Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. 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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-08-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, in the first reading, we examine the Prophet Isaiah's message regarding the future healing coming from God upon the whole sin-broken world. Then we continue the study of the Book of James in the second reading and close with the continuing study of the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus heals a deaf and mute man.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This week, in the first reading, we examine the Prophet Isaiah's message regarding the future healing coming from God upon the whole sin-broken world. This message especially resonated to the Jews who were under attack from the King of Assyria during this time.

First Reading:

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The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The historical context is during the time when King Hezekiah had made an alliance with Egypt (Isaiah 30:1-2) thereby provoking Sennacherib the King of Assyria. Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria ultimately led to his humiliation in which he was forced to cede reparations as recorded in Second Kings. The people were very afraid of the Assyrian King because he had already conquered and taken captive the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Hezekiah's unwise decision to trust in an alliance with Egypt angered God. However, at some point he came to his senses and confessed his wrongdoing, then tried to buy peace with Sennacherib. "*King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, 'I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.' The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria* "2 Kings 18:14-16).

Equally important in the historical context is the location of the reading in the whole of Isaiah and the overall theological context. Today's reading from Chapter 35 precedes a section in Isaiah regarding the future judgment of the Edomites. This is a people group that can be taken both literally (as a region) and figuratively, as anyone (or nation) who opposes God. Edom is the nation that descended from Isaac's firstborn son, Esau. Esau was Jacob's brother and the one who claimed the promises of God and the blessing from Israel. Although Esau didn't war with the Hebrew people during the time of Jacob, his descendants became sworn enemies of the Jews. God says about the Edomites in Chapter 34, "For My sword is satiated in heaven, Behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom And upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction" (Isaiah 34:5). Although we don't know exactly how God's judgment of Edom will play out, we are told many details about the judgment of the earth which must take place before Jesus returns to rule the earth. Scripture seems to indicate that the timing of the judgment is in the distant future, during what is known as the Day of the Lord (DOL). This period of God's judgment of the seals, trumpets, and bowls as described in Revelation will be accompanied with signs in the heavens. Isaiah said "the sky will be rolled up like a scroll" (Isaiah 34:4b) just as it says in Revelation 6:14. Today's reading is a message regarding the future restoration after the terrible period of time after the DOL. As in many of the prophetic passages in the Bible, and especially in Isaiah, we can locate both near term fulfillments as well as unfulfilled events that will happen sometime in the future. In some cases we can clearly see partial fulfillments of certain passages through the first coming of Jesus, but yet it is clear that the complete fulfillment won't occur until the second coming of the Lord. This is the case with today's reading.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 35:4-7 NAS95 4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 The scorched land will become a pool And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes.*

The heart of the message was that God would first destroy His enemies and then restore the land. Although the message contained a message of physical healing, the prophet was also speaking metaphorically about the spiritual healing that would occur in the future when all of Israel would be saved (Romans 11:26). In terms of the historical context, Isaiah spoke to the people of Judah that were being threatened with attack from the Assyrian Empire who had already devastated their brothers in the Northern Kingdom. The Prophet provided a message of hope to the people, that ultimately God would prevail over his enemies by "com[ing] with vengeance, with terrible recompense" (v. 4d). This will lead to the salvation of the people, "He will come and save you" (v. 4f). During that time, the land shall be restored from war, all the evils of the world will be reversed, including blindness, deafness, lameness, and the inability to speak (v. 5). The desert shall be watered (v. 6c) and the hot sand shall be blessed with cool water (v. 7). The land, including the region of Edom that was destroyed by God (Isaiah 34:5) and had been turned into the haunt of jackals will be restored. The Prophet's message would have provided comfort to the people as they faced the onslaught of King Sennacherib while their own king tried to buy the country's freedom against this vast imposing army. While the people lived with the imminent threat of the Assyrians, Isaiah's message would have been a rallying cry for exclaiming the power of the one true God over their enemies.

When we look at the ways in which Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled after his time we see that Jesus quoted from this very text. The way in which this happened was while John the Baptist was in prison. He evidently began to have some doubts as to whether Jesus truly was the Messiah. Perhaps he questioned why Jesus would allow him to be imprisoned. John the Baptist sent word to Jesus from prison saying, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"(Matthew 11:3). Jesus answered by quoting from Isaiah. "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM" (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus said that His healing ministry was in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Later in the Gospel reading, we will see another instance of how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy from Isaiah. Like many prophecies in the Old Testament, this one was only partially fulfilled during Jesus earthly lifetime. The final fulfilment will happen when the Lord returns to establish his kingdom on earth.

The message of Isaiah for our current day includes a couple of possible application points. One, we can believe in Jesus as the Messiah and be saved from the destructive nature of sin in our own lives. No matter what we have done or what has been done to us that is sinful, Jesus the Messiah, can heal and restore the brokenness of sin. Two, when we have this type of relationship with Jesus, we can also see God the Father's heart, now, through a different lens. Instead of fearing God's wrath and punishment for sin, we can draw close to God's heart that is tender and fiercely loyal to His sons and daughters who are in distress. Romans 8:1 tells us that there is no longer any condemnation associated with those who are in Christ Jesus. So we can boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). The fact that God is eager to save and embrace us should encourage and embolden us to live in light of His abiding presence in our lives.

You may wonder how things turned out for Judah. If you read further ahead in Isaiah, you can see how God worked mightily but only after Hezekiah came to his senses. Instead of leaning upon foreign alliances and gold to buy his way out, King Hezekiah eventually turned to God for deliverance, "he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the LORD" (Isaiah 37:1). God answered his heartfelt plea by devastating the Assyrian army: "Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead" (Isaiah 37:36).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study begun in James last week. The Book of James is a Book called the "Proverbs of the New Testament" and is filled with practical wisdom for being a Christian. This reading follows James' teaching on the basic practices of religion which included "visiting orphans and widows in their distress, and keeping oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). This James is the one who led the first Ecumenical Council recorded in Acts 15 which dealt with rebutting the false teaching that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). During this meeting, James stood up, announced a summary of the scriptural teachings on the matter (from the Old Testament), and provided the authoritative, final judgment on how the church should proceed. His teaching in the Book by his name came to the early church with the same sense of authority that he had during the proceedings of the first church council.

Note: The reading omitted verses 6 – 7 which have been included below.

Second Reading:

> *James 2:1-5 NAS95 1 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?*

This passage is teaching the importance of reflecting the nature of God by treating everyone with fairness and honor. Showing favoritism in the church reflects a muddy picture of God's heart, confusing people about who God is and what He values. We are to value each person as God values them, and thus avoid the class wars and pecking orders of the world. The poor in this world have a lot to teach those who are supposedly "rich" by material standards. Instead of favoritism dictating our treatment of people, God's love for all should level the playing field. We can now approach others (rich or poor) with a sense of humility, giving them honor as image bearers of God.

James provides an excellent warning about how God hates pride (Proverbs 8:13) and desires for unity in the Church (John 17). If you think about it, the higher a person is, the further they have to fall! James' lesson closely parallels the Parable of the Wedding Feast:

7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Lu 14:7-11)

In the parable, the central truth is Jesus' message regarding the sinfulness of pride as well as a call to servanthood. In reality, using the illustration of the feast, the proudest person in the room may be the one collecting the food trays after the meal! Only God truly knows the heart (1 Corinthians 2:11), although wealth and power are often accompanied with pride. In this illustration, Jesus is calling us to reflect upon the times in which we have positioned ourselves "at the head of the table," or when we have learned from the mistakes of others in positions of power.

As a college professor who taught in various state prisons for a half dozen years, one of the primary lessons I learned was to avoid rushing to judgment of a person based upon their appearance. Prison had a way of leveling the class differences because although everyone dressed uniformly, between hairstyles, tattoos (and scars) the students had ways of making themselves appear differently. Yet even with the students wearing the same uniforms over the course of the class, it would become obvious that there was a "pecking order" among them. Some, like the rich man, "sat" in positions of power, regardless of the location of their physical desk in the classroom. Others were subservient to the leadership positions among the students which became obvious to me over the course of the semester, but which the students already knew. Places of power don't always mean sitting at the head of the table.

It is instrumental to have a proper understanding of the point that James and Jesus were getting at in order to apply these lessons to our lives. The meaning that they had in mind is best illustrated by Psalm 73. Let's read that entire text and meditate upon it before moving onto the Gospel lesson.

> *Psalms 73:1-28 NAS95 1 <<A Psalm of Asaph.>> Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart! 2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat. 5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; The garment of violence covers them. 7 Their eye bulges from fatness; The imaginations of their heart run riot. 8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; They speak from on high. 9 They have set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue parades through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return to this place, And waters of abundance are drunk by them. 11 They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. 13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence; 14 For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. 16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight 17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end. 18 Surely You set them in*

> *slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form. 21 When my heart was embittered And I was pierced within, 22 Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. 28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Your works.*

Although the people who are rich in faith may suffer during this lifetime, those that are only rich in material things and full of pride will suffer eternal destruction.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading continues from Mark that we looked at last week. This week the context is Jesus' teaching in the Gentile region of the Decapolis to the east of the Jordan. Today's reading follows the healing of a Gentile in the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24) when Jesus cast out a demon from the Syrophoenician woman's daughter (Mark 7:24-30). Interestingly, the Decapolis was the same region in which Jesus was asked to leave after healing the man possessed by a legion of demons. Once the demons left the out of control man, they entered a herd of 2000 pigs, which caused them to run off a cliff into the Sea of Galilee and be destroyed. When the owners found out about this "they began to implore Him to leave their region" (Mark 5:17). Nonetheless, Jesus returned there and resumed His healing ministry. Perhaps this was because the formerly demon possessed man whom He healed went and told many others in that region about Jesus (Mark 4:20).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 7:31-37 NAS95 31 Again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis. 32 They brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they implored Him to lay His hand on him. 33 Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He*

> *touched his tongue with the saliva; 34 and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, "Ephphatha!" that is, "Be opened!" 35 And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly. 36 And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it. 37 They were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

He took a very long and circuitous route to get to the Decapolis by going from Tyre through Sidon and then back to the Decapolis (v. 31). We are not told the reason why he would have taken this route and the possible many months it would have required. Despite them having earlier asked Jesus to leave their region someone brought a man to Him for healing. Jesus separated the man from the crowd then proceeded to heal him. Jesus used two physical signs to manifest the healing given to Him by His Father God. First, he put his fingers into the man's ears, and then placed His own saliva on the man's tongue (v. 33). Evidently, he did this to accommodate the others who were watching ("they" in v. 37). Jesus looked up to heaven and sighed showing His reliance upon God the Father as well as His compassion for the man's condition brought on by the fallen world. Next, the first thing Jesus told them including the man whose speech was restored was to keep silent! Jesus knew that His time had not yet come (John 7:6) and having these people broadcast about Him wouldn't serve the timing of the perfect plan the Father had for Him. Another perspective is that His statement to keep quiet had more to do with His disciples than about the Gentiles who were present during the healing. As we mentioned in the first reading, the prophets like Isaiah used physical blindness and deafness as a metaphor for the people's spiritual condition. At this point Jesus' own disciples didn't understand the spiritual significance of all that was going on because in the very next chapter He told them, "Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR?" (Mark 8:17c – 18b). Jesus, knowing that by asking the Gentiles to keep quiet may stir them on to proclaim the healing that much more, may have been making a statement to His disciples about their unbelief. This, along with the fact that the disciples would have been familiar with the Old Testament metaphor of blindness and that Jesus opened the eyes of a blind man lends more credence to this interpretation. Jesus is in effect telling His disciples that He can open the eyes of the blind, but they were still spiritually blind to many of the realities of His nature. Although Peter soon afterwards confessed that Jesus is the Christ (Matthew 16:16), all of them had a lot to learn about Jesus – even after He rose from the dead.

There are many applications of Jesus message for our lives today, here are a few:

- Jesus' healing of the blind man's physical ailments reminds us of the need for everyone's need

for a spiritual birth. Spiritual blindness is the primary condition that vexes humanity today, the only unforgivable sin (Mark 3:22-30). In John's Gospel Jesus said that "unless a person is born from above they will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). Saint Paul said that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Paul continued by saying, "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 10:9). The Scripture is clear that "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). We cannot earn this free gift but must accept it in faith. "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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

- If we desire to be like Jesus, we too can be drawn to minister to the handicapped. Considering what we learned from James, the "handicapped" aren't necessarily just the people with obvious physical issues. Instead, we can pray to consider ministering to those who are marginalized in our society.

- As we learned in the reading from Isaiah, if we and others for whom we care are struggling with handicaps, remember how the prophetic messages in the Bible point us to the perfect healing we will one day receive with the Lord Jesus. For some, this may mean experiencing physical death and meeting Jesus in heaven (John 14:3).

- We too can be astonished that Jesus does all things well (v. 37a,b)! Jesus lived a perfect life and we can be changed by how He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

Reflection Questions

1. Develop a list of some categories of people who are marginalized in our society. Second, ask God in what ways you can be praying for specific people that you know fall into this category. Ask God to show you His will regarding ways in which you could minister to one of these people before the end

of the year.

2. Read John 14:1-3 and answer the question that follows.

John 14:1-3 NAS95 1 "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. 2 "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 3 "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

A. How does knowing that Jesus is 1. Going to prepare a place for you, and 2. Going to meet you when you get there, help you to face the handicaps you are experiencing in your life today?

B. Especially in light of how God has helped you with any "handicaps," would you consider sharing your testimony with the fellow readers of Mass Notes? If so, please send me your testimony or upload it in the form provided on the web site.