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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 05-19-2024



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 on to 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.

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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).

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 despite the gifts of the Spirit being 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.

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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 a 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. As I turned the corner of the road leading up to my house at around 7:00 pm, I recognized my neighbor Greg 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:

https://giftstest.com

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 05-05-2024



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.

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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 forbids 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 a 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 a 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 worthiest 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 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?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-28-2024

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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.

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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?

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?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-21-2024



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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

cornerstone." 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 the 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 with 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 are 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?

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,

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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.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-14-2024



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.

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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.

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 sins 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 online is popular, fast, and convenient. However, how many of us have purchased something online 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 in 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 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?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 04-07-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Since this Sunday marks the first week after the

celebration of Easter, the readings for today focus 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 the 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" looks 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 were 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:

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

Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

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.*

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-31-2024



Study Notes for the Sunday Mass Published by Christians for Christ Ministries. We are a non-denominational Christian ministry that seeks to encourage and facilitate Christians in studying the Holy Scriptures. **"For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus."** 1 Timothy 2:5

Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Easter Sunday. This week you will hear a story about a death-defying airplane trip that prompted me to ponder ultimate questions of life. 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. Then we conclude with the glorious story of Jesus' resurrection from the Gospel of Saint John.

Before we move to the readings, my wife asked me this week as I was studying the readings for the Easter Sunday Mass, what does Jesus' resurrection mean to me? I thought for a moment, and was about to give her an answer in "Christianese" like "because Jesus atoned for my sins." However, I stopped myself and found that I could not answer her question. Instead, I told her that I would think about it and get back to her with the answer. I thought about her question over a period of several days, and spent time reading the conclusion of all four of the Gospels that chronicled Jesus' resurrection from the dead. After much study, I came up with the answer. The resurrection means to me that I don't have to be afraid of dying. I might not be thrilled with it, but I don't have to live in constant fear of dying. (Hebrews 2:14-15 says: "he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery).

When I was younger, I didn't really think much about dying. That changed one day when I was flying with my twin brother into an airport southwest of Indianapolis to make a fuel stop on our way to Houston. This was during a time in my life when I did not sense any sort of close communion with God even though I attended Mass each week. The weather this particular day was challenging and we had delayed our departure from my home airport in Pontiac, Michigan because of thunderstorms. After we left Pontiac, we were in an out of the clouds all the way down to Terre Haute. The stress of determining whether to fly, when to leave, and then flying under instrument flight procedures in the clouds without an autopilot on my first airplane left me feeling very frazzled as I approached the navigational fix at which I would commence the landing procedure. Complicating the matter was that the only instrument approach procedure that made sense that day because of the wind conditions was something known as a "back course" approach, meaning that the indicator needles in the navigation instruments had to be interpreted backwards from their normal readings. In other words, left was right and right was left. As we descended during the approach I was reaching the point of mental exhaustion when my brother suddenly screamed, "We seem to be awfully low Jim!" As I looked up from my instruments I realized that after I crossed the final approach fix I had

continued to descend to a level which put us only about a hundred feet above the sequenced flashing landing lights (known as rabbits). I quickly realized my mistake, added power and climbed up to avoid descending further into the lights and terrain below. After this happened, it hit me, we could have died! From that day forward, I began to think about dying and what was beyond my time on earth. Would I go to heaven or hell? How good did I have to be to get into heaven? How does a person get to heaven? We will answer those questions later in the study today.

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. This 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). After Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, had a vision in which an angel of God spoke to him, he sent messengers to Peter in Joppa with orders to bring him to his home in Caesarea. Afterwards, Peter 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).

Read the text, noting that some of the omitted verses were included in order to provide the full context (as our readers know that we are prone to do).

First Reading:

> *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." (Acts 10:34-43)*

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 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).

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 is much further detail below.

Stepping back to look at the big picture, Paul's overall purpose in the Epistle was to correct some 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 are clearly contradicted by the Scriptures. Paul corrected their misunderstandings early in the second chapter by making some clear didactic statements. 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, keeping in mind the sufficiency that we as believers have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

> *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. (Colossians 3:1-4)*

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, if we believe, we have been "born from above." This is something that Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus (John 3:3), the man who evidently did later come to believe in Jesus since he came to help prepare Jesus' body for burial after He was crucified (John 19:39). Jesus used a Greek word "anothen" which had a dual meaning, above and again. Jesus taught Nicodemus that he had to born from above spiritually, and that he had to be born a second time spiritually in a process distinct from his physical birth. The instant a person believes they are "born from above," meaning that they received the gift of the Holy Spirit of God.

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 New Testament reading and discussion, it may be helpful to rephrase the flow of thought before the first few verses (in one very long, grammatically incorrect sentence). 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:

THEREFORE, keeping in mind the correction given to us regarding the four theological heresies, since we **have been** crucified with Christ, **have been** born from above, **will be** exalted to participate in reigning with Jesus Christ, and since God **has** granted us all of these incalculable gifts from God, **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.

How is that for a long sentence?! However, did you understand the importance of reading the context into the study of the verses of 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 especially 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).

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 to you.

Gospel Reading:

> *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. (John 20:1-9)*

The narrative continued beyond what was covered in the reading:

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)

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. 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 we must repent of (or turn away from) our sins. This means that we have to come to an agreement 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 preacher 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.

What about you? Have you acknowledged the forgiveness of your sins through the only method possible: faith in Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection from the dead? Let's pray to affirm our faith.

Dear God, I believe that I am a sinner, and that because of my sin I deserve death and eternal

separation from You. I believe that Jesus died for my sins as payment of the penalty I owed. I believe that You raised Him from the dead and that He will come again in glory. I repent of my sins and ask You, in the name of Jesus, to empower me to set my sights on spiritual things above, not on my carnal desires that have separated me from You. I pray this in Jesus' Holy name, Amen.

We pray that you have a very happy Easter celebration!

Reflection Questions

1. What difference does the resurrection of Jesus Christ make in **your** life?

2. Take a few quiet moments and ponder how you truly feel about dying. Are you afraid of death? Have you had a narrow escape with dying that changed your opinion about the eventuality of dying? In light of your response, write down some of the verses that we covered today which provide you with the hope of eternal life when you die.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-24-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Palm Sunday. This week we open the reading with the procession of the palms. Then we move to the first reading that gives us a glimpse of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah. The second reading shows the humility of Jesus, who came to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah having to suffer. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel account of Jesus' passion, our Messiah, Who paid the penalty for our sin.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The reading with the procession of the palms is from Mark 11. This is Saint Mark's telling of the preparation for Passover supper and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As you read, imagine that you were a believing Jew among the crowd and spread your own palm branches on the road for the King.

First Reading:

Mark 11:1-10 NAS95 1 As they approached Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the

> *Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples, 2 and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. 3 "If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' you say, 'The Lord has need of it'; and immediately he will send it back here." 4 They went away and found a colt tied at the door, outside in the street; and they untied it. 5 Some of the bystanders were saying to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They spoke to them just as Jesus had told them, and they gave them permission. 7 They brought the colt to Jesus and put their coats on it; and He sat on it. 8 And many spread their coats in the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields. 9 Those who went in front and those who followed were shouting: "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David; Hosanna in the highest!"*

The time around Passover was a season of messianic expectancy, and there were many pilgrims in the city for the celebration. One of the issues that was fresh in the mind of the people was Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead just shortly before this last Passover. This would have played into His sudden popularity and for the people's desire to see Him. In messianic form, Jesus directed His disciples with exact precision, and when they followed His orders, everything worked out exactly as Jesus had said. Jesus asserted His authority over Jerusalem by riding into the city on a colt (v. 4), not a mighty stallion as would have been done by kings. This was in fulfillment of a prophecy of Zechariah (Zechariah 9:9).

The procession of the palms dealt with Jesus' first coming. As we look forward to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday, let's look briefly at Jesus' second coming. The Book of Revelation revealed some of the details about Jesus' physical return to the earth at the end of the Great Tribulation period. Jesus entered Jerusalem during His First Advent on a donkey. Read what the Scripture says about how He will return the second time.

> *11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. 12 His eyes are a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself. 13 He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. 15 From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. 16 And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." (Revelation 19:11-16).*

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 as happened the first time. At His First Coming, many people missed His appearance. According to John, at His Second Coming He will not be missed. John said, "BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen" (Rev 1:7). When the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (v. 16b) returns, He will come in judgment to a people living "as in the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37) expecting things to continue as they always had in the past. Since God has given us this warning, we must ask ourselves "How now shall we live?" While ignorance seems to be bliss, it does not lead to eternal life.

This Sunday as we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entrance in Jerusalem at His First Advent, we can celebrate that we are among those that did, in a sense, welcome Jesus to Jerusalem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We can celebrate that we are not among those who missed His first coming. As we hold our palms, we can proudly celebrate our belief that King Jesus will one day return to the earth he created. In our waving of the palms, we can lift them up as white flags of surrender to the King who deserves our whole lives.

The first reading after the procession of the palms is from Isaiah 50. The context is just after Isaiah told about how God had disciplined the northern tribes of Israel (Isaiah 50:1-3). We see that God judged Israel's sinfulness, but then also provided a way for salvation in this prediction of the Messiah. The picture painted in the verses leading up to today's reading is one of temporarily setting aside this group of God's chosen people until they come to believe in God's sending of the Messiah. The prophecy shifts to the personalization of the Messiah's suffering, which we will also be reading about in greater detail during the Gospel narrative covering the Passion of Jesus Christ.

> *Isaiah 50:4-7 NAS95 4 The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed.*

In this reading, the Prophet Isaiah speaks of himself as a "type" of Christ. Christ the Messiah has been given the Word of God, something that "sustains a weary one with a word" (v. 4). The Messiah

is obedient (v. 5), even giving His back to those who strike Him and His "cheeks to those who pluck out [His] beard" (v. 6). God darkened the skies during the spiritually dark event of Jesus' suffering, and Jesus "set [His] face like flint" and wasn't ashamed (v. 7) to fulfil God's will in giving His life for us. Later in the Gospel lesson, we will read about the fulfillment of the suffering of God's servant (Is. 50:6 "scourged" and "spat upon") in great detail.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The predicted suffering from Isaiah is also the backdrop for the second reading, which was probably sung as a hymn in the early Church about the great lengths that Jesus went to in order to fulfill the Father's plan for our salvation. This second reading is from Philippians 2:6-11:

Second Reading:

> *Philippians 2:6-11 NAS95 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

This passage continues the sharp contrast that the Bible portrays between Jesus' first Advent and His second coming. The first advent He came as a humble servant. In this act of the incarnation and His death, He not only served His Father, but he served us. Humankind was in desperate need of a Savior, owing a sin debt beyond the ability to repay. So He became the suffering Servant "for the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2), paying our debt on the cross. By being obedient to the Father, He will come again in exaltation and power (as we saw in Revelation earlier). The second coming will be very different from the first Advent. In addition to every eye seeing his second coming, this passage informs us that every knee will bow, voluntarily or involuntarily. The choice is ours to make. We can voluntarily bow our knee to the Messiah now, or we can harden our hearts against Him, only to involuntarily bow when He returns.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel Reading is Mark's account of the passion, which includes the betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, humiliation, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 14:1 – 15:47 NAS95 1 Now the Passover and Unleavened Bread were two days away; and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to seize Him by stealth and kill Him; 2 for they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise there might be a riot of the people." 3 While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head. 4 But some were indignantly remarking to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted? 5 "For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor." And they were scolding her. 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me. 7 "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me. 8 "She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial. 9 "Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." 10 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. 11 They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time. 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. 27 And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, because it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP SHALL BE SCATTERED.' 28 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." 29 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away, yet I will not." 30 And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, that this very night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times." 31 But Peter kept saying insistently, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" And they all were saying the same thing also. 32 They came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here until I have prayed." 33 And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. 34 And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch." 35 And He went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. 36 And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will." 37 And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? 38 "Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." 39 Again He went away and prayed, saying the same words. 40 And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. 41 And He came the third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough; the hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" 43 Immediately while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs, who were from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. 44 Now he who was betraying Him had given them a signal, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him and lead Him away under guard." 45 After coming, Judas immediately went to Him, saying, "Rabbi!" and kissed Him. 46 They laid hands on Him and seized Him. 47 But one of those who stood by drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. 48 And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me, as you would against a robber? 49 "Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me; but this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures." 50 And they all left Him and fled. 51 A young man was following Him, wearing nothing but a linen sheet over his naked body; and they seized him. 52 But he pulled free of the linen sheet and escaped naked. 53 They led Jesus away to the high priest; and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes gathered together. 54 Peter had followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest; and he was sitting with the officers and warming himself at the fire. 55 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and they were not finding any. 56 For many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent. 57 Some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying, 58 "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.'" 59 Not even in this respect was their

testimony consistent. 60 The high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, "Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" 61 But He kept silent and did not answer. Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" 62 And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN." 63 Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? 64 "You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. 65 Some began to spit at Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him with their fists, and to say to Him, "Prophesy!" And the officers received Him with slaps in the face. 66 As Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, 67 and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Nazarene." 68 But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out onto the porch, and a rooster crowed. 69 The servant-girl saw him, and began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" 70 But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean too." 71 But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" 72 Immediately a rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had made the remark to him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he began to weep. 1 Early in the morning the chief priests with the elders and scribes and the whole Council, immediately held a consultation; and binding Jesus, they led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate. 2 Pilate questioned Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him, "It is as you say." 3 The chief priests began to accuse Him harshly. 4 Then Pilate questioned Him again, saying, "Do You not answer? See how many charges they bring against You!" 5 But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate was amazed. 6 Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. 7 The man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. 8 The crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. 9 Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" 10 For he was aware that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Answering again, Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" 13 They shouted back, "Crucify Him!" 14 But Pilate said to them, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" 15 Wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified. 16 The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort. 17 They dressed Him up in purple, and after twisting a crown of thorns, they put it on Him; 18 and they began to acclaim Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 They kept beating His head with a reed, and spitting on Him, and kneeling and bowing before Him. 20 After they had mocked Him, they took the purple robe off Him and put His own garments on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him. 21 They pressed into service a passer-by coming from the country, Simon of Cyrene (the father of Alexander and Rufus), to bear His cross. 22 Then they brought Him to

the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. 23 They tried to give Him wine mixed with myrrh; but He did not take it. 24 And they crucified Him, and divided up His garments among themselves, casting lots for them to decide what each man should take. 25 It was the third hour when they crucified Him. 26 The inscription of the charge against Him read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS." 27 They crucified two robbers with Him, one on His right and one on His left. 28 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And He was numbered with transgressors." 29 Those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ha! You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" 31 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. 32 "Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" Those who were crucified with Him were also insulting Him. 33 When the sixth hour came, darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" which is translated, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" 35 When some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." 36 Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down." 37 And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last. 38 And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 When the centurion, who was standing right in front of Him, saw the way He breathed His last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" 40 There were also some women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses, and Salome. 41 When He was in Galilee, they used to follow Him and minister to Him; and there were many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. 42 When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. 45 And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid.

Dear God, as we move forward to the Holy Week, we pray that we would live in light of this gift that we have been given, so that all who come into contact with us can see Christ in us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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Reflection Questions

1. The week before Jesus' crucifixion, the people applauded Him as their Messiah. They probably thought that Jesus was going to overthrow the Romans and set up His earthly Kingdom. When He was arrested and tried, the people rejected the concept of a Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). They had no idea the importance of His death as the payment for their sin. Instead, they wanted a Messiah who would give them political deliverance. We need to learn from their mistake, and ponder whether we want the real Messiah that God sent (the One who acts for our spiritual deliverance) or do we want a Messiah of our own making (a powerful ruler who makes our circumstances more comfortable)? He will one day set the record straight and deliver us from physical oppressors, but now He is working on our hearts to deliver us from spiritual oppressors.

The question is, will we let Him do this good work in us, or will we perhaps not fully recognize His rightful place in our lives? How may Jesus be working in your life, even if it is not what you expected from God?

2. What is one thing from these readings that helps you to trust in how Jesus is working in your life?

3. All of the readings from this week portray a running contrast between Jesus' first coming and His second coming. His first Advent already came, but His second coming is yet to happen. How can taking time during the Advent season prepare you for the Second coming? What areas of your life should you pray about changing in order to reflect His kingdom values (Christ in you)?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-17-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week Marla shares the study of the readings beginning with Jeremiah 31 in which we see God's promise of a new covenant with Israel. Then she moves on to the second reading from the Book of Hebrews and then closes with the Gospel lesson from John 12. As we come nearer to the celebration of Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the focus of the Bible passages continues to point us towards the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection in glory.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading from the prophet Jeremiah is about love, promises, and a special family relationship, broken and restored. I love my family and express my love with affectionate names. I (Marla) call my husband "Hon," my daughter "Sweets," and my son "Sonnybun." I speak of them with endearing words because we are family, and they mean the world to me.

In the Old Testament God speaks of the nation of Israel in intimate terms. He made a covenant (promise) with Abraham that his offspring would be God's chosen people and the whole world would be blessed through them. God and Israel were bound together much like a husband and wife, and God spoke of her in tender and loving terms as a husband speaks of his bride. But when Israel

rebelled and turned away from God, her sin was likened to adultery or whoredom. God had been faithful, but Israel had broken her promise.

The book of Jeremiah records the coming judgment. God's judgment on his people was not intended to destroy them but to restore them to himself. Though they would be taken away into captivity by a foreign power, God would keep his promise, bring them back, and make a new covenant with them. That covenant is still in effect today, and here is the good news—that covenant includes us! The first reading explains it as follows.

First Reading:

> *31 "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. 33 "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." Jeremiah 31:31-34*

The Old Covenant had a law written on tablets of stone. When Israel disobeyed that law they sinned. The Bible says that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22). In the days of Israel, sins were covered but not taken away by the blood of repeated animal sacrifices in an earthly temple. But the New Covenant is far superior to that (see Hebrews 10: 1-25). God gave Jesus his Son as the perfect sacrifice for sin. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (St. John 1: 29). His death on the cross is the final sacrifice for sin and cleanses the sinner (and we are all sinners, Romans 3:23) completely.

Now we have the law of God not on stones but in our hearts. Each of us can receive Jesus by faith and know him in a personal way. When we accept what Jesus has done for us and believe in Him, our restoration to God is complete, and He can once more call us by His affectionate names—child, friend, and bride (St. John 1:12; 15:15; Rev. 19:7, 22:17).

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading takes us to a set of verses in a larger passage that speaks of Jesus as our high priest. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, when someone sinned, he would bring an animal to the priest and the priest would sacrifice it (shed its blood) on the altar in the tabernacle/temple. Behind a heavy curtain was the Holy of Holies (or Holy Place) where God would appear in a pillar of cloud or fire. No one could go in there except the high priest, and he could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would make a sacrifice for himself (for he is a sinner, too) and for the sins of all the people and carry the blood inside the curtain and present it to God. The sacrifice had to be repeated year after year.

Before we read the second reading, first we want to look at Hebrews Ch. 7 and 9 which tell us that Jesus is a high priest, but one far superior to the human ones we read about in the Old Testament. Moreover, here's why:

> Hebrews 7:26-27 "*For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself."*
>
> Hebrews 9:11-12, 24-26 *"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".*
>
> *[24] "For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; [25] nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own. [26] Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."*

Jesus himself was both the high priest and the sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice was perfect and total, and God accepted it as final. That's why he is the source of eternal salvation to all those who obey him. With that background we come to the second reading. It reveals the anguish Jesus experienced as he faced his impending death for sin.

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Second Reading:

> *7 "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save* Him *from death, and He was heard because of His piety. 8 Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. 9 And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation," Hebrews 5:7-9 NAS95*

The day has arrived that Jeremiah spoke about in our first reading: God would "*forgive their iniquity, and …remember [their sin] no more*" (Jer. 31:34). Jesus was going to inaugurate the New Covenant, but to do so would cost Him his life. If we had been walking past the garden that evening, we would have heard loud cries of anguish coming from deep within the garden. Why was Jesus crying? After all, He knew all along that He had come to die. The Bible says His life was not taken from Him; He willingly laid it down for us. It was in God's good plan before the world began. But the path to accomplishing that plan was so horrible to contemplate that it caused Jesus to cry out with loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus knew what the prophet Isaiah foretold—that He would be "*pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins*" *(Isaiah 53: 5 NLT).* And so Jesus prayed, "*Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done*" (Luke 22:42). In this time of suffering and submission, Jesus' obedience was completed, made perfect. By perfect, we don't at all mean there were flaws or sins or defects in Jesus that needed to be corrected. No, He was perfect in His being. P*erfect* in this verse has the idea of *being made complete.* You see, it wasn't until God the Son took on a human body that He experienced suffering in the flesh. In His suffering He learned obedience and, in doing so, was made complete.

Enduring the pain of rejection, loss, temptation, and suffering in a body like ours, Jesus became One who can sympathize with each of us in our weakness and suffering. We see this in another section of the Book of Hebrews:

> Hebrews 4:15-16 [15] "*For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.* [16] *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.*"

What a comfort to know that the One who saves us from our sins is also the One Who has walked the path we are walking and will give grace and help in our time of need. We can draw near to Him with complete confidence.

Moving onto the Gospel reading, we see Jesus himself acknowledging that the time has come to fulfill God's plan foretold in our first reading in Jer. 31.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Gospel Reading:

> *20 Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; 21 these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 22 Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus. 23 And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25 He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. 26 If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him. 27 Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify Your name." Then a voice came out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." 29 So the crowd of people who stood by and heard it were saying that it had thundered; others were saying, "An angel has spoken to Him." 30 Jesus answered and said, "This voice has not come for My sake, but for your sakes. 31 Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out." : John 12:20-33 NAS95*

Just prior to the events of this passage, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. People were flocking to Jesus because they had heard of this miracle, and many, including Jews, were believing in Him. This upset the religious leaders, and they plotted to kill Lazarus and Jesus. They had tried to capture Jesus before, but each time He escaped because "*his time had not yet come*" (John 7:30).

But in this Gospel reading, we see Jesus acknowledging that the time has come to fulfill His purpose and glorify His Father. A grain of wheat fulfills its purpose of producing grain when it falls to the earth and dies. Likewise, Jesus must die in order to accomplish His purpose of providing eternal salvation for all who believe. Though His soul was troubled, He would not hold back His life but would give it as a sacrifice for others. Because of His sacrifice we have been offered eternal life. We can love this life with its worldly pleasures and sin or we can turn from this life and follow Him. One is the wide road that leads to destruction, and one is the narrow road that leads to eternal life (St. Matthew 7:13-14).

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Reflection Questions

1. List the primary aspects of the New Covenant and prayerfully thank God for Christ's provision. Jesus came to fulfil the New Covenant that Jeremiah predicted. What aspects of the New Covenant resonate with you and sound like Good News as opposed to the Old Covenant?

2. How does it encourage you to be faithful to Jesus this week knowing that He learned obedience in His life through suffering? In what ways can you see God working through your own suffering? It might be helpful to list one particular issue that keeps coming into your mind. How can you surrender this to God and look beyond these circumstances to see God's sovereign hand?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-10-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the readings and discover many important truths about God. We learn about the nature of God and how He is faithful, just and forgiving. We see how we cannot earn our righteous standing before God and how this is a free gift

to us through faith in His One and Only provision, Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Chronicles. The context was a time of deep darkness in the Kingdom of Israel. Godly King Josiah, who was a key reformer for the Nation during the decline of the theocratic kingdom, had just been killed after going into battle against Neco King of Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:23). Following his death, the decline of the kingdom continued with the appointment of Josiah's son Joahaz as King of Judah who was promptly deposed by Neco (2 Chronicles 36:3). At this point, "The king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But Neco took Joahaz his brother and brought him to Egypt" (2 Chronicles 36:4). This king "did evil in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 35:5) and after some 11 years was dragged captive to Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:5a, 6). In the short span of time before the happenings in today's reading two more kings ruled in Judah, first King Jehoiachin (v. 9) and finally Zedekiah who is introduced in the opening verse of the reading.

Note: We included all the intervening verses between 11 and 23 in order to include the full context and lead to the full meaning.

First Reading:

> *2 Chronicles 36:11-23 NAS95 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their*

> *young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia–in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah–the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 23 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"*

We see in the reading that Zedekiah continued the wickedness of his forefathers and did not listen to the Lord who spoke through the contemporary Prophet Jeremiah (vv. 11-12). At that time, the Kingdom of Babylon was now the reigning world power and Jeramiah had spoken to Zedekiah about the coming siege by their mighty ruler King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him a message from the Lord saying, "I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jer 27:12). Zedekiah failed to heed God's advice given by Jeremiah and eventually "the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (v. 16a). The event that occurred next has reverberated throughout Jewish history ever since and included the destruction, looting, and burning of the temple, the destruction of the walls around Jerusalem, and the deportation of the people (including Jeremiah). God wasn't finished with Israel though, and He kept His promise to restore the temple and the city after seventy years. God said through Jeremiah, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). In the closing verses of the reading we see how the Medo-Persian king Cyrus made a decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem along with the restoration of the people (vv. 22 – 23). Interestingly, the Prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Cyrus over a hundred years before he was even born and stated that he would be God's shepherd to rebuild the temple, which hadn't even been destroyed yet. Isaiah said, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'" (Isa 44:28).

What can we learn about God from the reading? First, God works through any world leader, even idolatrous, pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus of Persia. We saw in the reading how God used Nebuchadnezzar to discipline His people during a seventy-year period under He raised up

Cyrus to restore it. God called Cyrus His shepherd (Isa 44:28). Saint Paul told in the New Testament about how all rulers were established by God. He said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1).

A second thing we can learn about God from the reading is that He keeps his promises. Even when His patience is tested, His punishment also includes a plan for restoration even before the day of Judgment comes. As we saw in the introduction to the reading, King Zedekiah was the last in a long line of evil rulers that God allowed to serve in the Kingdom of Judah. Once the rules and the people continued in their unrepentant sin, God carried out His promised plan to discipline the people for 70 years. Then, he restored them according to His promise. In the same way, God is also faithful to us in that He only disciplines us because He loves us. The author of Hebrews said in quoting from Psalm 94:12, "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" Hebrews 12:6). He goes on to explain the meaning of the Lord's discipline. "For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Finally, we can draw more attributes of God from the reading, here are a few:

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).

- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out!

- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move on to the second reading, we will learn more about another important aspect of God: He is a forgiving God, the One who has provided the ultimate forgiveness for the sins of all humankind through the giving of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, take careful note of how clearly God has provided us with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and how works flow from a believer's heart that has been changed by God.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 2:4-10 NAS95 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

Saint Paul provided what is quite likely the clearest explanation of Christian salvation in the entire Bible. He said that a believer was "dead in their transgressions" (Romans 3:23) but then was "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). He states twice that a believer is saved by grace, not works (verses 5 and 8), not because of our works but because of God's great love for us (v. 4) and the grace of God (v. 8a) through our faith (v. 8). Finally, Paul says that the end result of our creation ("His workmanship") is the good works that God has prepared for us through His foreknowledge (v. 10). Salvation is a free gift from God (v. 8) that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3 and includes verse 16, which is the famous one that is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin (that is the Jewish ruling council). Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews, so he met secretly with Jesus. Later

in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 3:14-21 NAS95 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 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. 19 This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."*

The story from verse 14 was recorded in Numbers 21, during which Moses instructed the Hebrew people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sins and given eternal life as a gift of God. This is the same thing that we saw in the second reading (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases, the people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

We see in this passage that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connotation of being unique. So, to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves

no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. However, if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save.

We have covered a very lot of important ground this week. As we prepare for Easter Sunday on which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, let's contemplate how great is the mystery of salvation. How are you feeling, do you feel guilty because you sense that you haven't done enough for God? If you have repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness, you can rest in God's graceful provision for you. Spend some time in prayer right now to talk to God and tell Him about your feelings. We pray that you have benefited from the readings this week.

Reflection Questions

1. We saw in the second reading how Paul explained the source and outcome of salvation for a believer in Jesus Christ. Explain the relationship between faith and works for the believer based upon Ephesians 2:4-10.

2. A common theme that exists in the lives of many who do not believe in Jesus as their only source of forgiveness of sin before God is the extent to which they do good works in their lives to justify the bad things they may have done. Read both the second and the Gospel readings again, and then the following verses:

Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Ac 4:12 "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."

1John 5:12 – 13 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 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.

In light of these readings, explain the relationship between works and salvation for the non-believing person. Without faith in Jesus, do their "good" works ever provide a means for them to earn their way into heaven?