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. Today we celebrate the ascension of our Lord Jesus, remembering how He returned to heaven and God the Father before he commissioned His church to spread the good news of the Gospel throughout the world until the time that He returns.

Introduction to the First Reading:
The Book of Acts continues Doctor Luke's chronicle of the life and legacy of our Lord Jesus. This Book picks up after the closing of the Gospel of Luke in which right before Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised the eleven that they would be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The Gospel of Luke closed with Luke's telling of Jesus' ascension. "50 And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. 51 While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. 52 And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and were continually in the temple praising God" (Luke 24:50-53). Interestingly, the eleven disciples obeyed Jesus by staying in Jerusalem and were "continually in the temple" in spite of the fact that the Jewish leaders there were the ones responsible for His crucifixion.

First Reading:

> Acts 1:1-11 NAS95 1 The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. 3 To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. 4 Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; 8 but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." 9 And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10 And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 11 They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."

This opening section of Acts recounts how Jesus reaffirmed His commissioning of the church to be His witnesses not only to the Jews but to the entire world (v. 8). The question at hand for the disciples was whether Jesus would immediately bring in His kingdom on earth and overtake the oppressive Roman rule (v. 6). Jesus didn't deny that He would establish such a rule in the future but rather told them that the timing was not for them to know, but was a mystery reserved only to the Father God (v. 7). At the conclusion of His message Jesus was taken up in a cloud, meaning that the Skekinah Glory of God had appeared in contrast to some sort of rainstorm. The closing verse was a message presumably from two

angels, not men, commanding them to get busy with the Jesus' business which He had just directed them.

Today's reading marks the unfolding of the mystery of the church, something that was not foreseen even by the Disciples. We will see that in the Gospel reading where it says that "some were doubtful" (Matthew 28:17). The mystery deepened as Jesus left the disciples to build His kingdom, but without His physical presence. Although His disciples certainly knew the Scriptures, they didn't yet understand many of the elements of how they related to this future kingdom ministry. Remember how Jesus had explained to some of them on the Road to Emmaus about how the Scriptures spoke of Him and how he had to be killed in order for the next phase of God's plan to unfold (Luke 24:25-27).

A key point to remember from this reading is that Jesus didn't leave his disciples powerless, rather he promised to send then God's Holy Spirit which would empower them. God's. God's "dynamite" power would enable the disciples to unveil this new mystery of the church through various miraculous gifts which set fire first to Jerusalem and then to the entire world. As Christians, we have the power of God the Holy Spirit living within us. He empowers us to accomplish God's work in His kingdom until the time that He returns.

Second, the two men in white robes (presumably angels), said how Jesus would return in the same way that He had left them (v. 11). In other words, when Jesus returned, He would come by descending in a cloud of God's glory in physical form downwards from heaven. The men asked the disciples whey they were staring up into the sky. Obviously, angels had much more information about Jesus' kingdom and had we been there we too would have been staring up into the sky wondering what had just happened!

One day my wife and I were walking along a nature trail and heard the rapid fluttering of a bird as it flew away. Had we been looking up instead of down at our feet in order to keep from tripping on the rocky trail we would have been able to spy a bald eagle as it roosted in the tree shortly ahead of us. Instead, we only got to see the white tail feathers of this beautiful bird flying away from us, we had missed the opportunity to have the much fuller experience of its presence. After several events like this we learned to be more careful and focus farther ahead and keep looking up in order to have a chance to see things ahead that we otherwise would not have seen. We had previously said something like, had I been looking up (or ahead) we would have seen it before it flew away. Now, our mantra is to look up so that we don't miss important things ahead. So it is in our spiritual lives. God calls us to "look up" and anticipate His imminent return. We are called to go about accomplishing His business and keep our eyes focused upon Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:
In the reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians we will see the unveiling of some details of Jesus' kingdom reign from heaven. Jesus rule during the church age is from His throne on the right hand of God the Father (Mark 16:19). Jesus rules from heaven where He "sat down at the right hand of God." We see this most clearly in the Book of Hebrews. "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" (Hebrews 10:11-14).

Second Reading:

Ephesians 1:17-23 NAS95 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. 18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Paul provided many insights into Jesus' kingdom, and asked the Ephesian believers to pray for wisdom so that they too may experience "the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints" (v. 18). Paul himself prayed they these believers' eyes would be opened to see and understand this treasure (v. 18a). He reminded them of how God through his mighty power raised Jesus from the dead and seated Jesus at the utmost highest throne in the universe (vv. 20-21). He closed with a marvelous statement about how God had given Jesus total rulership over all things through His rulership over the church (v. 23). Here the word translated "church" doesn't refer as much to the technical translation as a religious assembly, but rather something fuller, more spiritual and mysterious since we see how Paul equated it to Jesus' body (v. 23a).

The church on earth is God's body of believers set apart to do His will until the time that Jesus returns. As Jesus' body is the church, we are in essence part of Jesus' body. We are God's special agents commissioned on His behalf. Our ID card is that of the Holy Spirit living within us. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the great power that lives within us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:
This short reading from John Mark's Gospel records what is called the "Great Commission" in which Jesus commands his followers to do several things until His return.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 16:15-20 NAS95 15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16 He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. 17 These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; 18 they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." 19 So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. 20 And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed. And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Jesus commanded His followers to do preach the good news (the Gospel, v. 15) and told them that certain powerful "sign gifts" would accompany these early disciples as they set about to accomplish this

mission. To a large extent these "sign gifts" were temporary with the purpose of proving the truth of the Gospel through powerful miracles as we see throughout the Book of Acts. Mark records how they set out to do just that, and how they "confirmed the word by the signs that followed" (v. 20). Interestingly, even though we see in verse 19 that Jesus had ascended back up into heaven, the reading says that He worked alongside the disciples, "while the Lord worked with them" (v. 20). In the closing portion of this verse the Lord Jesus Himself commissioned the growing group of disciples to accomplish His worldwide mission in proclaiming eternal salvation. Even though Jesus has ascended back to heaven He is still active in the lives and ministries of His believers.

What does the ascension of the Lord Jesus mean for us as believers today? With Jesus' return to heaven (from where He came), we also receive the promise that He will one day return (Acts 1:11). Regardless of how bad things get down here we can count on the fact that one day Jesus will return and set everything into perfect order as it was intended before Adam (and Eve's) sin through the world into chaos. Although most of us are not able to practice the same type of "sign gifts" that we read about in the Gospel today, we are still able to present other powerful signs to the nonbelievers in our lives. Foremost of those gifts is the evidence of changed lives. Nonbelievers recognize the crucial differences between our behavior and that of the non-Christians around us. Although we may not be able to handle deadly snakes without harm, we are able to powerfully express the difference that Jesus has made in our lives by forsaking the ways of the world through the daily choices that we make.

I remember back many years ago when a friend of mine called to ask me to go out on the town with him while his wife was out of town. Just before his invitation another friend had called and told me that he was sick with a high fever. I knew that nothing good would come from a night of partying so I made the obvious choice to take my sick friend to the hospital. It would have been easier for me to just bow to peer pressure and go party with my friend, but somehow, I felt that Jesus was calling me to a different path that evening. Jesus calls us to make these kinds of moral choices, and even though we may not recognize it ourselves, people are watching. These are the people that understand that we are somehow different, and it is this difference that may eventually lead someone to repent of their sin and trust in the only method of forgiveness through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. When you reflect upon the Great Commission of spreading the good news of the eternal Gospel, in what ways are you accomplishing this mission?

2. How does living in anticipation of Jesus' imminent return (looking up), help you to accomplish the Great Commission? What are one or two things that you could change this week in our life in order to more fully accomplish one or more aspects of God's plan for you?

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