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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-13-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with Ezekiel 17: 22-24. The prophet uses a metaphor to show how God sets up kings and takes them down and will eventually establish a King who will reign over all. Then we move to St. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, encouraging the use of our earthly bodies for eternal purposes. Finally, we conclude with St. Mark 4: 26-34, as Jesus uses parables to teach about the kingdom of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

When an F5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, on May 22, 2011, 158 people died, and countless others were injured. Tornado warnings had been issued and the sirens activated, but many did not seek shelter soon enough. One study found that only 10 percent of the population respond immediately when a tornado warning is given. The others respond with what the researcher called, "denial." * Lives are lost when people don't believe and heed the warnings.

Ezekiel was a prophet of God sent out to warn God's people of impending destruction. God had always been their shelter in a time of storm, but they had strayed far from Him. If they didn't turn back to Him destruction would surely overtake them. Ezekiel and many of the other prophets were sent to sound the alarm, but sadly, many did not heed the prophets' warning.

The people of God were composed of twelve tribes descended from Abraham's grandson Jacob,

(renamed Israel in Genesis 35:10). These descendants and the land God gave them for a home were called Israel. From them, the Messiah Jesus would come, and through the salvation He would bring, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Despite their privileged position in God's plan for the nations, Israel rebelled against God and went after the false gods of the surrounding nations. They forgot the Lord's commands and worshiped idols. This was the fate of King Solomon when he ruled in Israel after his father David's reign. At first, he followed God, and God gave him great wisdom to rule justly. But when Solomon married foreign women, he began to follow after their gods. Because of his idolatry, God would take ten of the tribes from his rule and leave his posterity the tribes of Benjamin and Judah only. The ten tribes became known as the Northern Kingdom and were called Israel. The remaining two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom and were called Judah. It was to Judah that God sent Ezekiel with His warnings.

God had already sent an invading army from Babylon to take Judah into captivity. Ezekiel was with the first wave of captives taken to Babylon. Some of God's people, however, still remained in Jerusalem, Judah's capital. If they didn't repent and turn back to God, they would face a similar fate as their brothers. They ignored the warning, and instead of seeking God, they sought an alliance with Egypt. That failed, and Babylon conquered Jerusalem taking most of the people who resided there into captivity.

First Reading:

Ezekiel 17:22-24 NAS95 22 Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23 "On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. 24 "All the trees of the field will know that I am the LORD; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will perform it."

In the First Reading, Ezekiel uses trees as a metaphor for rulers God sets up and takes down. When kings abandoned God and led the people far away from Him, God sent prophets like Ezekiel to call them back to God and warn them of impending destruction. When the king and his people persisted

in their rebellion, God sent conquerors to come and take them captive.

Ezekiel looked forward to the time when God will set up another king. God will take a twig from the lofty top of the cedar and plant it on the mountain of Israel, and it will bear fruit and birds of all kinds will come and prosper there. This tree is a reference to Jesus who will be established in Israel and will bring salvation to all who come to Him. And someday He will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a heavenly kingdom that has no end.

Another prophet sounds the warning for us. St. John tells us:

[16] "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall 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 might 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. (Gospel of St. John 3: 16-18)

Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Those that don't, stand judged already.

* http://www.mprnews.org/story/2012/05/09/storm-ready-human-reaction#gallery accessed 6/06/2021

Introduction to the Second Reading:

1 and 2 Corinthians were written by St. Paul the Apostle to the church in Corinth. There were sin issues in the church, and Paul had addressed them frankly in 1 Corinthians. Now in his second letter, he wanted to reassure the Corinthians that he did this, not out of anger, but out of love. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul encourages the Corinthian church to forgive and restore the one who had caused the problems. He goes on to discuss practical matters of Christian living such as financial giving and caution regarding relationships with unbelievers. But often his thoughts turn from earthly matters to eternal blessings.

In the proclamation of the gospel, St. Paul had undergone extreme persecution which he recounts in 2 Corinthians 4. He testified, *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."* Encouragement came from knowing that these "light troubles," as he called them, were producing eternal results—people were hearing about and believing in Jesus. His focus was not on the temporary suffering but on eternal rewards. He continued this focus in chapter 5.

Second Reading:

2 Corinthians 5:6-10 NAS95 6 Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord– 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight– 8 we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9 Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

In the first five verses, St. Paul compares our bodies with an earthly tent. Tents are fragile and temporary and subject to destruction. So are our earthly bodies. While we are in this "tent" we groan and are burdened, Paul tells us. We long for a heavenly body, which is like an eternal house not a fragile tent.

In this reading (v. 6-10), Paul acknowledges that it would be much better to be away from this body and home with the Lord in heaven. But until then, Paul tells us to do what is pleasing to the Lord. God has ministry for us to do, and it would be pointless to waste this time by wishing we were in heaven. But on the other hand, knowing that we are going to heaven someday will give us courage and perseverance when we face persecution and hardship in this life.

In addition, St. Paul reminds us we will someday have to give an account to Christ for what we have done in this life as Christians. Did we serve Him well? Did we tell others about Christ? Will He someday be able to say to you and me, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*"? He will if we faithfully use these earthly bodies to accomplish his eternal purposes.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Wherever Jesus went, a crowd of the curious gathered. He often spoke to them in parables. A parable is a simple, everyday story that represents a spiritual truth or moral principle. It usually compares a spiritual concept with an earthly object or event.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 4:26-34 NAS95 26 And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; 27 and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows–how, he himself does not know. 28 The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. 29 But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." 30 And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, 32 yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEST UNDER ITS SHADE." 33 With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; 34 and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.

In the Gospel Reading, two parables are given. The first one begins, "*The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil."* Stories like these are often told to illustrate or illuminate a truth. But Jesus spoke in parables not to clarify the truth but to obscure it. It was a judgment on those whose hearts were hard. To the unbelieving, the parables were incomprehensible riddles, but to those who wanted to understand the truth, Jesus would give them understanding. He said to His disciples and His true followers, "*To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, [12] so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand….*"*

In the first parable, the kingdom of God is compared to a man who plants seeds. While he goes about his daily routine and without any further help from the man, the seed sprouts and matures. So it is with us. We plant the seed of the gospel in people's hearts when we teach or preach or proclaim the truth of the Bible to our friends, neighbors, and relatives. Then God causes the implanted truth to take root and grow. A mature Christian is the result.

The second parable says that the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed which grows into a large plant with branches capable of providing shade for birds of the air. The church was small in the beginning–just a little band of disciples. But when those men were empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the Gospel to the whole world, the church grew rapidly. Many have found comfort and salvation there. If we plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts, God will cause that seed to spout and the church to flourish.

*Information gleaned from a sermon by John MacArthur accessed 5/20/15.
http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-464/the-purpose-for-parables

Reflection Questions

1. What would you need to do differently in order to live your life for eternal purposes? List two areas in which you will write down on a card or in your personal journal.

2. If we plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts, God will cause it to grow. What are some ways you can plant more "seeds" this week? Give at least two ways in which this could be done.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 06-06-2021



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the Old Testament book of Exodus and learn about the giving of God's Law and the people's response to it. Then we move to Hebrews in the New Testament, where Jesus is shown to be our high priest, fulfilling the role pictured in the Old Testament offering of sacrificial blood to cover sin. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel of Mark where we learn about the Last Supper. Here Jesus clearly spoke of the significance of Communion, the offering of His body and blood. As you study all three, look for a common theme among them.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). As the name implies, it records the story of Israel's deliverance after 400 years of slavery in Egypt and the long journey of forty years to the Promised Land. After the Exodus from Egypt and during the long journey through the wilderness, God appeared to Moses on Sinai Mountain and delivered to him the Law. The summary of it, the Ten Commandments, is in chapter 20, and the next several chapters explain more fully the covenant God is making with His people. Laws and regulations relating to worship, offerings, sacrifices, and the building of a tabernacle for His dwelling place are given in great detail.

First Reading:

Exodus 24:3-8 NAS95 3 Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!" 4 Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. 6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. 7 Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" 8 So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

We have read now about the people's response to the giving of God's Law. When Moses came down from the mountain and revealed the Law the people twice agreed to obey the Law completely, first in verse 3 and again in verse 7. After hearing the people's response to the Law, Moses wrote down the words that God had told him (v. 4). Then, he built an altar and made the sacrifices that God had commanded, including the sprinkling of blood on the altar. The blood from the sacrificial animals represented the covenant, in a similar way as we remember the shedding of the once for all sacrificial Lamb Jesus through celebration of communion. This was the beginning of many years of sacrificial offerings which prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of blood to be made by the Messiah Jesus many centuries later. When Moses read from the "book of the covenant" that he had written down (v. 4a), the people they once again vowed to obey the Law.

We know how all of this turned out. Although the people agreed to obey the Law, they very soon broke away from strict observance of it to the extent that God prevented any of them except Joshua and Caleb from entering the Promised Land. In subsequent generations the people fell into cycles of sin, punishment from God, and return to following His Law. At the end of the Old Testament when the voice of the prophets fell silent, the people began increasingly seeking the coming Messiah. Obedience to the Law became codified by the scribes and Pharisees into the Jewish religion through which the doers of this "law" felt justified.

As Christians we too are called to obey God's Law but through a new relationship granted to us through the New Covenant initiated by Jesus' death and resurrection. Like the Jews in the reading, we agree that we want to obey God. However, unlike those in the reading, our ability to obey God's teaching is granted through the new heart given to us from above (John 3:3). Although obedience ought to be our response when we hear God's Word, God knows that we will continue to struggle with sin (Romans 3:23). Through our relationship with Jesus Christ was have an Advocate, Jesus Christ, Who intercedes on our behalf with our Father God. Saint John said, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:1-3). We should not look back at the Jews and think that we would do any better than they do. Instead, we have a unique empowerment through God's Holy Spirit living within us that they didn't have. This should provide us with a sense of even greater responsibility since to whom much is given, much is demanded (Luke 12:48).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the First reading we saw how God's covenant was display to His people Israel through the observance of the sacrificial practices in the Law. In this passage from Hebrews we read of a "New Covenant." Although the old covenant was sealed with through the repetitious offering of the blood of sacrificial animals, the New Covenant was sealed with one single offering of the blood of Jesus. In the reading we will see how Jesus is shown as the High Priest Who offers this single, acceptable sacrifice (His death burial, and resurrection) to atone for our sin.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 9:11-15 NAS95 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

The Old Testament priests had to repeat the sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the Temple, which were mere symbols of the dwelling place of God, for "the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands" (Acts 7:48). But Jesus entered into "the greater and more perfect tabernacle"—into the very presence of God—to present the sufficient sacrifice of His blood. So, not only has Jesus paid the price for our sin, He has also become the one mediator between man and God (1 Timothy 2:5). Therefore, as Christians we can rejoice that through the work of Jesus on our behalf, we have the "promise of the eternal inheritance," ever to be with Jesus in heaven.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

All three of the readings today made mention of a covenant. In the first reading from Exodus it was God's covenant with man that required the keeping of the Law, including blood sacrifices as a picture of cleansing. In the second reading from Hebrews the writer reminded us of a New Covenant that God offers to people through the sacrifice of Christ's blood that satisfied God's demands for justice. Finally, as we look at today's Gospel reading, we have the account of the Last Supper with

its deep, significant teaching of essential truth. In the reading we will see Jesus celebrate His last Passover meal with the twelve disciples.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 14:12-26 NAS95 12 On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb was being sacrificed, His disciples said to Him, "Where do You want us to go and prepare for You to eat the Passover?" 13 And He sent two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him; 14 and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is My guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' 15 "And he himself will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; prepare for us there." 16 The disciples went out and came to the city, and found it just as He had told them; and they prepared the Passover. 17 When it was evening He came with the twelve. 18 As they were reclining at the table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me–one who is eating with Me." 19 They began to be grieved and to say to Him one by one, "Surely not I?" 20 And He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who dips with Me in the bowl. 21 For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." 22 While they were eating, He took some bread, and after a blessing He broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is My body." 23 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 And He said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I say to you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus had evidently conferred with the person whom the disciples met regarding the place with they were going to prepare the Passover meal. However, only Jesus could have known that at the instant when they went into the city they would meet this certain man carrying a pitcher (v. 13). The disciples then prepared the meal perhaps not understanding the full significance as we do with the benefit of hindsight. The Passover supper provided clear illustrations of God's grace and mercy to sinful men. First, it pointed back to the delivery of Israel from Egypt. When the angel of death fell upon the Egyptian households, their firstborn children died. But the Jewish children survived because the families had sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial lamb (representative of Jesus, the Lamb of God) on their doorposts. The celebration of Passover for the Jews is a vivid reminder of deliverance by blood. Now, on this special night in Jerusalem Jesus used object lessons to demonstrate that it was essential to identify by faith in His blood and body in order to receive the offered gift of salvation and a personal relationship with God. In stark contrast to this gracious offer, Jesus points out that one of the Twelve, who had walked and worked with Him, would betray Him. In fact, before the night was over, all of the disciples would fail the Master (however eleven repented

and returned to Him).

As we look back at Jesus' Last Supper, we recognize the great importance of our communing with Jesus through the celebration of the communion meal. Communion helps us to recognize how our Savior willingly offered His body and blood as the supreme sacrifice once and for all. Although we take communion many times, each time we look back to the single sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf forever. Unlike the priests in the Old Testament who had to offer repeatedly the same sacrifices which never took away their sin (Hebrews 10:11), when we celebrate communion we recognize how our Great High Priest Jesus sat down at the right hand of God after offering Himself once, taking away our sins forever (Hebrews 10:12). Communion provides a time for us to reflect upon our unique relationship with God through the New Covenant, one in which we no longer have to rely upon the Old Testament priests offering sacrifice on our behalf, as we saw in the first and second readings today.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading we saw some powerful statements about both the identity and the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ towards believers. Study the text of this reading again and answer the questions that follow.

Hebrews 9:11-15 NAS95 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? 15 For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

A. The author of Hebrews described how Jesus as the eternal High Priest entered not into the tabernacle built by Moses but into a far different place. Describe the attributes of the "more perfect tabernacle" (v. 11) into which Jesus entered. In what ways is this tabernacle different from the one

built by Moses?

B. Verse 15 begins with the phrase, "For this reason." For what reason is the author or Hebrews referring?

2. In the Gospel lesson we read about Jesus' last supper with His disciples and His call to the disciples to reflect upon whether they would be the one who betrayed Him (v. 18). How does what you learned today about the eternal nature of the ministry of Jesus as our highly priestly King enable you to better answer a question about your own ability to take a stand for our Lord?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-23-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Pentecost Sunday. We open with the first reading from Acts that chronicled the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in the early church. Then we move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and discuss the gifts of the Spirit. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint John where we will examine what it means when Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The theme of the readings this week goes like this: In the first reading, we see God's sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the second reading, we see the revelation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we find the commissioning by the Holy Spirit for all believers to spread the Gospel message. Let's begin with the first reading from the Book of Acts. This is the record of the momentous day on which God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (John 14:17). This event occurred fifty days after Jesus had risen from the dead and ten days after Jesus returned to heaven.

First Reading:

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. 5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs–we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (Acts 2:1-11)

God's sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18). The Holy Spirit is the Person who empowered the disciples to turn from hiding in the upper room to being bold speakers in the name of Jesus. Notice how the first ministry of the Holy Spirit was to cause the disciples to speak in various languages in such a way that the Jews from around the world heard them in their own language (v. 6). It's not known whether each of the disciples spoke a different foreign language or if they spoke some sort of holy tongue that the foreigners were able to understand. Jesus had earlier told the disciples, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). This first ministry of the Spirit was to spread the Gospel to the foreign Jews gathered for Pentecost by allowing them to hear the Gospel message in their own language. Their testimony was that "we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God" (v. 11).

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. His ministry through the believers in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. As we move to the second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we see some of the gifts sent to us by the Holy Spirit. Note that the reading this week skipped verses 8 -11, these are included in order to provide the proper clarity of Saint Paul's instruction.

Second Reading:

3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3-13)

In this reading, Paul cataloged some of the gifts of the Spirit and said that the purpose of the gifts was "for the common good" (v.7). Although this was not an exhaustive list of the gifts (see also Ephesians 4:7-13 and Romans 12:3-8) they included wisdom and knowledge (v.8), faith (v.9a), healing (v.9b), miracles (v.10a), prophecy (v.10b), discernment of spirits (v.10c), speaking in tongues (v.10d), and interpretation of those speaking in tongues (v.10e). Later in the reading, Paul stated that although the gifts of the Spirit were diverse with everyone having a different gift, they were delivered by God in such a way as to work perfectly together in the whole body of the church (vv. 11-13). Even though not everyone would have the same gift, the diversity of gifts among the believers would accomplish God's purposes through the unity of the believers (v.13). For example, only certain people were given the gift of prophecy, meaning either the ability to foretell future events or more prominently in the New Testament context to forth tell through the preaching of the

Scriptures. In today's age, some of the gifts that Paul listed are more prevalent than other ones. During the early church immediately after God sent the Holy Spirit certain gifts such as tongues and healing were very important as "sign gifts" that greatly increased the spread of the Gospel to a culture thoroughly immersed in the worship of idols. God used these sign gifts in a powerful way as we can see in the first reading with the empowerment of the disciples to speak in various languages.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God the Holy Spirit commission the believers in the early church to spread the Gospel. The context of the reading from John Chapter 20 is the evening of the first Easter Sunday when Jesus' first appeared to the disciples who were gathered together in the upper room with the doors locked. This didn't stop Jesus, who was able to walk right through the wall or door by exercising His divine power with His new glorified body. Only ten of the disciples were present as Thomas "The Twin" didn't see Jesus until the next time the whole group was gathered together (John 20:26) and Judas had already given up hope and killed himself.

Before we read the text, since the central focus of the lesson will be on the concept of the forgiveness of sin let's review what God's Holy Word says about this crucially important subject. First, God says that everyone, except for Jesus, is a sinner. Paul said in Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Second, God says that because of our sin, we deserve the penalty of death; having sinned against a Holy God Who is completely separate from sin. Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). We can never enter into the presence of our Holy God because we are sinful. The only way that we can enter into a relationship with God and be in His presence when we die is to have our sin forgiven by God. Third, there is good news. Paul continued in Romans 6:23, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b-ff). Finally, only God can forgive sin. In Luke's Gospel Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees after he proclaimed the forgiveness of a paralyzed man's sins and they challenged Jesus authority to forgive sin. In response Jesus said, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, –He said to the paralytic—'I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home'" (Luke 5:23-24). Though Scripture tells us to "confess our sins one to another" (James 5:16), only God can forgive sin. Jesus came to the earth as God in the flesh for the express purpose of dying on the cross for our sin (Romans 4:25). "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Paul explained later in Romans Chapter 10 how to receive the free gift of eternal life through the

forgiveness of our sin:

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; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED." Romans 10:9-13

We see that the forgiveness of our sin is free gift of God that comes by believing the good news of the Gospel. Jesus gave the disciples, and by application every Christian, what is called the Great Commission to preach this message about the forgiveness of sin. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). This is the Gospel, meaning good news, that Jesus instructed his believers to preach to the world for the forgiveness of sin.

Now, with these things in mind let's read what happened that Sunday evening when Jesus made a surprise visit to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

Gospel Reading:

19 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." (John 20:19-23)

What did Jesus mean when he said in verse 23, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained"? The key to understanding Jesus' teaching in verse 23 is found in the previous two verses. Jesus said "as the Father has sent

Me, I also send you" (v.21b). Next in verse 22 He promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. This "sending" or "commissioning" of the disciples (and all believers) is one of the main purposes of the church as expounded in the Great Commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus instructed these ten men that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved, just as we saw in Romans Chapter 10. The interpretation of Scripture must always be consistent with the whole counsel of God's Word.

What do the three themes we discovered in the readings today mean in our lives? First, God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His believers in order to accomplish His purposes. He sent a diversity of gifts to a diversity of people in such a way that it forces the Church to work together as the Body of Christ. Second, God commissioned all believers, not just the ten disciples that were gathered in the room at Pentecost, to fulfil His Great Commission. This means that everyone that believes is to work to spread the Gospel message and to disciple believers, recognizing that not everyone will be gifted in either of these two particular areas. Some will be called to teach, and some to evangelize. You can rest assured that if you truly commit your heart to the Lord that you won't automatically be called by Him as a missionary in Africa. But you can be assured that God will call you to use whatever spiritual gift(s) that He has given you to your fullest ability.

I remember how many times I used to see my neighbor returning to work after dinner to make phone calls to people that he knew would only be at home in the evening. One particular night I was driving home from the local lake after spending a couple of hours windsurfing, which is one of my favorite pastimes. As I turned the corner on the road leading up to our house at around 7:00 pm, I recognized my neighbor as he drove by me on the way back to work at our local Christian college. Although he goes into work at 8:00 in the morning he usually returns after dinner. Although God has gifted this man in a variety of ways, through it all is one of his preeminent qualities: faithfulness. His example has truly inspired me to be faithful as well. Although God doesn't call everyone to work 10 plus hours each day on a fixed salary as my neighbor does, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Reflection Questions

1. God provides us with a list of spiritual gifts in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11. We looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today. Read each of the other passages and see if you can locate some of the other spiritual gifts including: Administration, Knowledge, Apostleship, Leadership, Discernment, Mercy, Evangelism, Miracles, Exhortation, Pastor/Shepherd, Faith, Prophecy, Giving, Serving/Ministering, Healing, Teaching, Interpretation of Tongues, Tongues, Wisdom. As you read these verses, think about the ways in which you serve God.

Romans 12:6-8 NAS95 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:28-30 NAS95 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

Ephesians 4:11 NAS95 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

2. What is your spiritual gift? One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other believers. Another way it to use one of the variety of spiritual gift tests available online. See for example:

http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1

In what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God? How does understanding your spiritual gift(s) help you to better serve God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-16-2021



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.

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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.

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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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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-09-2021

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week discuss the concept of abiding in Christ during the Gospel lesson. What does it mean to abide in Christ?

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after God had shown Peter in a vision that all food was good for him to eat; he no longer had to obey the kosher laws observed by the Jews. As we will see, the meaning of Peter's vision went far beyond just the food laws. At about this same time, a God-fearing centurion from Caesarea saw a vision of an angel who commanded him to send for Peter who was in Joppa. This man named Cornelius sent some servants to Peter who then traveled back to Caesarea. The reading opens with Peter entering Cornelius' house.

Note: We have included the verses that were omitted in the reading and bolded the ones that were covered in the Mass.

First Reading:

Acts 10:25-48 NAS95

25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But

Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man."

Omitted:

27 As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. 28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. 29 That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me." 30 Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, 31 and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 'Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.' 33 "So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.

Omitted:

36 The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Cornelius' immediate response to seeing Peter is to worship him, an action that Peter immediately forbid because "I too am just a man," he said. This is similar to what happened when John bowed down to worship the angel in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 19:10, and again in Revelation 22:9). In the latter case, the angel sternly warned John saying, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 19:10). In any case, Cornelius was obviously overcome by Peter, either because of his sincere expectation of finding a great man, or perhaps because of some spiritual aura that emanated from him. Remember, Cornelius had just seen a vision of an angel telling him to locate Peter. As the story continues, Peter explained how God revealed to him the deeper meaning behind the vision he had seen. In verse 34, Peter explained how the Prophet Isaiah foresaw that God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ wasn't limited just to the Jews but extended to anyone who believed (v. 34, Isaiah 42:6). Peter's speech came after he had seen a vision of a great sheet descending from the sky and filled with animals that were ceremonially unclean to the Jews (Acts 10:9-16). In this vision, God commanded Peter to "kill and eat," and said that these animals were not to be regarded as clean because they had been cleansed by God (v. 15). In order to further emphasize the importance of this vision God repeated it three times. Therefore, when Peter met with Cornelius and heard about the miraculous events that had happened with him too seeing a vision from God (in the form of an angel) Peter understood that the plan of salvation had been extended to the Gentiles. In the New Testament era the church has stepped in where Peter left off, proclaiming the message of salvation to everyone, not just to the Jews, as was Peter's primary ministry.

At the conclusion of the reading, an amazing thing happened which was the pouring out of the Holy Spirit of God on the Gentiles who were present in the room and came to believe in Jesus Christ through Peter's preaching. Peter's immediate response to this marvelous event was to command the new believers to be baptized (vv. 47 – 48). These events confirmed Peter's testimony that the plan of salvation extended to both Jews and Gentiles alike (vv. 34 – 35) and opened the door for the explosive growth of the new church throughout the Roman world. As Gentile believers we may be tempted to take it for granted that the plan of salvation extended to anyone who believed. However, we must remember that God chose the Jews for the unveiling of His divine plan and the ultimate revelation of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul taught us that after the Jewish Jesus was martyred for His faith and rose from the dead, God allowed "a partial hardening [to happen] to Israel until the fullness of

the Gentiles has come in" (Romans 11:25).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

I remember a conversation that I had many years ago with a woman who claimed she was "spiritual" but wasn't a Christian. Although I was a faithful attender of Sunday Mass, I didn't know how to debate the meaning of what she called "spirituality" versus what constituted Christianity. I have remembered our interaction over the years, to the extent that I can even recall where we were when she told me this. In recent years, I have come to the understanding that much of what purports to be spiritual is decidedly un-Christian. In the introduction to the second reading, we will look at the nature of beliefs that are opposed to Jesus Christ. Then with this understanding of the context, we will learn about love in the context of the true believers.

The second reading continues from First John, which we studied last week. This week we move to chapter four in which John explains in the opening verses before today's reading the nature of false spirits including the Antichrist. False spirits are those that "[do] not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world" (1 John 4:3). True spirits are those "that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). Next, John comforts the believers by telling them, "You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (v. 4). There is a sense that a spirit of Antichrist inhabits anyone who doesn't believe in Jesus Christ, and therefore opposes God, while believers are much different. There is no middle ground, either you are for Jesus or you are against Him. John continues, "We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (v. 6). There is great dichotomy between believers who confess that Jesus is the Messiah from God, and those that deny this. The first group is called the children of God (1 John 3:1), the latter group is of the spirit of the Antichrist. With this dichotomy in mind, let's proceed to the reading.

Second Reading:

1 John 4:7-10 NAS95 7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved

us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

In the reading, we see why the context is so important in understanding the meaning. John further expanded upon the theme that he began in chapter 4, the differences and nature of unbelievers as contrasted with believers. Believers "love one another," are "born of God" (see John 3:3), and "know God" (v. 7). In contrast, anyone "who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (v. 8). Next, John explains that "the love of God was manifested in us," that through Jesus "we might live through Him" (v. 9), meaning the love and power that flows to us through His Holy Spirit Who was given to us the moment we believed. We saw this happen in the first reading when the group was assembled in Cornelius' house. When they believed after hearing Peter's preaching, they were given power from on high, in fulfillment of the promise Jesus made to His disciples (Luke 24:49). Finally, John reminded his readers that the greatest expression of love wasn't that the believers loved God, but that God loved them by giving His one and only Son for their sins (vv. 9 – 10).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The first two readings logically connect with the Gospel lesson in which we see Jesus' teaching on the nature of a believer's love of God. The context of the reading is Jesus' parting words to His disciples during the Last Supper.

Gospel Reading:

John 15:9-17 NAS95 9 "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are My friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. 17 This I command you, that you love one another."

Several important points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how Jesus opened this section with the conditional phrase, "If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love" (v. 10a). The word "love" that appears multiple times throughout the reading beginning in verse 9 is a form of the word "agape" which refers to love that exists between Jesus and God. Jesus said rhetorically that if you love Him then you would follow His commandments. In the Jewish mind, the "commandments" would have referred to the whole of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments. However, later Jesus summed up the whole of the Law by the following statement, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Jesus expressed the greatest love of all by giving His life for our sin. He said in verse 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." We are to express our keeping of the law by loving one another with Jesus sacrificial love as our example.

Second, notice the number of repetitions of the word "abide" in the reading, which gives us the main point of this Gospel lesson. Jesus uses the word "abide" three times in verses 9 through 10. Anytime we see a repeated word, it means we must give it special attention, as Jesus was intentional in using this word so many times in such a short span. The word "abide" in the original text primarily means to dwell, but also to stay, remain, be true to, or persevere. Read verse 9 again, but when you do substitute some of these alternative words. *"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; **abide** in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will **abide** in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and **abide** in His love" (emphasis added).* God calls us to stay in Christ, in submission to Him, and not to stray. This means to follow His commands with Him as the Master and center of our lives. Through having this focus, we will experience the love of God that He desires for our lives.

Finally, notice the number of times that Jesus referred to Himself by using the pattern of words "My," "Me" or "I" followed by "you." Here are the first two:

- "Just as the Father has loved **Me**, I have also loved **you**"(v. 9)
- "If you keep **My** commandments, **you** will abide in **My** love" (v. 10)

From this, it is evident that in His farewell discourse Jesus is telling His disciples (and us) that He is the one and only true pattern of love. "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you"(v. 9). As the Father loved the most worthy Jesus He then loved His most unworthy disciples. In the same way, Jesus loves us even though we too are unworthy of Him. For it is "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" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

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The famous spiritual author Henri Nouwen had perhaps the firmest grasp of the concept of abiding of anyone this side of heaven. He said about Jesus' invitation to abide in Jesus verse 10 that it was "an invitation to total belonging, to full intimacy, to an unlimited being with." As true disciples of Jesus, we don't approach Him only to experience His love. Instead, we remain (abide) as a branch connected to the vine in order to bear much fruit (v. 16). Unless we abide we cannot bear fruit, in the same way that a branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains completely attached the vine. It is through this intimate connection that we may experience the fullness of Christ's love for us.

If you haven't read any of Henri Nouwen, I would encourage you to read *The Way of the Heart*: Henri J. M. Nouwen (Ballantine, 2003). In this short book, he has helped many Christians to better understand the concept of abiding in Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. As you journey through life this week, ponder Jesus' invitation to abide in Him. What does that look like in your life? What small changes could you make this week to begin a closer journey with abiding in Jesus? Is there anything that is standing between you and abiding in Jesus?

2. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Jesus referred to Himself by using the pattern of words "My," "Me" or "I" followed by "you." Make a list of all of the times that Jesus said that in the reading. Read over your list several times. What can you learn from Jesus in this list in terms of both the proofs and results of His love?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-02-2021

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts in which we see the newly converted Saul of Tarsus testifying to the Jews in Jerusalem who then try to kill him. Then we cover the second reading from First John in which we learn about the heart of the child of God. Then we conclude with the Gospel lesson from John 15 in which Jesus shares an analogy of the believer being a branch of the true vine of Jesus with God as the vinedresser.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus to Christianity, who is now called Paul. The chapter opened with Saul viciously attacking the church and after visiting the high priest, "asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:2). As Saul was on the way to Damascus, he experienced the Lord Jesus in a voice from heaven (v. 5) as well as a light flashing from heaven (v. 3). Next, Saul found himself to be blind and was led by the hand into Damascus (v. 8) to await further instruction from the Lord (v. 6). Once in Damascus he was still blind and didn't eat or drink for three days (v. 9). At this point God directed a disciple of Jesus named Ananias to go meet with Saul even though he had heard about his treachery against the followers of Jesus (vv. 10 – 16). Ananias did as God directed and laid his hands upon his "enemy" Saul for healing.

It is instructive for us to include the verses in Acts 9 leading up to today's reading in order to better understand the full context. Here we encounter a humbled and blind Saul fresh from his encounter with the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road.

Acts 9:18-21 NAS95 18 And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; 19 and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, 20 and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?"

As we move to the reading for today, Saul had continued staying in Damascus and testifying about the truth of the Lord Jesus as the Messiah (v. 22). This provoked the Jews to hatch a plot to kill him, so the believers snuck him out by lowering him down from the city wall in a basket (v.25).

First Reading:

Acts 9:26-31 NAS95 26 When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. 30 But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. 31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

This was the first occasion that the Jerusalem church met the newly converted Saul. In spite of their fear of him, the disciples listened to Barnabas' testimony about him. Saul then went on with his business of ministering to the Jews. They didn't receive his message very well since they began to attempt to kill him (v. 29). Thankfully, the disciples heard about it and moved him to Caesarea, then sent him back to his home town of Tarsus. Interestingly, once Saul departed from the region the church enjoyed a time of peace and continued to grow (v. 31).

What can we take away from the reading? Imagine how Saul must have felt when, just a short time before he would have been openly received by the Hellenistic Jews, yet now they tried to kill him. This was all because of his newfound relationship with Jesus Christ Whom he encountered on the Damascus Road. As believers, we should expect that those people who we knew us before we came

to believe in the Lord Jesus may not warmly receive our new beliefs. This certainly shouldn't keep us from sharing it with them, to the extent that they are open to it. Jesus warned that "in this world we will have trouble" (John 16:33).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Letter of First John. The context is John's teaching on the characteristics of the child of God, meaning true believers in Jesus Christ. John opened the chapter by saying, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him" (v. 1). The world is at odds with the children of God, because unbelievers are by nature children of the father of this world, the devil (John 8:44).

Second Reading:

1 John 3:18-24 NAS95 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 19 We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him 20 in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. 23 This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24 The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

In this reading, John is describing the nature of godly love of a believer. This type of love results in action motivated by the truth of the Gospel message (v. 18, "in deed and truth"). The clear conscience of a believer testifies that they are walking in the truth because God, who knows all things, testifies through their conscience (v. 21). The true child of God is in good standing with Him such that when they pray God hears and answers them (v. 22a). The author of Hebrews said about this, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" Hebrews 4:16). Finally, John said, "The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him" (v. 24a). This means that God hears our prayers because of our special relationship with Jesus Who gave us a new spiritual heart at the moment we believed (John 3:3, "born from above"). God doesn't hear us just because we keep His commandments, but because of this special relationship that is founded upon abiding love. The love

that believers express is something that God modeled when He sent Jesus Christ to die on our behalf. The believer benefits from what is called the "double imputation." This means that our sins were imputed to Christ (the first imputation), and the righteousness of Christ was then imputed to us (the second imputation).

The application of John's message is that godly people act like it by expressions of deeds motivated by the truth of God. They model the love of God that was imputed to them through Jesus' death and resurrection. They do so with a clear conscience since God testifies in their heart that they are indeed a child of God. On the other hand the person that is not yet in right standing with God through the only way possible, belief in the Lord Jesus, will have their conscience pricked by the testimony of the Gospel. Others who are unresponsive to the Gospel have had their conscience's seared, and turn away from the good news (1 Timothy 4:2). If our conscience is grounded in the truth, it can tell us a lot about our heart's true status with God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John 15. The context is Jesus' parting instructions to His disciples before the events that happened during the last week of His earthly ministry. The reading today includes several uses of the phrase "I am" which Jesus' disciples would have understood as a strong statement of His divinity. In chapter 8 Jesus had told the Pharisees, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:58). They rejected His claim of being equal with God (John 10:30, "I and the Father are One"). In this reading, the disciples are privileged hearers of Jesus' instruction into some deeper truths about God.

Gospel Reading:

John 15:1-8 NAS95 1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My

disciples."

There are several key points that Jesus is making in this reading. First, Jesus is the true vine. A vine is the life-giving conduit to the branches. Jesus makes this parallel to emphasize that life is only found through a relationship with Him. Second, He states that the Father is the "vinedresser" (v. 1), meaning that He is the person Who planted and cultivated the vineyard. The Father is the Person who sovereignly nurtures the growth and productivity of each person who is connected to the vine. Third, the Father takes an active rule in the pruning process in the lives of believers. This is done through His love with the goal of producing more fruit. A key word that is repeated throughout this passage is the word "abide." We don't tend to use that word very much in English, but in this context it means to remain, dwell, or live in Jesus. Fruit bearing is evidence of our right relationship with Jesus, and this glorifies the Father. We tend to think of fruit as good deeds or proper choices, but Scripture actually gives us an indication of the type of fruit that should be the evidence of God at work in our lives. Paul said, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). Bearing this type of fruit definitely takes a work of God's Spirit in us, which goes beyond the outward appearance of good deeds and requires a changed heart.

How does one abide in Christ's love? Jesus actually answers that later in verse 10. "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love." Jesus summed up the commandments in Matthew's Gospel when he answered the question about the greatest commandment. He said, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). Therefore, we find out that we can't keep the law just by keeping the law, because the law is to love. One reason Jesus correlates keeping God's commandments and loving Him is because it takes a trusting relationship to obey God and to keep His commands from the heart. To do things God's way does not come naturally to us. The only way we can truly keep His commandments is by being deeply connected and dependent upon Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. How have you experienced rejection or hardship as a result of your faith in Jesus Christ? How does reading about Paul's opposition encourage you to persist in your pursuit of spiritual things?

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2. The second and third readings dealt with abiding in Christ and keeping His commandments. Is there a way to be "obedient" without abiding in Christ? Why do you think Jesus made such a strong connection between abiding, obedience, and bearing much fruit?

3. Why it is important for the vinedresser to prune the branches? Have you or are you experiencing any type of pruning that this passage can help you to understand God's ways and love for you during this time?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-25-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Acts 4 in which we see Jesus as the Chief Cornerstone, the One whom the builders rejected. Then we cover the second reading from First John in which we learn more about the nature of a believer whose heart has been changed by God. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from John 10 where we see an illustration that Jesus gave of Himself as our Good Shepherd.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after Peter's sermon given to the people gathered at the portico of Solomon (Acts 3:11-26) and following the miraculous healing of the man lame from birth (Acts 3:2-11). These events greatly disturbed "the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees" (Acts 4:1) "because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (4:2). At this point, Peter and some of the disciples were taken into custody, most likely protective custody (4:3). The church continued to grow as a result of the preaching and reached a total size of four thousand people (4:4). The next morning Peter and the disciples were presented to a group including the high priest and two others of priestly descent (4:4-6) at which point they asked them, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" (4:7). This led to Peter's response which is covered in the first reading.

First Reading:

Acts 4:8-12 NAS95 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, 9 if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead–by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11 He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. 12 And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

Peter explained to the Jewish rulers that the lame man was healed by the miraculous power of Jesus Christ whom they crucified (v. 9). He went on to explain that this Jesus is the Messiah, then quoted from the Bible evidence showing that their rejection of Him was prophesied to occur. Peter quoted from Psalm 118:22 which said, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone." In the context of the audience, the builders who rejected the cornerstone can be seen as the unbelieving Jewish leaders. Finally, Peter combined the teaching from Isaiah 28:16 that said something similar about the cornerstone but added the element of belief in Jesus for salvation. Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God said, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, a costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who **believes in it** will not be disturbed" (Isaiah 28:16b, emphasis added). Peter's teaching wasn't new to the disciples because Jesus had Himself taught that the belief in Him was the only way to get to heaven. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Jesus used the expression "I am" in this passage as a strong statement of His divinity. We will see Jesus' use of this term again in the Gospel lesson.

Peter's bold speech contains some crucially important truths. Faith in Jesus as the Messiah, which fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of the Chief Cornerstone, is the only way to get to heaven. There is no other Person through whom we can gain forgiveness of our sin; this can come through faith in Jesus Christ alone. These truths are just as applicable to the "rulers and elders of the people" (v. 8) as they are to "all the people of Israel" (v. 10) and by application to everyone in the universe.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) comes about, as we will see in the second reading, as a result of God's great love for us. The context of this reading from First John is the apostle's teaching on the evidences and nature of true salvation of a believer. John opened Chapter 2 by saying, "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). Keeping the commandments of God is evidence of a heart that has been changed by God. Today's reading opens in Chapter 3 by expanding this teaching to include the special relationship that exists between God and the believer.

Second Reading:

1 John 3:1-2 NAS95 1 See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.

John said that believers in Jesus Christ are bestowed with a special relationship with God, that of "children of God" (v. 1). This was in contrast to those who don't know God, whom Jesus called children of their father the devil (John 8:44), something that he said to the very religious Pharisees. Faith in Christ bestows a special relationship on the believer with God, that of sonship (John 1:12; Romans 8:14-17). The person whose heart has been changed by God stands in contrast to the values of the worldly people around us (v. 1d). This was John's point in the previous chapter and one of the main ideas that he continues to bring out in the entirety of this letter.

Besides our present status as children of God, John tells of an additional blessing from God in how as

a believer in some future time we will become like Jesus because we will see Jesus with eyes opened and will be freed from our sinful flesh (v. 2). Perhaps we will have some of the same powers that Jesus had, Who was able to walk through walls (John 20:19). Whatever the case, we will possess supernatural powers and freedom in our glorified bodies (Romans 8:18). Paul describes our current bodies as perishable, dishonorable, and weak, all due to sin (1 Corinthians 15:42-53). However, our imperishable bodies will be perfect, like Jesus, and unhindered by sin. For this we have only God to thank. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are" (v. 1).

John's teaching here brings out the reality of our redeemed standing in God. We do not have to perform to get Him to love us. Instead, because we belong to Him as a child of God, we learn how to walk in a way that is consistent with our new identity. The world will not know what to do with us, for we will exhibit the fruit of God's Spirit within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Opposition, persecution, and being looked down on for our faith is just an opportunity for God to display His nature in us. If these things do not fully characterize our daily lives, we can pray for God to continue His work in us as His children to help us to live in light of our true identity.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we transition to the Gospel reading, we must remember the raucous caused by Peter as he healed the man lame from birth that we learned about in the first reading. In the Gospel, we see Jesus teaching just after He healed a blind man and afterwards confronted the Pharisees (John 9). The message today alludes to Ezekiel 34, where God condemned the shepherds of Israel, meaning the spiritual leaders (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Ezekiel announced God's strong judgment on the kings, priests, and prophets who ruled before the exile of the Jews to Babylon. God said, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So, the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:10). It's not coincidental that Jesus' message came just after He told a group of Pharisees that they were spiritually blind (John 9:41).

This section of Scripture is profound in that throughout the Chapter Jesus uses a metaphor of Himself as the Shepherd and the Door, with us (the children of God) as the sheep. Other characters come into play in the lesson including a hired hand, owner, and wolf. As you read, think about the contemporary application of these characters as Jesus' illustration unfolds. In the world today, who are the hired hands and wolves to whom Jesus was pointing?

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Gospel Reading:

John 10:11-18 NAS95 11 "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, 15 even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. 18 No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

It's evident that Jesus' message was pointed squarely at the Pharisees, a group of selfishly motivated "lay ministers" (shepherds) of Israel identified as the wolves and hired hands in this story (v. 12). Clearly, the owner of the sheep is God the Father, and Jesus stated outright that He is the Good Shepherd. He even added extra emphasis by using the Greek term transliterated "ego eimi," translated "I Am" (v. 11), a term which Jesus had repeated multiple times about Himself beginning in John 6:35. This phrase was something that the First Century Jews would have recognized as a strong statement of divinity. In Jesus' earlier use of this phrase in this Gospel He said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:35). In today's reading Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd" (v. 11a). Jesus is our protector, the one who provides us with spiritual sustenance, and protects us from our enemies. He is the Light of truth from God, the Light that leads us to the single door to obtain eternal life, the only way to God.

Jesus went on to explain, with the context of the Pharisees in mind, that the plan of salvation would be extended to the "other sheep" (v. 16), meaning the Gentiles, and they would join with the flock of the believing Jews. He foreshadowed His death by telling how the shepherd would lay down His life for the combined Jewish and Gentile flock. Finally, Jesus made a very important point that He was not a victim. He said that He was given the power by His Father to lay down His life for His sheep. Nowhere in the Bible is Jesus ever portrayed as a victim. On the night He was betrayed Jesus said, "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). Jesus gave up His life in voluntary submission to the Father. This teaching has important implications for our daily walk as believers. As we contemplate Jesus' voluntary sacrifice for us, would we not want to voluntarily reciprocate and sacrifice our misguided desires for Him? The call of the Gospel is one of invitation, not coercion and manipulation. Jesus' voluntary death on the cross built a bridge of trust to us in our desperate situation. May we cross the bridge of trust and learn to walk with Him on a daily basis.

Finally, Jesus is our protector from the wolves. Though Jesus directed His message to the Pharisees, these ungodly forces are alive and well in the present day. All one has to do is click through the television dial on any given day to find spiritual charlatans peddling their wares all across the airwaves. False spiritual cults and belief systems abound, as do global religious movements that enthrone the false god of the moon and objects in temples. Peter said about the false teachers, "But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed" (2 Peter 2:12). Though we live in a fallen age where spiritual darkness is present across the world, we are called as the ones that God knows by name to continue to plead with the lost and dying generation to repent of their sins and be baptized, trusting only in the Lord Jesus for spiritual life.

Reflection Questions

1. Jesus is referred to as our Good Shepherd and the Guardian of our soul. In what areas are you struggling on your own and need to let Him into your life to shepherd you? How does this guardianship of your soul change how you view life and your decisions?

2. In all three passages, we see a variety of angles to identify the greatness of Jesus:

    He is the Chief Cornerstone of the faith

    He is the One who will appear and make us like Him when He returns for believers

    He is the Good Shepherd

Write out your response to these descriptions of Jesus and what difference this should make in your life. Pray this back to the Lord and ask Him to help you to internalize these realities in your soul.

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_04-25-2021Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-18-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week Marla shares the study of the readings beginning with Acts 3 where Saint Peter explains the meaning of the death of resurrection of Jesus. The second reading in First John also clarifies the importance of our relationship to Jesus Who is our Advocate in the face of our sin. Finally, the Gospel lesson from Saint Luke relates one of the stories of Jesus' appearance to the disciples after His resurrection.

Introduction to the First Reading:

When my son Cole was a little boy, he was often oblivious to what was going on around him. I remember one time we were anticipating the visit of a beloved aunt and uncle. My husband and I spoke of it for weeks ahead of time around the dinner table. But when the day came and his aunt and uncle arrived, Cole was surprised to see them and more than a little perturbed with us. "Why didn't anyone tell me they were coming?" he wanted to know. We assured him we had spoken of it numerous times in various ways in his presence. But somehow, he didn't get the message.

Turns out the Jews were a little like Cole. They had heard of the Messiah for generations. Moses and all the prophets from Samuel on had spoken of Him saying the Messiah would come and would suffer for their sins. Yet when Jesus came on the scene, they didn't recognize Him. And when a miracle was performed in front of their eyes in the power of Jesus name, the people were astonished.

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A man lame from birth was well known by the Jews who came to the temple. For as long as they could remember this man sat at the temple gate begging for money. This day, though, Peter and John, disciples of Jesus and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, healed the man (see Acts 2: 36-47). His walking and leaping and praising God caused quite a stir in the temple that day, and the people came running to the men they thought responsible for the miracle. In the first reading, Peter denies being responsible and points the people to Jesus instead. In addition, he points out that though the Jews heard the prophets, they somehow didn't understand the message. Instead of receiving the Messiah, they had disowned Him and killed Him. Devastating words! Yet it was not too late to respond. They could repent and turn to God and their sins would be wiped away and times of refreshing would come from the Lord (v. 19).

First Reading:

Acts 3:12-19 NAS95 12 But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. 14 But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. 16 And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. 17 And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. 18 But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. 19 Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;

It is important to note that in this passage Peter is speaking to "men of Israel," i.e. Jewish people (v. 12). He appeals to their heritage of "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers" (v. 13). Then he uses multiple terms to identify Jesus including:

- [God's] servant (v. 13
- The Holy and Righteous One (v. 14)
- The Prince of Life (v. 15)
- The one whom God raised from the dead (v. 15)

These are some strong statements about who Jesus is. When we believe in Jesus, it is because we are convicted of our need for a Savior. This leads us to repent of (or turn away from) our sins. Peter invited them to turn from their sin and return (to the Lord) so that their sins would be wiped away. This same invitation is extended to everyone who is willing to believe in Jesus.

It is possible to attend Mass, hear that Jesus died for your sins, but not fully understand the message. Peter says to repent of our sin and then to turn to God so that our sins will be wiped away and that times of refreshing will come to us. God has promised, and He always keeps his promises.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

I know shopping on line is popular, fast, and convenient. However, how many of us have purchased something on line and ended up with an inferior product? Sometimes I prefer to go into a store, see the product with my own eyes, and handle it and try it out with my own hands. Only then can I be sure that what I am purchasing is the real deal.

St. John the apostle testified that Jesus was who He claimed to be—the Son of God and Savior of the world. And how did John know that? Because he was an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus and with Peter and James was part of Jesus' inner circle. Here is how St. John spoke of his relationship with Jesus:

1 John 1:1-4 NAS95 1 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life– 2 and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us– 3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

St. John had seen Jesus with his own eyes, heard Him with his own ears, and touched Him with his own hands. He knew from firsthand experience the real Jesus and wanted others to know Him, too. However, false teachers—the Gnostics—were teaching error, calling the body evil, denying the true humanity of Jesus, and living immoral lives. St. John reminded his readers that those who claim to be real followers of Jesus would live as Jesus lived not like the Gnostics, indulging in immorality. He

explains:

1 John 1:5-8 NAS95 5 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

This idea is expanded in the second reading.

Second Reading:

1 John 2:1-5 NAS95 1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. 3 By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. 4 The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him:

The big idea in this reading is the importance of having a personal relationship with Jesus, rather than living hypocritically by claiming knowledge of Him with no fruit. If we claim to know Jesus and do not follow His commands we are liars and His truth is not in us (v. 4). Anyone can claim to be a Christian but John gives a clear guideline to assess ourselves. Keeping Christ's commands shows the sincerity of our claim to be a Christian. Obedience from the heart is a byproduct of coming "to know Him" and an outward manifestation of an inward reality.

Even while we are in Christ, we recognize the ongoing struggle we have with sin. The good news is that when we sin we have an advocate—an advocate is someone who has authority and uses that position on our behalf. God hates sin and as a good judge must punish sin. The Bible says the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23A). But Jesus is the propitiation for our sins (v. 2). Propitiation means "satisfaction." God is propitiated—satisfied—with Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus pleads our case before the Father. He died and shed His blood for our sins so we don't have to. And when we truly believe in

Jesus, we will walk in His ways, demonstrating that our faith is real.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

My son Cole was not the only one who failed to fully comprehend what was going on right before his eyes. The disciples, too, often heard and saw things that they did not fully understand until later. When Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it up the third day, some thought He was talking about a building. It wasn't until after Jesus was raised from the dead that the disciples understood He was referring to his death and resurrection.

Maybe that's why two disciples on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize the resurrected Jesus when He joined them along the way. The disciples told their fellow traveler about the Nazarene who was crucified three days prior and how puzzled they were at the report from eyewitnesses that His tomb was empty. What could it mean? Then Jesus said to them:

"*O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*." (St. Luke 24: 25-27)

Their hearts burned within them when He spoke, but it wasn't until later, when the three of them broke bread together, that the disciples recognized Jesus. A moment later, He vanished from their sight. They hurried to Jerusalem to find the apostles and to testify that they had seen the risen Lord. As they spoke, Jesus appeared in their midst.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 24:35-48 NAS95 35 They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. 36 While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst. 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. 38 And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch

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Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." 40 And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. 41 While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; 43 and He took it and ate it before them. 44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things."

Notice what great effort Jesus made to demonstrate that the One who stood before them was not a spirit or a conjuring of their grieving imagination. It was the real flesh and bone person of Jesus. They could actually see and touch the nail prints in His hands and feet. And in a final convincing proof, Jesus ate a piece of fish, something no dead person or disembodied spirit could do. It was really Jesus, raised bodily from the dead.

Because He was raised from the dead, we have the hope of a new life also, not just in heaven someday but here and now (Romans 6:1-8). The disciples were to proclaim to the whole world the message of repentance, forgiveness, and resurrection to new life. And now it's our turn to proclaim this life-giving news to our generation.

Reflection Questions

1. Even when we read the Bible we sometimes miss the message. What message about Jesus did you learn from the reading today that you hadn't noticed before? How can understanding that message change how you live today?

2. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we have the hope of new life also, both now and for eternity. What is one way you can begin to share that message with those around you?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-11-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Since this Sunday marks the first week after the celebration of Easter, the readings for today are focused upon the activities that occurred immediately after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Since the grave could not hold Jesus, if we have faith in Him we can trust that someday we too will rise from the dead with an incorruptible body.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. A lot had happened by the time we reach the end of chapter 4 where we pick up with today's reading. Jesus had already been taken up to heaven in a cloud (Acts 1:9). Afterwards, Peter addressed a gathering of about 120 believers (Acts 1:15) with the purpose of telling how Judas' betrayal of Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies and then appointing Matthias as the traitor's replacement (Acts 1:26). The Day of Pentecost had come and the promised gift of the Person of the Holy Spirit had been sent (2:1-3). This event launched the full-scale ministry of the apostles to the Jews, which later extended to the Gentiles and the whole world. The church was growing at a frantic pace during this time. In fact, the number of believers began to expand exponentially, from just 11 to 3,000 in a very short time. "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b). There was a special emphasis placed upon the ministries of preaching (prophecy), fellowship, communion, prayer and giving. In Chapter 3, we see the beginning of the powerful healing ministry of the disciples with the healing of a man that had been lame from birth (Acts 3:1-9). God used these events evangelistically as a powerful

testimony of the supremacy of Jesus as well as to embolden and strengthen the believers in the growing church.

First Reading:

Acts 4:32-35 NAS95 32 And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. 34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

The Book of Acts is one of various stages of transitions in the church. As the church grew, it was marked at this stage by unity, being "one heart and soul" (v. 32). The showed their unity by pooling their resources and sharing everything that they had (v.32). This generosity came from their newfound relationship with Jesus Who gave everything for them (v. 33, "abundant grace was upon them all"). Can you imagine the attractive quality of a church where people are generous and the needs of the people are met by the sacrifices that each one would make? This type of church could probably be an inspiration for us today in how to live generously with our brothers and sisters in the Lord working towards unity.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we transition to the second reading, we find out from Saint John how to be unified in a doctrinal sense. At this point in church history, many people were claiming to be Christians but were not truly born of God. John wrote this letter to help people understand the characteristics of a true believer in Jesus.

Second Reading:

1 John 5:1-6 NAS95 1 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we

love God and observe His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. 4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world–our faith. 5 Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? 6 This is the One who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood. It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

John said that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ" is "born of God" (v. 1). Since this is the crux of knowing whether a person is a true believer, it's important for us to understand a couple of main points. First, what does it mean to believe that Jesus is the Christ? The word translated "Christ" is "Christos" in the original meaning "the anointed One" or "Messiah." Christos brings with it the concept of a Deliverer, the One that is coming to rescue people from their precarious position of sin. Isaiah spoke about the Messiah when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1). Jesus claimed to be the Messiah and declared that this prophecy was fulfilled through Him (Luke 4:18). In summary, to believe that Jesus is the Christ is to turn our hearts over to Him as God's special conduit of grace for deliverance from sin.

Second, what does it mean to be born of God? The concept of being "born of God" harkens back to the conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus at night recorded in the third chapter of John. In that discussion Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of God that he must be born again (John 3:3). We have been born physically, that is our first birth, and it is of the flesh. From the moment we were born we are alive physically but we are dead spiritually (Ephesians 2:1). It takes an act of God to regenerate our heart. Paul explained this further by saying, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4-5). To be born of God is to be born from above (or again) in a spiritual sense which provides us with eternal life.

Finally, putting these two concepts together gives us a litmus test for evaluating our hearts in relationship to God. Anyone can claim to be a Christian and to do Christian things like going to church but not pass the test of true faith. Saint John helps us to see that true faith begins with trusting in Jesus for deliverance from our sin that results in our new spiritual birth.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel lesson is from the Gospel of Saint John. The context is the evening of the day we call Easter Sunday. Mary Magdalene had just told the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Gospel Reading:

19 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." 24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." 26 After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." 30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:19-31)

The focus of the reading was Thomas' doubt and then his subsequent faith upon physically experiencing the resurrected Christ. Several points can be drawn from the text, First, notice that Jesus entered the room without knocking, without even opening the door; He just walked right through the wall! Talk about a grand entrance, and it's no wonder the disciples were scared. The point is that Jesus had supernatural powers in His new, resurrected and glorified body. Second, although Jesus' resurrection body was different in it's capabilities, there was a one to one correspondence between Jesus' body that was crucified and laid in the grave and His resurrected body. Jesus will be forever recognizable by the scars given to Him during His earthly lifetime. Finally, Jesus was gentle with Thomas even though he expressed doubt among circumstances that we may consider compelling for him to believe. Since Jesus treated Thomas with such concern even though he doubted Him, we can be sure that Jesus walks with us through seasons of our own doubt.

Jesus bore the scars of His torture and crucifixion even after His resurrection. Although we don't know to what degree **we** will bear the scars of our own humiliation from men upon the earth, we can be certain that God will use our "scars" as an eternal testimony of our deliverance from the powers of darkness. We can rest assured that "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Reflection Questions

1. Jesus' appearance to the disciples in His resurrection body served as a foretaste of the type of body that all believers will receive one day when Jesus returns. Though we will never be God, we will become **like** Him. Saint John said, "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2b).

How does being born of God (1 John 5:1) and the resurrection of Jesus (John 20) provide hope for you as you experience the limitations and struggles of a declining earthly body?

2. Every believer in Christ has seasons of doubt, but we can stand on God's Word to receive assurance. How does Saint John's description of true faith provide reassurance for you as you contemplate eternity? Would you change your answer in light of what John said in First John?

1 John 5:13 NAS95 13 *These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-04-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. On this joyful day of celebration, we remember how God raised His Son, our Savior, Jesus from the dead. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have eternal life through faith in His finished work on the cross. Accordingly, this week's readings answer some of the most important questions that humans have ever asked about eternal life. The first reading is a message from Saint Peter that explains the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection that has been provided for all humankind. The second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians provides the implications of what believing in Jesus looks like in the life of the believer. Finally, we conclude with the glorious story of Jesus' resurrection from the Gospel of Saint John.

Throughout my earlier years, our family always held a special celebration of Jesus' resurrection on this important day of Easter Sunday. Our festivities included a delicious dinner with special people including my grandmothers, grandmas, aunts, uncles, and of course my brothers and sisters. Back then, I understood that Jesus' resurrection from the dead was very important. As I grew into adulthood, I came to a much fuller understanding of the meaning of Easter Sunday and I am learning how to live in the reality of Jesus' resurrection for every day of my life. My prayer is that through this study you, too, will come to a deeper appreciation of what Jesus did for us and live in His resurrection power all throughout the days ahead.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading this week is from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10. The context of this section is Saint Peter's address to Cornelius, the gentile Centurion from Caesarea. A Centurion was a roman

military leader who led 100 men. The story of what we are about to read happened a few days after Peter had seen a vision of a huge sheet lowered to the ground containing a variety of animals, including ones that the Jews were forbidden from eating according to the Old Testament Law. God revealed to Peter that he was no longer bound by these dietary food laws, and by extrapolation, that the proclamation of the Gospel was being opened to the Gentiles. God told Peter, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (Acts 10:15b-ff). At the same time that Peter had his vision of accepting Gentiles, Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, had a vision in which an angel of God spoke to him about salvation. He sent messengers to Peter in Joppa with orders to bring him to his home in Caesarea. Because Peter had been convinced in this vision about associating with Gentiles, he agreed to travel to Cornelius' home. When Peter arrived Cornelius fell at his feet and worshiped him, but Peter stopped him. Peter then said, "Stand up; I too am a man" (v. 26). He addressed the crowd that Cornelius had gathered by saying, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean" (v. 28). Then Cornelius explained that he had seen a vision of an angel who told him to send for Simon Peter at the home of one Simon the tanner who lived by the sea (v. 32). It was at this point that we join Peter's address to Cornelius along with his relatives and close friends (Acts 10:24).

Now let's read the text, noting that some of the omitted verses were included in order to provide the full context.

First Reading:

Acts 10:34-43 NAS95 34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

Peter said quite an earful; his message encapsulated almost the entirety of the Gospel. He told the gentile Cornelius and his family the Good News regarding the forgiveness of sins offered to anyone who believes, Jew or Gentile alike (v. 34), through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 43). Peter, fresh from his vision of the animals coming down in the large sheet, affirmed that God was no respecter of persons; this salvation was available to everyone (vv.34 – 35). Peter provided a high-level narrative to Cornelius of his personal, eyewitness testimony concerning the events about Jesus Christ. He said that Jesus:

- Was anointed by God with power (v.38),
- Ministered to the people by healing and opposing the devil (v.39),
- Was crucified by the Jews in Jerusalem (v.39b),
- Was raised by God on the third day (v.40),
- Was made visible to select witnesses after His resurrection (v.41), and
- Provided the disciples with specific instructions regarding preaching the truth about Jesus being the divinely appointed Judge of the living and the dead (v.42).

Peter confirmed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the testimony given by all of the Old Testament prophets. Finally, Peter announced the best news of all, that **anyone** who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of their sins (v.43). What, though, does "believing in Jesus" mean? For many believe that Jesus existed or that He was a good teacher. When the Bible talks about believing in Jesus, it means having a personal, experiential trust that we put in Jesus for our salvation. We all know that we have done evil things and thought wrongly about people. These wrong behaviors and mindsets are what the Bible calls sin. Because of our choices to sin, we each have a debt that we owe to the Holy God, our Creator who designed us for Himself. By sinning, we basically declared cosmic treason. This sin debt will need to be paid. The question is, who will pay? We have two payment options: 1. an eternity in hell, or 2. belief in Jesus' payment for our sin. All of the best deeds in the world do not cancel out our sin debt. The Bible is very clear about this, for it says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Death, meaning eternal separation from God, is the payment for sin. And that is why Jesus' death on the cross is so important. Here is where He made the payment for my sin and your sin. This payment is offered to us as a free gift of eternal life. Therefore, belief in Jesus is accepting this gift of Jesus' payment for your sin debt and trusting in Him for eternal life. This is why the celebration of Easter (Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday) is such a glorious memorial in the Christian church.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Understanding Peter's testimony in the first reading that anyone who believes in Jesus receives the

forgiveness of their sins, provides a convenient gateway to the second reading where we see that humans cannot attain to God through their own efforts. This reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians, chapter 3. This Book is one of the biblical books known as the "Prison Epistles" named because Paul wrote them while he was in prison in Rome. The reading today opens with the word "therefore" in verse one. Any time we see that word (as you may have noted in previous editions of Mass Notes) we have to ask, "What is it the 'therefore' there for?" The "therefore" in 3:1 refers to what Paul said in the previous chapters. In order to give the passage more context, we will explore this in much further detail below.

Stepping back to look at the big picture, Paul's overall purpose in the Epistle was to correct heresy that was being taught in the church. The heresy had four elements that Paul addressed in chapter 2. These false beliefs included the denial of the sufficiency and preeminence of Jesus Christ (2:8), the exaltation of Jewish ritualism (2:11, 16-17), the teaching of the extreme denial of the flesh as a way of getting closer to God (known as "asceticism," 2:20-23), and the ungodly practice of worshiping angels (2:18). All four teachings clearly contradict the Scriptures. Paul corrected their misunderstandings early in the second chapter by making some clear statements to help them stand in the midst of false teaching. Paul said, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:8-9). This statement addressed elements of all four of the heresies that were being taught and practiced by certain members of the church.

With this context in mind, let's read from Saint Paul's Letter, the second reading in the Mass today. As you read, keep in mind the sufficiency that we as believers have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

Colossians 3:1-4 NAS95 1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Paul said, "if you have been raised up with Christ. This has a threefold meaning. First, he meant this in the sense that **if** we have believed in Jesus' death and resurrection, then we are in a sense crucified with Him and therefore "raised up" on the cross with Him. Paul said in Galatians, "I have

been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Second, we have been "raised up" in the sense that, when we believe, we have been "born from above," something that Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus in John 3:3. The third meaning that Paul had in mind regarding being "raised up" with Christ is that in a spiritual sense after we die we will be "raised up" to a much greater authority in order to reign with Jesus Christ. Paul said, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us" (2 Timothy 2:12).

Here is another important insight from the reading. Paul said in verse 4, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." Notice the repetition of the word "revealed." We spoke about one aspect of Christ's revelation last week in the Palm Sunday readings when we discussed His triumphal entry to Jerusalem. However, in this reading Paul wasn't referring to Christ's exaltation as King when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Rather, he was referring to Jesus' Second Coming at which time He will return in glory to judge the world. As we said last week, Jesus came the first time as a humble, unblemished Lamb (Revelation 13:8). However, Jesus will return the second time as the glorious Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). He will return as the Almighty Warrior on a white horse, not a donkey (Revelation 19:11). Jesus **was revealed** as the King of the Jews when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey. He **was revealed** as the King of the universe when he rose from the dead, this is what we are celebrating today. Finally, Jesus will be revealed when He comes again in glory with all of His believers in tow, that is us, His saints (Revelation 19:14, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:13, Acts 9:32, Acts 26:10, Romans 16:2).

As we conclude the second reading and discussion, it may be helpful to rephrase the flow of thought before the first few verses. After the three verses of the reading, a capstone statement provides my personal summary of the reason why we must set our minds on things above:

Keep in mind the correction given to us regarding the false teaching that depends on self-effort,and realize we **have been** crucified with Christ, we **have been** born from above, and we **will be** exalted to participate in reigning with Jesus Christ. Since God **has** granted us all of these incalculable gifts, **THEN** let us "*Set [our] minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. 3 For [we] have died and [our lives are] hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then [we] also will be revealed with Him in glory*" (vv. 2-4). We are called by God to do the latter (vv. 2-4) because the teachers of the theological heresies were attempting to bring Jesus down to their level by falsely thinking they could reach up to heaven by practicing manmade religion.

I hope that this illustrates the importance of reading the context of the verses from the reading. The big idea is that humans cannot attain fellowship with God in heaven through religious rituals, ascetic practices (like starving the body), or the worship of angels (see Luke 4:8, Matthew 4:10, and Revelation 22:8-9 where the practice is expressly forbidden). The only way that humans can attain eternal life and fellowship with God is through faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, believing that Jesus atoned for our sin (Romans 10:9-13).

Alternative Second Reading:

This week's readings included an alternative to the second reading. This optional passage was from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's confrontation of a certain church member who was having an immoral relationship with his stepmother. In verse one of this chapter he said, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife" (1 Corinthians 5:1). Paul was upset with the church because rather than disciplining the one that was involved with this sin, the church acted as if this was an acceptable practice for a believer in Jesus. The Corinthian church failed to exercise these proper steps of church discipline that could have eventually led to the restoration of the man that was trapped in this sexual sin. This would have included first calling the person to repentance and separating him from the church. Paul's confrontation is strong, but it is based in the power of the Gospel, Jesus' sacrifice for sin.

1 Corinthians 5:6-8 NAS95 6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? 7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. 8 Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

The root of the issue was that this young church was flaunting the freedom that they had in Christ. Paul explains this by using imagery drawn from the Old Testament Feast of Passover. In verse 6 Paul referred to the Jewish religious practice of purifying their home from yeast (leaven) during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:15). Every Jewish home would have to get rid of yeast and bake unleavened bread during this season. He uses this imagery to provide a metaphor for the purity that God requires in the church. Paul's point was that the "leaven" of the man's sin permeated throughout the church, in the same way yeast permeates dough (v. 6). It was bad enough the church tolerated this sin amongst them, but they even boasted about it (v. 6).

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As we celebrate Jesus' resurrection today on Easter Sunday, this passage helps us to recognize God's calling to live holy and pure lives. This is especially true in our culture that is filled with temptations to be drawn into sexual sins, something with which the ancient Corinthians also struggled. Today we can celebrate that Jesus fulfilled once and for all the repetitive, annual practice among the Old Testament Jews to sacrifice their Passover lamb (Hebrews 10:10). We can turn to the victorious One in prayer to deliver us from our temptations (Matthew 6:13), even difficult things such as sexual sin. Jesus calls us to "confess our sins one to another" (James 5:16) meaning that we can turn to a fellow Christian to ask for their intercessory prayer on our behalf when we encounter struggles that we are unable to overcome through our own prayer and obedience. Paul calls believers to celebrate the feast with sincerity and truth before God and our community. What better day to contemplate making some serious changes in our life than on Easter Sunday?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel reading from Saint John Chapter 20 we will see the "reason for the season" of Easter. Throughout the Lenten period, we have looked forward to the celebration of this glorious day. Before you read, say a short prayer asking God to show you what the resurrection means for your life.

Gospel Reading:

John 20:1-9 NAS95 1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark, and saw the stone already taken away from the tomb. 2 So she ran and came to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." 3 So Peter and the other disciple went forth, and they were going to the tomb. 4 The two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter and came to the tomb first; 5 and stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. 6 And so Simon Peter also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the face-cloth which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb then also entered, and he saw and believed. 9 For as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

The narrative continues beyond what was covered in the reading (which is not covered next Sunday):

10 So the disciples went away again to their own homes. 11 But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. 13 And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). (John 20:10-16)

Can you imagine being one of the disciples who watched Jesus die on the cross? Then all of a sudden news reaches you that Jesus' body is not in the tomb. You run to the tomb on Sunday and realize it is empty. What are the options? Maybe someone had taken the body or maybe Jesus' prediction that he would rise again really did come true. It would have been confusing, mind-blowing and extremely scary, for those who sought to kill Jesus were still feeling emboldened to snuff out any memory of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene believed and was the first person to see the risen Lord alive. She received confirmation that since God raised Jesus from the dead, she would one day be raised herself.

We can also have assurance of salvation which leads to eternal life by trusting in what the Scripture says about how a person does make it to heaven when they die. The first reading brought up the idea of "belief in Jesus." Let's recap what this means, for this is the foundation of our faith. First, God says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). God says that because of our sin the payment we will receive without some outside intervention is death, meaning eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). In that same verse, God says that the outside intervention has been given as a free gift: Jesus died on the cross for the payment of our sins. This good news can also be found in the famous verse that is often seen printed on cardboard signs held up at sporting events. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Saint Paul said, "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).

Does this sound like something that is simple to achieve? It is simple, but if it's not necessarily easy. If it were easy then everyone in the world that ever heard the Gospel would become a believer. Peter

said in Acts 2:38 that belief is intricately tied to repentance. When we believe in Jesus, it is because we are convicted of our need for a Savior. This leads us to repent of (or turn away from) our sins. This means that we have come to agree with God about our sins, and recognize them for what they are, deadly (Romans 6:21). The Bible says that even one single sin would keep us from entering heaven – forever (James 2:10). So, repentance of sin, turning away from the destructive forces that once ruled our lives, is an on-going part of exercising faith in Jesus. One teacher said, "If your faith hasn't changed you, it probably hasn't saved you." This is not to imply that works are necessary for salvation. But it is to say that true faith is manifested in our lives being oriented around the values that Christ had, because He is our life (Colossians 3:4). Jesus' death and resurrection were given as a gift to all, to cover our sin and provide us with the right to be accepted into heaven. As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, keep in mind the simplicity of this Gospel message that Jesus gave to the world.

Reflection Questions

We covered a great deal of ground today in our study. The main point that we ask you to consider in light of your study is, what difference does the resurrection of Jesus Christ make in **our** lives? Contemplate this question in light of the following contexts.

1. What difference does Jesus' resurrection make as I move about in many relational networks where I rub shoulders with people who don't all believe that faith in Jesus is the only pathway to God? How does my life reflect the power of Jesus' resurrection and become an apologetic for His life-transforming presence?

2. What difference does Jesus make if you find yourself in an unhappy situation this Easter? How does the knowledge that Jesus rose from the dead give you hope through these difficulties?

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