah prophesied, "*As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.*" In the ensuing drought, God miraculously provided food for Elijah. One of the ways He did this was through an unlikely source--a poor widow woman.

When Elijah's source of drinking water dried up, God sent him to a widow in Zarephath. Elijah arrived just as the widow was gathering wood to cook a final meal for her and her son. She had only enough flour and oil to make a little bread, and after that she believed she and her son would die. When Elijah requested bread from her, the widow explained her plight. Elijah promised her that God would not let the flour and oil run out until the day God sent rain upon the earth. Why the widow believed Elijah we

do not know. But placing her trust in Elijah and Elijah's God, she did as he requested. God kept His promise, and the widow, her son, and Elijah were miraculously spared.

The story begins in 1 Kings 17:8. You will want to begin reading there and continue through the First Reading (v. 10-16).

First Reading:

> *1 Kings 17:10-16 NAS95 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." 11 As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." 12 But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." 13 Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. 14 "For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" 15 So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah.*

Elijah and the widow trusted God, and God kept His promise. We will likely never go through a drought but we might experience a job loss or setback that greatly affects our ability to provide for ourselves and our family. The same God who took care of Elijah and the widow knows our needs, too. Philippians 4: 13 says, "*And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."* He is a faithful God who never changes. Like the widow of Zarephath, we can trust Him to provide.

It is rare, though, for God to provide through a direct miracle as He did when the flour and oil did not run out. More often He lays the need on the hearts of His people and moves us to give. After all, everything we have belongs to God. We are merely stewards or managers of it. Every time we pray for God to provide for someone's need, we should ask God if He wants any of our stuff (money, food, belongings) to be the provision for that need. The widow did not fear to give all she had. We don't need to fear either.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were experiencing persecution and, as a result, were contemplating returning to Judaism. The writer of Hebrews explains how Jesus is superior to all things under Judaism. He is greater than Moses, the Old Covenant, the Old Testament priesthood, and the earthly tabernacle with its animal sacrifices.

A reminder of the Old Testament sacrificial system would be helpful here. When an Israelite sinned, he would bring an animal (often an unblemished lamb) to the priest in the tabernacle. The priest would sacrifice the animal and shed its blood on the altar for the remission of sin. Behind a heavy curtain was the Holy of Holies where God would appear in a pillar of cloud or fire. No one could go in there except the high priest, and he could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would make a sacrifice for himself (for he is a sinner, too) and for the sins of all the people and

carry the blood inside the curtain, presenting it to God. The sacrifices had to be repeated year after year since they were never able to perfect the worshipper. They were only a foreshadowing of the ultimate sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Jesus) who takes away the sin of the world (Gospel of St. John 1: 29).

The Second Reading shows us that Jesus, as the mediator of a new covenant, is superior in every way.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 9:24-28 NAS95 24 For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; 25 nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. 27 And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, 28 so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.*

Jesus Himself is the high priest who entered into the holy place, not an earthly one made by human hands, but into heaven itself. There He presented to God, not the blood of animals as a sacrifice for sin, but His own blood. Because Jesus was perfect, God accepted His sacrifice as final. There is no need for any other.

He is coming a second time to receive all believers to Himself, and we eagerly await that day! Will you be ready to meet Him when He comes?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Many people in our parishes follow the practices of the church because they love God. Some however follow the rituals because they want to be thought of as "religious." Their concern is not so much how God sees them but how others see them. They are not so much interested in pleasing God as they are in impressing others. Some of the religious leaders of Jesus day were like that, too.

In the immediate setting of the Gospel Reading, religious leaders were pretending to be interested in Jesus, but they were actually trying to trick Him with difficult questions in order to discredit Him. Knowing their motives, Jesus confounded them with His superior wisdom until they had nothing left to say.

Jesus warned the crowd to beware of religious leaders who flaunt their religion for self-serving reasons— for personal gain or to be seen and respected by men. Instead, Jesus pointed out a poor widow and her small gift as an example of sincere faith, for she gave it quietly and sacrificially. Others gave out of their surplus, but she gave out of her poverty.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 12:38-44 NAS95 38 In His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, 39 and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, 40 who devour widows' houses, and for*

appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation." 41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. 43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; 44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

Our religious acts of service are to be done humbly and quietly out of love for God not as a means to impress men and earn favor with God. God already looks favorably on us not because of what we have or what we do but because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. God is not looking for impressive external religion but sincere and sacrificial devotion from the heart.

Reflection Questions

1. Jesus was the perfect and final sacrifice for sin. God looks on us with favor not because of what we have or what we do but because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. How does this truth affect your day-to-day relationship with God?

2. Do a heart check this week. Are you practicing your religion to impress people or as an expression of sincere devotion from the heart?

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