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 12-11-2022



Did you know that even as firm believers in Jesus Christ that it's natural to have doubts about our faith? There may be days when we feel like we can walk on water, but other days we feel like we are slipping down into a deep, dark, sea. Throughout history, even some of the most famous Christians have experienced moments of doubt regarding their faith. We will see in the Gospel lesson today that one of those people who experienced doubts was none other than John the Baptist. In the first reading from the Old Testament, we will also see that the people of Israel were struggling to believe in the promises of God. Isaiah was sent as a messenger to encourage God's people to keep their covenant (or relationship) with God. The passage we looked at last week sets the stage for the unfolding good news that God has not abandoned His people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading today is from Isaiah Chapter 35. Before we read the text, it's important to take note of the context, the audience to whom Isaiah was speaking, and information that we can glean from other prophetic voices in the Bible. This prophet ministered to the people of the Southern Tribes of

Israel, including Benjamin and Judah during the time that the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Assyria. Micah and Hosea were prophets speaking on behalf of God at the same time as Isaiah. His message was one of repentance and subsequent hope for the future. Isaiah was a forerunner, one that announced the coming Messiah and his future kingdom, much like John the Baptist in the New Testament. Like the other prophets, Isaiah often saw near and far term events "telescoped" together, but even more so because of the greater range of his visions. This is called by the theological term "prophetic foreshortening." When we look back in hindsight, it's easy for us to differentiate between the near-term events and those in the distant future that have yet to be fulfilled. However, when we look at the events which haven't been fulfilled yet, such as the future era known by biblical scholars as the Millennial Kingdom, it's more difficult to determine the order and timing of the events. This portion of Chapter 35 concerns the coming Kingdom which would be brought in by the Messiah. Looking back we understand that this would be fulfilled at Jesus' Second Coming. But Isaiah did not have the advantage of knowing the difference between what would happen when Jesus came the first time and what is yet to take place in His second coming. This is why it's important to understand the whole of Scripture when we read isolated portions of the prophetic Books.

As you study the first reading, pay attention to Isaiah's proclamation of the future hope of Israel and the whole world of believers, in the context of the future Millennial Kingdom.

First Reading:

1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus 2 It will blossom profusely And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, The majesty of our God. 3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. 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 dumb will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 And 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. 8 And a highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it. 9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, 10 And the ransomed of the LORD will return, And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10)

One of the things that Isaiah looks forward to in the Millennial Kingdom reign of Jesus is that the broken parts of this earth will be restored; that includes nature and people. If we pause to assess our world, it seems that every part of it is broken at some level. Families are torn apart, lives are exhausted, fear and anxiety seem to be rampant. Although Isaiah prophesied long ago, his words are very relevant today. Isaiah's prophecy is meant to remind God's people that one day all will be well—He will set the record straight. He will save us. Those who trust in God to save them are those who are called the "redeemed" and the "ransomed" of the LORD. To be redeemed is to be bought back or restored to one's original intent. To be ransomed is to be set free from being in the grip of an enemy with a payment. Both descriptions can be treasured terms of endearment for those who walk on the "Highway of Holiness" by trusting in Christ's holiness to save them.

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events. Micah said, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem, he differentiated between the one in the North and the one near Jerusalem in which the new King would be born. Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus.

1 And it will come about in the last days That the mountain of the house of the LORD Will be established as the chief of the mountains. It will be raised above the hills, And the peoples will stream to it. 2 And many nations will come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD And to the house of the God of Jacob, That He may teach us about His ways And that we may walk in His paths." For from Zion will go forth the law, Even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 3 And He will judge between many peoples And render decisions for mighty, distant nations. Then they will hammer their swords into plowshares And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they train for war. (Micah 4:1-3)

Micah said that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a time of peace, when weapons of war would be turned into peaceful usable (v. 3). In this age the city of Jerusalem would be the capital city of the universe (v. 1) and the King would serve as the perfect judge over the entire world (v. 3). The Jews

misinterpreted this to mean that the Messiah would immediately usher in His Kingdom when he came, and who can blame them? It was only after Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and explained the Scriptures (Luke 24:27) to them that **some of them** understood. Even then, some doubted (Matthew 28:17).

Malachi was another prophet who called the people of God to be patient. He provided clear details about the events concerning the coming of the Messiah. In fact, Malachi announced that a forerunner, who we know as John the Baptist, would precede Jesus. He said, "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). This New Testament Prophet would come in the spirit of the Prophet Elijah (John 19:21), and that Elijah would return during the coming tribulation period. Malachi said, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Exercising patience is very important, especially when we expect God to come rushing in and fix the events in the fallen world. This is even more important when, like the Jews, we experience injustice at the hands of our civil rulers. In the second reading today from Saint James, we see this important leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:13) cautioning the young Church about the need to be patient concerning the return of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

7 Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. 8 You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. 10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:7-10)

James reminded us that the Prophets were an example of those who were patient and persisted through suffering and quoted from them as scriptural authority. He admonished us not to complain against one another, because living in the spirit of "unthankfulness" would bring about judgment (v.8). This hearkens back to Jesus' words: "For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7:2). James exercised authority over the believers gathered during the Jerusalem council (refer to Acts 15) and exhibited great patience towards those with whom he disagreed. One of the ways in which he did this is to claim the authority of the prophets. James said, "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written" (Acts 15:15), and then he went on to quote from the prophets. James, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was supremely wise because he rested his authority on the weight of the supremacy of Scripture by relying upon the writings of the Prophets.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson about a New Testament Prophet, I wish to have you ponder this question. Some time ago, someone asked me who I thought was the greatest man that ever lived. I responded with a question. "Do you mean the greatest man that ever 'lived' in the past tense?" "Yes in the past tense," they said. My answer was easy. I said, "John the Baptist, and the greatest Man that ever 'lives' is Jesus." Who do you think was the greatest man that ever *lived*? Study the text of the Gospel lesson and as you read, try to ascertain why the greatest man that ever lived would ask Jesus the question that he did.

Gospel Reading:

2 Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" 4 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." 7 And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces. 9 But why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there

has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:2-11)

Why would John the Baptist, the greatest man that ever lived (v. 11), send someone to ask Jesus whether he was the Messiah? Well, if you were in prison for speaking the truth and you expected the Messiah to deliver you, you might have trouble discerning whether Jesus was the promised one just like John the Baptist. The question for all of us is whether we want the real Messiah or whether we want our own version of the Messiah (someone who doesn't leave us in prison). Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Even though John was the greatest man that ever **lived* (in the physical sense, although his spirit lives forever), John the Baptist was a fallible, imperfect man. However, he was commended by Jesus for his faithfulness in fulfilling the role of the forerunner or messenger. In response to John the Baptist's question about whether Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus said, in so many words, YES! Since He was in the process of fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies (the blind see . . . the deaf hear and the dead are raised to life), He was reassuring John that his faith was well placed in Jesus being the Messiah of God. As we saw before, Malachi said, "And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1b). Jesus clearly fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah, including Malachi, and quoted it as proof of His divinity. (Matthew 11:10).

*Jesus is the most perfect Man that ever *lives*.

John the Baptist's shortcomings stand to give Christians hope, especially during the upcoming Christmas season, which is such a difficult time for so many people. Since even the second greatest man that ever lived experienced periods of doubt in his life, we too shouldn't be surprised when it happens to us. Saint Peter said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12).

Reflection Questions

1. What about you, have you come to the place where you are doubting your faith? Read the advice from Jesus, the Greatest Man that Ever **Lives,** and see what He has to say about coming to a place where you either confirm your faith in Him or find faith in Him for the first time.

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:16-21)

Saint Paul explained, "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

How do these Scriptures provide you with hope, especially during the Christmas season?

2. When you think of the terms "redeemed" and "ransomed" in regards to your relationship to God through Christ, how does this give you hope and patience for God to "work all things together for good" as He continues to conform you to the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28-29)?