Study Notes for the Sunday Mass

Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. Find us on the web at:
http://www.christiansforchrist.org

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 reading from Daniel 12 in which we study the combined event known as the rapture of the church, the return of the Lord, and the resurrection of the dead. Then we examine in the second reading how Jesus died for our sins once and for all, which is so much superior than the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament that had to be repeated twice a day and never took away the people's sins. Finally, we close with another view of the same event described in the first reading from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Daniel, chapter 12. The context of the message is a prophecy about the end of the world as we know it when the man of sin, known as the Antichrist, rules the world. The Antichrist will be in power when God pours out His final judgments on the earth and Jesus returns to reign on earth. The reading today describes the resurrection of the dead, some of whom go to eternal life with God and others go to eternal damnation. Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS'" (Matthew 7:22-23).

The reading from Daniel promises that the people of God will be "rescued" from this time of unprecedented distress. In the New Testament, we have further corroboration of this, which Saint Paul calls the "rapture," where the Lord Jesus comes to take His church to heaven before God pours the judgments chronicled in the Book of Revelation (see especially Revelation 16:1, the "seven bowls of the wrath of God"). We will read more about this later in the Gospel lesson regarding the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), a very dark time for those left on the earth after Jesus' return for His church. The "catching up" of the church to heaven was predicted by Saint Paul in response to someone in Thessalonica who had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17) as follows. "*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.*" Paul reassured the believers that the Lord's return will be very obvious and recognizable. No one will "miss it." This corresponds to the teaching in Daniel 12, which is the focus of the first reading.

First Reading:

> *Daniel 12:1-3 NAS95 1 "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who have*

insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

The reading opens with the phrase, "Now at that time" (v. 1a). The previous verses in Daniel 11, chronicle a time of wars and violence that will consume the earth. This will bring in a "time of distress" that is referred to later in the verse. Michael, one of only two angels mentioned by name in the Bible who follow God, will somehow superintend the activity during this time. As we said in previous studies, the time leading up to this event will be a time of increasing and terrible persecution of God's people. Although a small remnant of Jews will be divinely sealed for God's protection throughout this time (Revelation 7:4-8), the Antichrist will pursue Christians with great vengeance just before the Lord returns and "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (v. 2). Saint John said in Revelation, "So the dragon was enraged with the woman (Israel), and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Christians)" (Revelation 12:17 with parenthetical explanations added). Verse two says that "many" will rise, meaning not everyone, but many people have yet to die on the earth. The exception to this is that the believers who are alive at that time will be taken up to be with the Lord. "*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. 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*" (1Th 4:16-17).

During this time "everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." What is this book? The book that Daniel refers to is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Philippians 4:3 says that people who labored by Paul's side had their names written in the book of life. Revelation 3:5 shares a promise to those who overcome, that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. Revelation 20:12 describes two books, one that has all the deeds of every person (implying judgment for misdeeds) and another book, the book of life, which if one's name is written there, will cancel out the judgment recorded in the other book. Revelation 20:15 says: "And if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 21:27 describes it as the Lamb's book of life and says that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter the New Jerusalem, God's eternal heaven. The Bible makes it very clear that the book of life is a place that records those who are going to be saved from the eternal lake of fire, the just consequences for those who live contrary to God and apart from His life. How does one know if his or her name is written in the book of life? Another way to ask the same question based on the passage in Daniel: how can we know which group we are in, the ones who will rise to everlasting life or those who rise to disgrace and everlasting contempt? Once we recognize that we are a sinner, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we can turn our hearts to the Lord Jesus as the only remedy. The Bible tells us that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1a), and later John said, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:12). Further it says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Salvation is a free gift that comes about **only** by belief in Jesus Christ, it can never be earned. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you have put your faith in Jesus to save you, then you can have assurance that you will be "rescued" from eternal disgrace and contempt.

Daniel also explains that the people "who have insight" and who "lead the many to righteousness" will be prominent in the eternal kingdom of God, shining brightly "like the stars forever and ever" (v. 3c).

Being involved in gaining wisdom and pointing others to deeper faith in Christ is a valuable focus for our lives. You may have a ministry of evangelism, introducing people to a relationship with Jesus. Or you may have a ministry of discipleship, helping those who have put their faith in Jesus grow in their new life in Christ. Either way, it is important to continue growing in your own faith to have insight and to be equipped to lead others to righteousness.

Interestingly, God gave us a glimpse into a precursor to the resurrection of the dead which happened at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. He is the only one of the four writers that recorded this event. Matthew said that after Jesus had given up His life on the cross, "The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:52-53). This is one example of how powerful God is and is evidence of the deity of Christ.

What does this reading mean for us today? First, if anyone is sitting on the fence regarding Jesus as Lord, today is the day to trust in Him. Saint Paul said, "*AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). As Peter told the people in Jerusalem about Jesus, "*He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Second, although we as Christians should expect increasing persecution leading up to Jesus' return, we can take hope that Jesus will fulfill His promise to return "in the same way in which [they] saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Finally, we can have confidence in the fact that God's mighty angelic beings are fighting the spiritual battle against the demonic forces allied against us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:
This reading is from Hebrews chapter 10, a treatise on how Jesus died one time for sins forever, which means this sacrifice can never be repeated. At this time, the Hebrew people were still conducting the Old Testament sacrifices required by the Law. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer provides a running contrast to the old manner of things compared to Jesus. The verdict is that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, and greater than the sacrificial system. In this reading, we see a culminating point of the author's conclusion that Jesus is greater than the priestly system of the Old Testament.

Second Reading:
Note: Verses 15 – 16 which were omitted from the reading were included below.

> *Hebrews 10:11-18 NAS95 11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

The author said that by "one offering He has perfected [forever] those who are sanctified" (v. 14). The word once follows a string of uses of this same word that first appears in this context in chapter 7: "For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He died once for all when He offered up Himself" (Hebrews 7:26-27). To make his point that Jesus died once for sins forever, in contrast to the sacrifices offered repeatedly by the Levitical priests, the author continued repeating this word four more times before today's reading, and twice more in the actual reading. The author presented extremely compelling evidence as to the importance of understanding the concept of Jesus' single sacrifice for sins forever. He said, "[H]aving offered one sacrifice for sins for all time," (v. 12) then again he said in verse 14, "For by one offering." Interestingly the phrase indicating Jesus' single sacrifice is repeated seven times between the end of chapter seven and today's reading in chapter 10. Anytime the Bible repeats something we need to pay special attention to it, and especially if the concept is repeated seven times! The reading clearly tells us, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (v. 18). The only thing that can take away our sin is Jesus willingly sacrificing His life as a Victor on the cross for our sins (see John 10:18).

What does this mean for our life? The value of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins is of inestimable value. Compared with the sacrificial system of the Jews about which God said "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4), Jesus' single sacrificial giving of Himself as a Victor on the cross provided the means for believers in Him to be reconciled to God forever. Jesus will never have to offer Himself as a sacrifice again, ever. When we celebrate communion we look back at His finished work on the cross. This was always God's plan, as Jesus was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). When we break the bread of communion and drink from the cup, we remember the body that he allowed to be broken for us and His blood poured out as the final offering for sin forever (1 Corinthians 11:26). We do not need to work for our salvation, for Jesus' work on the cross is finished (John 19:30). I'll end this with one last exclamation point, for Jesus has "appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"(Hebrews 9:26)! What a wonderful savior!

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will return to eschatology (pronounced es·ka·tol·a·gee), a word that means the study of the last things. The events in the reading will sound very familiar from your study in the first reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
The Gospel lesson from Mark 13 is from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse. The parallel passage in Matthew 24 goes into some greater details than that of Mark's account. The context of the message is after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the temple from the money changers during the preparation for the Passover. Upon the disciples telling Jesus about the "wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings" (Mark 13:1) of the temple complex, Jesus told them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down" (verse 2). Afterwards Peter, James, John and Andrew approached Jesus privately and asked Him, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled" (v. 4). Jesus then explained to them what was to come, including many deceivers (Matthew 13:6), "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 13:7), famines and earthquakes (Matthew 13:8), yet these were just the beginning of the times of the end (v. 8). Then would come persecution (Matthew 13:9, 11), including death (v. 12), and the spread of the Gospel to the extent of the known world (v. 10, with final fulfillment in Revelation 14:6). After the "beginning of the birth pains" (v. 8e), the Antichrist will be revealed and bring an end to

the restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem (Matthew 13:14). Although this prophecy was partially fulfilled by the Roman general Titus during the siege of Jerusalem during AD 70, the text is clear that another siege is in sight since Jesus warning is a global one, not just a local one concerning the city of Jerusalem. He said, "if the Lord had not cut short the days no human being would be saved" (v. 20). This and the corresponding testimony in the Book of Revelation make it clear that these events are yet future. This brings us up to today's reading which details events which begin after or during the unveiling of the first six seals in the Book of Revelation. The "gathering of the elect" (v. 27) about which we will read is the same event that we studied in the first reading from Daniel 12.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 13:24-32 NAS95 24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."*

The opening verse of the reading is nearly the same as what John described with the opening of the sixth seal in the Book of Revelation. "*12 I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places*" (Revelation 6:12-14). In the time just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus, the world will experience miraculous cosmic signs revealing God's power (vv. 24 – 25). At some point during the mid-point of a seven year period counting from a peace treaty made with Jerusalem to settle the worldwide chaos surrounding control over that tiny but religiously important region, Jesus Christ "will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds" (v. 27). While there is much speculation about the sequence of events, this is the event we discussed in the first reading that, in my opinion, includes the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54), the return of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:11), and the resurrection of the dead up until that time (Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29). Beyond this point the period known as the Great Tribulation or the Day of the Lord will commence during which God will bring an end to the Antichrist's religious and commercial systems of mystery Babylon and Babylon the Great (Revelation 18). Although we don't yet understand what form this Babylon will take, we know that it will exalt itself against God much in the same way as the people did with the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

As the reading continued, Jesus explained to His disciples how to discern the signs of the times by telling them the parable of the fig tree. In the same way that they could discern the ripeness of the fig tree and that the summer was near they would also be able to discern that the end times were at their doorstep when the signs He gave them were at hand. He told them that once people (not necessarily them) saw these signs that the current generation would see the whole process completed during their lifetime (v.

30). Finally, through the mystery of the functions of the Three Persons of the Godhead, Jesus explained that the timing of the events was known only to God the Father (v. 32).

What does all of this talk about the horrible events of the end times mean to us today? Jesus calls us to live with an expectation of His imminent return. We are to be good stewards of the gifts that He has given to us. He said in Matthew's retelling of the Olivet Discourse, "*For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes*" (Matthew 24:44-46). We too must learn to discern the times by studying the imminent signs that will precede the return of the Lord, as you did today. Although the study of the end times may seem daunting, the Bible lays out a clear pattern of events that people alive during that time should expect to see. As time marches closer and closer to the fulfillment of these events, we should expect to see the "beginning of birth pains" described in Mark 13:8. We must expect to be persecuted on an increasing level for our faith, even to the point of death. The point of Jesus' teaching about His imminent return was to provide us with comfort that He is not far away, and He will return soon in fulfillment of His promises to us and to Israel. Saint Paul said, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) regarding the catching up of the church to heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you find comforting about the words from the first and third readings? How can you encourage and challenge others with your faith in Jesus' imminent return?

2. When you think about the fact that Jesus has paid fully for your sin debt, what inner response does this evoke? What outer response seems fitting for you to reflect this reality in your life this week? How can you live in light of this reality?

Keywords: Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 158