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's reading begins with a passage from the Apocrypha. We begin our exposition with the second reading which is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi then conclude with the Gospel reading from the third chapter of Luke. The Philippians passage allows us to see into the heart of the Apostle Paul and the mutual affection he shared with the believers in Philippi. The Gospel account introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. The reading includes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah, which foretells something about both John's ministry and the work of the one whom he introduced. [By Jesse Deloe]

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. 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. Due to copyright and other restrictions we are not allowed to share a study of this text.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The beginning of Paul's ministry in Philippi is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 16, beginning at verse 11. Philippi was a leading city in the Roman colony of Macedonia, and became the location of the first Christian church in Europe. While there, Paul and his companions were mistreated because of their preaching and were imprisoned. Paul and Silas were miraculously released during an earthquake and had the opportunity to bring about the conversion of the jailer and his family as a result. The missionary team departed the city and continued what is regarded as Paul's second missionary journey.

Paul wrote the letter to his converts in Philippi to express his gratitude for their financial support in his time of need. The letter was delivered by Epaphroditus, Paul's companion. This is a very personal letter that encourages the church to live with joy and in unity.

Second Reading:

> *Philippians 1:4-11 NAS95 4 always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, 5 in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

Typical of his letters, Paul tells his readers about his prayers for them. He is joyful because of their involvement with him in the sharing of the gospel from the very beginning of their relationship with him.

They can have great joy, he writes, because of his confidence that what God started in them at their conversion will be completed. They will be preserved and kept until the "day of Christ Jesus," no doubt a reference to the second coming of Christ to establish His eternal kingdom, about which Paul writes in many of His epistles. That confidence should encourage today's believers, also. If a person has placed his trust in the work of Christ to provide salvation, he can be assured that he will be saved until the very end.

Verses 7 and 8 assure the Philippians of Paul's great affection for them. He tells them, "I have you in my heart." That is true, in part, because he considers that they have been a significant part of his life through their gifts and prayers and during his imprisonment and the difficult times he has had in proclaiming the gospel. His feeling for them is so great that he describes it in strong terms of longing and affection.

The specific elements of Paul's prayer reveal his concern that these converts grow in their spiritual lives. He prays that their love may increase continually. It is not just a feeling, however; it is a love that is based on "knowledge" and "discernment." In the 20 centuries since Paul wrote those words, current society seems to have lost the real meaning of love. Today, it seems to be either a fleeting sentiment based on passing emotions or a purely physical attraction. But true love requires knowing the loved one well and the ability to discern qualities worthy of affection.

Such discernment enables one to choose what is truly best ("excellent" is Paul's term). He writes in a later chapter that Christians should "let [their] mind dwell on" things that are honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good report "if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise" (4:8). Why? So that until the end of life on earth they will be "sincere and blameless." It is only by filling our minds with those kinds of things that we can live a holy and righteous life. It must have been difficult for believers to live such godly lives in their godless society. What a challenge that is for 21st century Christians with the constant influences of evil through the ever-present media of our times.

Is it possible to live such holy lives? To be sure, it is difficult. But the final portion of today's reading reveals the secret. It is possible only because the believer, as Paul writes, has "been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ." Apart from the indwelling Christ, it would be impossible to be blameless, but while we are still in our present bodies and are incapable of perfection, we do have the power within to increase in holiness and righteous behavior. And, Paul reminds us that all such spiritual progress will be "to the glory and praise of God."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we begin the next reading, we should remember that Luke's Gospel is the result of careful study so that he can present an accurate review of the life and ministry of Jesus. He introduces his story by assuring the readers of "having investigated everything carefully from the beginning." Luke's perspective, not in contrast with the other Gospels but as complementary to them, focuses on Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human.

Although Luke seems to be writing mainly to Gentile Christians, he makes it clear that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He seeks to add to the knowledge of those early Christians confirming that what they already believed was true and trustworthy. Today's reading follows the first two lengthy chapters which relate the stories of Christ's birth and surrounding events. As we approach the Christmas holiday, it might be good to re-read those familiar passages before looking at today's text more carefully.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 3:1-6 NAS95 1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT. 5 'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH; 6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'"*

Verse 1 of today's reading gives very specific details of the political and geographical environment into which John the Baptist was to come. Verse 2 introduces the religious leaders of the immediate area. Furthermore, it states that "the word of God came to John" as a simple fact without indicating how or under what circumstances except that it came "in the wilderness" where John seemed to live (Matthew 3:1-5). Zacharias is noted as John's father. The unique story of the announcement and birth of John is recorded earlier in Luke's Gospel (1:5-25).

John the Baptist's message was very clear. Luke says he came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." We should be reminded that repentance means a lot more than just being sorry for your sin. The New Testament word actually means "changing your mind," and it's not just a mental attitude. Genuine repentance involves a change in behavior that results from the renewed mind. John must have been a powerful preacher (enabled by the Holy Spirit, of course), because many responded to his message, repented, and were baptized. Elsewhere, we read that John's message of repentance included his preaching that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This is the same message Jesus preached (Matthew 4:17).

All of this was predicted centuries before by the prophet Isaiah (ch. 40) as repeated by Luke in today's reading. The first prophesied statement is obviously fulfilled in John. Clearly, he was a voice "crying in the wilderness." In an apparent allusion to the preparations that were usually made for a dignitary's travel, John is to make the way clear for the promised Messiah by his teaching. The next several clauses are thought to be poetic ways of saying that the way for Messiah will be advanced, and obstacles will be removed. These clauses may also be metaphors suggesting that the proud and arrogant will be humbled.

Verse 6 quite clearly has reference to the ministry of Messiah, not John the Baptist. In the preceding chapter (2:30-32) Luke had quoted other Scriptures indicating that salvation ultimately would be for both Jews and Gentiles. This is a message that Luke particularly emphasized since he was writing primarily to a Gentile audience, and the Jewish population often mistakenly thought that salvation was for Israel alone.

Reflection Questions

1. What did you learn today about having confidence that God has begun a good work in you and will complete it? That is possible only if you have put your personal trust in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to atone for your sin.

2. In what ways are you filling your mind with the "excellent" things of life that will honor God and build your Christian character?

3. During the past year, what are some specific circumstances when you acknowledged your sin before God, and change your mind and behavior so that you can live a life of holiness?

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