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. The Bible teaches throughout both the Old and New Testaments the importance or recognizing the immanency of the coming of the Lord Jesus and His eventual return. Later in this lesson we will look at readings from the Old Testament Book of Malachi and in the New Testament the Gospel of Luke that address these topics. In spite of these frequent teachings it's easy to get caught up in our daily lives and overlook the possibility of meeting the Lord ourselves at any given instant. I write about that in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's notes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Malachi. Malachi was a prophet who wrote around the time of the closing of the Old Testament Canon. He is one of the Minor Prophets, meaning their Books are shorter than the Major Prophets. This Minor Prophet who wrote one of what I call the "index books," because you shouldn't feel bad if you need to use the index at the front of your Bible to locate them. Malachi is a bit easier to find because it is the very last Book in the Old Testament just before the New Testament Book of Matthew. Malachi's message to Israel was a call to repentance concerning the corrupt priesthood, rampant divorce among the people, their lack of tithing, and poor social justice. The reading for today is from the first two verses in Chapter 4 (some versions mark the verses differently). If we look back to Chapter 3 we see that Malachi predicted both the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). In verse 5 we see the promise of God's future judgment of His people, but in an interesting way. "Then I will draw near to you for judgment" (v.5a). God says that He will be near to the people of Israel but it's for the purpose of judgment. This verse is helpful because it should remind us that as God judges His people He is still near to them, and His judgment is ultimately for their good. Let's read the text from the first reading in Chapter 4 but continue until the end of the chapter.

First Reading:

> *1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.*
>
> *Omitted Verses:*
> *3 You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 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 4:1-6 NASB (Malachi 3:19-24 in the Lectionary).*

Some insights from this text are as follows. When Malachi said "the Day" he was referring to the Day of the Lord (abbreviated DOL) which we spoken about before (link). The DOL is the future period of judgment which commences at the midpoint of the time known as Tribulation Period and marks the beginning of the Great Tribulation (Rev 13:5). The purpose of the Great Tribulation is to bring the Jewish people back to communion with God. Malachi conditioned his prophecy of this terrible time period with a blessing to those who turned to the Lord and repented of their fallen condition. "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth . . . "(v2a,b). Malachi also told another remarkable prophecy when he quoted God stating, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD" (v5). One of the marks of the tribulation period will be the return of the Prophet Elijah. John said in the Book of Revelation, "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophecy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth" (Rev 11:3). Although it's not explicitly stated in Revelation that one of these witnesses is Elijah, his return is predicted by Malachi and this does seem to align with the text in Revelation.

What is the relevance of Malachi's teaching for us in the Church today? As we discussed in those previous lessons, we find in the teachings of Saint Paul that God has granted an escape to all believers alive at His second coming. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). Malachi's call was for the people to repent of their sin and turn the Lord. This is precisely the call for everyone alive on the earth today, from every tribe and nation. Malachi's message serves as both a warning for people to heed the call to turn to the One True God but also to let believers know that God hasn't forsaken His people Israel. God will work actively to redeem His people and show them the need to turn their hearts to Him, even if it means subjecting them to terrible judgment. He will leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is missing (Luke 15:4). If God loves his people Israel so much to go to this length to save them, how much more does He desire that everyone alive today turn to him through faith in Jesus? Saint Paul said, "But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart' --that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" Romans 10:8-10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:
The second reading from 2 Thessalonians is Paul's teaching on avoiding fellowship with anyone holding to false teachings. Believers, Paul said later in this same chapter, were to warn these people, not associate with them, but attempt to win them back to correct teaching (see 2 Thess 3:14 – 15).

Second Reading:

> *2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 NASB (plus skipped verse 6)*
> *6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat,*

either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

Paul provides advice to the Thessalonians who were struggling with persecution (2 Thess 1:4-6) to break fellowship with those who didn't follow God's teaching (v. 6) but instead to emulate Paul's behavior in serving without an expectation of payment. Although Paul had the right to work as a paid minister he chose not to so as to set an excellent example for others to follow (v. 9). The principle he gave was, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat" (v. 10b). Paul had heard that some among them were not working but were instead "acting like busybodies" (v. 11c). Paul admonished these people with a word from the Lord to emulate him and "work in quiet fashion" (v. 12).

An important point that Paul makes is his connection between work and worship, which is also closely tied to godly stewardship. Paul's admonishment is relevant for us today in that God calls all of us to serve Him in order to be good stewards of the gifts which He has given us. We are called by God to offer our bodies up to Him as "living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). Through this we offer ourselves through our work to God as our "spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1e). Thinking of our work as a form of worship helps us to better understand God's holistic picture and plan that He has for our lives. Perhaps this view is easier to understand for those employed say as musicians in which they can clearly visualize how they are serving God through the beautiful music that they make flow through their instruments. But Paul's admonition to connect work with worship goes beyond the musician even to those who clean streets for a living or run parts in a machine shop.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
In the Gospel lesson today, God provided a message which continued the theme of the coming great and terrible Day of the Lord. Let's read the Gospel text from Luke Chapter 21.

Gospel Reading:

5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." 7 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" 8 And He said, "See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is near'. Do not go after them. 9 When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." 10 Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, 11 and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. 16 But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, 17 and you will be hated by all because of My name. 18 Yet not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:5-19

In this text, as was also the case with many of the Old Testament prophets, when Jesus told the story he used a theological construct known as "prophetic foreshortening." This means that when he spoke of events which were in the near term (as we look back in history) he combined them with events in the distant future such that the two events appear stacked together in the Gospel narrative. This was also the case in the first reading from Malachi today when he said, "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (4:2) just one chapter after he predicted the first coming of Jesus in 3:1. What Jesus was predicting was actually two events, though they may appear from first glance to be just one period of time. First, the temple would be destroyed. We know that this was fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Second, He was predicting the coming of the Great Tribulation period. In between these two events, Jesus said certain other events would happen, and it's this in-between period in which we find ourselves today. The events typifying this period, according to Jesus, will include, 1. The appearance of false Christs (v.8), 2. Wars, earthquakes, and famines all over the earth (vv. 9-11), and 3. Persecution of believers for Jesus' name (vv. 13-19.

What's the importance of Saint Luke's teaching for us as we live our lives as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? First, we should expect to see the types of events that Jesus spoke of as happening during this period. We should be surprised to be persecuted for our faith. Second, we must not be surprised to hear about false messiahs such as cult leaders who claim to be Jesus or start whole religious movements through new ways of interpreting the Bible. Many false religious movements have arisen such as the interpretation of secret "Bible codes." Jesus said not to be surprised by these events. Third, we should expect to see terrible natural disasters on an unprecedented scale. As I'm writing this the news is coming in about the awful destruction brought about by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Another implication of this text for our lives is to provide comfort and trust in God that He knows what He is doing. When life is chaotic (inside and out) it is helpful to remember that nothing is out of His control. We must turn often to Him for help and hope.

Yet, there is hope. As we saw in the first reading from Malachi, "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (v6a). Jesus said in the reading today, "Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives (vv. 18-19). . If He were offering physical protection, then the Apostles wouldn't have had to give their lives for the defense of the Gospel. No, He wasn't saying that we might not be harmed in the physical sense, but that spiritually we will be protected.

Have you placed your trust in the Lord Jesus for the promise of eternal life through faith in Him? Hearing about all of the bad things going on in the world doesn't provide us for much hope in this life, but there is much hope for the life to come.

Reflection Questions

1. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you almost faced the Lord? Were you a believer in the Lord Jesus when this happened? If you were, did the event lead you to a closer walk with Jesus? In what ways was it possible that this event was a means of God's judgment in such a way as to draw you closer to Him?

2. In our modern age we have often compartmentalized our lives thinking that worship belongs to Sunday while work is a Monday to Friday kind of thing. Have you ever considered your work as a form of worship? As we saw in the second reading, Saint Paul calls us to emulate his godly behavior in working without being a burden on others while continuing to serve without an expectation of reward. In what ways can you reconsider your work life as worship? How would taking on this new mindset help you to A. Relate to others at your workplace, B. Have a more accurate view of your service to God even if you are not engaged in full time ministry?

Going Deeper

It was a breezy afternoon when after church I decided to travel from Metro Detroit to a place called Kettle point in Canada to do some windsurfing. This spot on the southern end of Lake Huron was famous for having very large waves on windy days. This day was no exception and the waves were forecasted to be ten feet tall! Even though it was not normal for him, my brother decided to ride along to watch. I had an excellent afternoon riding the large, smooth waves in the bay. Just before I was going to stop for the day, I came in for a brief rest, and then decided to go out for just one more run. I had a very uneasy feeling as I was carrying the windsurf board back to the water and was compelled to pray very hard for God to keep me safe on this final run.

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I made a turn on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board which sent it flying one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile that same large wave crashed on top of me with my sail! I let loose of the sail and soon realized that I was drowning. I quickly noticed that I was unable to float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves and soon got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air in between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray. As I continued fighting I had a strange realization and began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real, and is difficult to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me. Yet I continued to fight and pray.

As I was fighting for my life in Lake Huron that day, two things came immediately into my mind. First, I made the vivid realization that I wasn't in control of the timing of when I would meet the Lord, it was up to God! It had been easy for me to think that I was the master of every element of my life. However, when my close call to death happened God used the opportunity to show me that **He** was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He was in control of my life and he had already set the exact day I would meet Him. Who was I to say that I would be alive when he returned as the Bible taught? Second, life-threatening times like this were not a very good time to search out a new relationship with God. You either have one, with Jesus as the Lord of your life and your only hope for salvation, or you don't. The Bible says, "Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

My story ended well. Somehow, I came to realize that if I pulled on my wet suit, I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. Against all odds I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot long mast with a flag attached. Between the huge waves I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and eventually someone riding a jet ski spotted me and came over and

yanked me out of the water. As I walked back up the beach, I praised God, and someone offered me a ride in their truck so I could hurry back to tell my brother the amazing story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition. Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario I had my first meal as a truly "born from above" man.

Although I am much more careful while windsurfing, I recognize that I don't have the choice to know when I will meet the Lord Jesus. It's up to Him and could happen at any time. We must be prepared for we never know the day or the hour.

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