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

What are you looking forward to? This question may have a myriad of answers: Christmas, time with family, a new year, a raise . . . But after all of this comes and goes, what else are you looking forward to? At the end of your life, what do you have to look forward to? When nothing seems to be going right, is there something outside of the rollercoaster of this life to look forward to?

The Bible speaks much about expectation, hope and things to come. Because it is divinely inspired, it has the unique voice to speak to us from an eternal perspective about real hope and what we can look forward to. This week we will begin with Isaiah's prophecy to the Jews in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah, the Jewish hope of a Deliverer. Next, we will study what Saint Paul had to say about Jesus as the hope of the Gentiles, and conclude with a Gospel lesson from Matthew about John the Baptist's pronouncement of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Today, both the first and second readings as well as the Gospel lesson were either directly from Isaiah or drawn from this Old Testament prophet. As a review, Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the period from about 740 to 700 BC. He spoke words of both condemnation and hope to the tribes of Benjamin and Judah concerning their impending capture by the Babylonian empire. This was during the same time in which the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 BC.

Introduction to the First Reading:
The first reading is from Isaiah Chapter 11. Isaiah writes in a form called "prophetic foreshortening" in which two events (one near and one far away) are written in such a way that seems to convey that they happen at the same time. Study the text and see if you can locate the transition point where the prophecy regarding Jesus shifts from the First Coming to His Second Coming.

First Reading:

> *1 Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, And He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; 4 But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. 5 Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist. 6 And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. 7 Also the cow and the bear will graze; Their young will lie down together; And the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea. 10 Then it will come about in that day That the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious. (Isaiah 11:1-10)*

Isaiah revealed some important truths about the source of the Messiah, the nature of the Messiah, and the nature of his future "millennial" kingdom on earth. Isaiah said that Jesus would come from the line of Jesse (v.1), who was King David's father. He said that He would possess the "Spirit of the LORD", wisdom and understanding, and the "spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (v.2). Next, in verses 3-4 a transition occurred which pointed to the future reign of Jesus initiated at His Second Coming. Isaiah said, "He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked." This means that justice will finally reign on the earth because Jesus will be physically ruling and reigning. Right now in this era of human history, evil is not always immediately punished and many times the wicked prosper by their cunning schemes. Not so in the millennial reign of King Jesus. The first time Jesus came to the earth as a Servant and like a Lamb (Isaiah 53:7). But when Jesus returns a second time He will rule the earth with a rod of iron (Revelation 2:27) and as a Lion (Revelation 5:5). Jesus' reign will occur during the future Millennial Kingdom when Jesus will reign over the earth for a thousand years beginning immediately after the end of the Great Tribulation period. If this sounds terrifying to you, it doesn't have to be. When you place your faith in Christ's righteousness, you do not have to fear His rule and reign, because you are united with Him forever. "There is therefore, now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). If you are not in Christ Jesus, then your fear should be a wake-up call to consider your eternal destiny.

Introduction to the Second Reading:
As we move onto the second reading from Romans 15:4-9 (plus the skipped verses 10-12), again we find a writing from Isaiah, one of the most frequently quoted of the prophets. The text opens with an important admonition about the value of the Old Testament Scriptures. As you read, note the importance of this admonition as well as the connection to the first reading from Isaiah 11.

Second Reading:

> *4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; 6 that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO THEE AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO THY NAME." 10 And again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." 11 And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." 12 And again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." (Romans 15:4-12)*

The opening admonition was that "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (v.4). Saint Paul went on to quote from several Psalms and then Isaiah. In verse 12 Paul quoted directly from the same section of text that we read in the first reading, Isaiah 11 verses 1 and 10. Paul did so to show that this portion of Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus at His First Coming, and to give hope to the Gentile Roman believers. He said, "Let all the peoples praise Him" (v.11a), not just the Jewish believers but believers from every tribe and nation. We can encourage one another through these words since we

see that the Scriptures are true, and that this prophecy is fulfilled through Jesus. We can trust that the since the prophesies concerning Jesus' First Coming were proven to be true we can trust that the prediction of the things that will happen at His Second Coming are also true.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
Before we move onto the Gospel lesson, I want to share a section in the Gospel of Saint Luke Chapter 4 because it helps to illustrate the importance of Isaiah's prophetic writings. When Isaiah wrote his Book all of the events concerning Jesus were yet future. Yet in this section in Saint Luke Jesus quoted from Isaiah and said that a portion of it was being fulfilled at that very instant. But Jesus stopped his quote exactly at that point at which the prophetic timetable turned to events concerning His Second Coming. In Luke Chapter 4, Jesus is just beginning His ministry and he had returned to his home town of Nazareth. The context of this section is just after Jesus' baptism, which is the same time period as the Gospel lesson today in Matthew that we will look at later in this study. Read the text from Saint Luke and carefully note Jesus' quotation from Isaiah that is marked in all CAPITAL LETTERS.

> *16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWNTRODDEN, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)*

In this section of Luke, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1-2a but stopped short of the concluding portion of Isaiah 61:2. Verse two, with the section highlighted that Jesus omitted from Isaiah, said "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, **And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn**." Jesus said in verse 21b of Luke 4, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v.21b). It's very significant that Jesus stopped where he did when he was quoting from Isaiah because it is important to understand the distinction between the purpose of His First Coming and of His second coming. We live in the "pause" between the First and Second Coming of Christ. This era allows us time to choose to embrace the favor of the Lord (grace) through faith. The next era, though, will usher in the day of "vengeance of our God." Who can stand in the midst of Him setting the record straight? None of us has a chance outside of God's wonderful provision through the death of His Son, Jesus at His first coming. Understanding this distinction will make it possible to properly understand the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. It also helps to interpret the future events in the Book of Revelation including the purpose of the Great Tribulation period that we discussed last week.

The Gospel lesson today was from Matthew Chapter 3. Again, the text contained a quotation from the Prophet Isaiah as indicated by the capital letters.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'" 4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and*

a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:1-12)

In this Gospel reading, John the Baptist announced the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He quoted from Isaiah 40:3 showing that he was the one about whom the Prophet Isaiah was speaking when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT." Next, Matthew described the ministry and nature of John the Baptist including his opposition from the two prominent groups that later also opposed Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees. John the Baptist warned that Jesus would eventually judge these oppressors (v.12). In retrospect we understand now that Jesus' judgment of them will not occur until His Second Coming, something which was unexpected – likely even to John the Baptist. The apostles expected Jesus to set up His Kingdom at any moment (John 6:15). The text today was just before Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:16). After Jesus was baptized another portion of Isaiah 11 was fulfilled when the Spirit of God descended like a dove and came to rest on Jesus (Matthew 3:16). Looking back to the first reading we see, "the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him (Isaiah 11:2a).

What's the importance of this Gospel reading for your life as a believer in Jesus Christ? First, we can trust the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus' First Coming because we can read about the facts of their fulfillment in the New Testament. Second, since we can trust the prophecies about Jesus' First Advent we can trust those about His Second Coming. Jesus' Second coming is when the believing world will realize the wonderful promises from God including restoration of the world to its pre-fallen, sinless condition. Isaiah said in the first reading, "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We have hope that Jesus' Millennial Kingdom will be a world of universal peace. This promise should motivate us to reach out to those in our community who don't know Jesus Christ personally. Thirdly, the Gospel reading warns us to not be deceived about our standing before God. The Pharisees and Sadducees were putting their trust in the wrong place (being children of Abraham). John the Baptist confronted this false belief and pointed them to put their trust in the only One who could truly save them, Jesus, the Promised Messiah.

Reflection Questions

1. Even though prophecy constitutes about one third of the Bible the importance of this genre is frequently downplayed, and the interpretation is often spiritualized. Yet we know that living with a proper anticipation of the Lord's return encourages holy living as well as dedication in loving Jesus with

our whole heart. Read the following Scripture. How does this cause you to live a more holy life as well as to reach out to others that don't know Jesus?

> *7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint. 10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:7-11)*

2. List a few characteristics of a forerunner, one who goes before someone. In what ways are you as a believer in the risen Lord Jesus Christ called to be a forerunner, like John the Baptist?

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