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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 1-22-2017



Welcome back to the Study Note for the Sunday Mass. This week we will again return to Isaiah and see in the Gospel lesson how the prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus. As in Isaiah's day, we too are living in a land of deep spiritual darkness, one in which we need both spiritual and physical healing through our Savior Jesus. After Jesus' First Advent, Scripture says that the best is yet to come when He returns to set up His Kingdom rule on earth. During this time there will no longer be any darkness because the Lord our God will be our Light (Revelation 22:5). As the believers during Isaiah's time celebrated because of his prophetic message of hope, we too can celebrate because of his prophecy of the coming Light through the return of the Lord Jesus. As we see evil men grow worse and worse (2 Timothy 3:13), similar to what was happening in Isaiah's time, we can look forward to the coming King who will reverse the curse placed upon the world through the sin of Adam (Genesis 3:17).

This week we are going to begin with the second reading and then cover the first reading and Gospel lesson last since the content on those two are closely related.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The first reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Last week we looked at the introduction to this Letter that Paul wrote to the crossroads city, a place entrenched in immorality and worship of a plurality of gods. To review, Paul's overall purposes of the Letter were to deal with

some divisions in the church, address some serious moral issues, defend his apostolic authority, and to specifically answer several questions from a letter they sent to him (1 Corinthians 7:1).

As you read, what is one word that best summarizes Paul's concern for the Corinthians in this section?

Second Reading:

10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. 16 Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. (1 Corinthians 1:10-17)

What word came to your mind which best summarized Paul's concern? For me it was "disunity." Paul was calling the local church in Corinth to unite for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel. Look at verses 17 and 18, just past where the reading stopped. Here we see an insight into why unity was important in the church. Paul said, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 17-18). In other words, Jesus sent him to preach the good news so that the minds of the unbelievers would be transformed such that they recognized the power of God. Later in First Corinthians Paul said, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, **so that they may be saved**" (1 Corinthians 10:32-33, emphasis added).

Second, Paul was warning the local church in Corinth *not to unite* along the lines of a "cult of personality" (as has happened in so many churches since then). Paul provided specific examples of how this disunity was happening in the church through the practice of baptism of family members in the house churches of the region. Someone may have said something like, "I am more spiritual than you because **I** was baptized by Paul but you were only baptized by Apollos."

Paul stood in good company with those that called the local church to unity. Jesus said in His prayer about the church, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me **through their word**; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21). Jesus prayed on behalf of His disciples who had believed by firsthand knowledge *and* for those who believed through the *testimony* of His disciples (v.20b, "through their word").Unity is important in the church because

it's through this unified message that God's power is revealed. All of the believers after the era of the disciples have come to faith in Jesus through the testimony of "**the word"** and "**their word**." "The word" is the testimony of the disciples through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit written into what we call the New Testament Bible. "Their word" is both the testimony of the disciples *and* the testimony of all believers. Jesus' purpose in this message was a calling for the church of God be unified in their proclamation of the Gospel so that the entire world may believe (John 17:21f).

Introduction to the First Reading:

As we leave the second reading, we will move to the Old Testament reading and the Gospel message. The first reading is from Isaiah, the prophet whom we have studied extensively over the past several months. The context of this section of Isaiah was just after his warning to the Northern Kingdoms that they would be overtaken by Assyria. This was a time of gloom and anguish for the Nation of Israel. He wrote the prophecy and delivered it to Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah so that there would be two witnesses as required by the Law such that when the event was fulfilled his authority as God's spokesman would be confirmed (Isaiah 8:2).

Let's read the Scripture, and as you do it will become apparent who the Galilean is about whom Isaiah is speaking.

First Reading:

1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. 2 The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them. 3 You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. (Isaiah 9:1-4 – Verse markings differ in this NASB version.)

Clearly, Isaiah spoke about Jesus of Galilee (Mark 1:9). He said that people "will see a great light" (v.2b) in the future sense, yet he saw through a telescopic lens of prophecy through which he recorded near term and distant events together. In this case, he saw both the First and the Second Advent of Jesus together as the accomplishment of God's deliverance from their oppressor. Those that are in a state of spiritual darkness will rejoice when their oppressors have been broken (v.4). The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were distant areas just to the west of the Jordan in Galilee that were easily subject to invasion from the foreign enemies. It was in this area that the Lord Jesus called His first disciples, as we will see next in the Gospel message. The Battle of Midian referred to Gideon's victorious battle with his small army of just 300 men waged against the Midianites in Judges 7:22-21:25. It's also important to note that the prophecy of the multiplication of the Nation of Israel (Genesis 22:17) will be fulfilled in the yet future (v.3a).

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel message Jesus began assembling his first disciples after John the Baptist had been arrested. You will see how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy from the Old Testament reading.

Gospel Reading:

12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; 13 and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. 14 This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 15 "THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES– 16 THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED." 17 From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 18 Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. 19 And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 21 Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him. 23 Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:12-23)

In this message, Saint Matthew confirmed that Jesus did in fact fulfill Isaiah's prophecy and quoted it directly as proof. Since the Law required two witness (Deuteronomy 19:15, Isaiah 8:2), God satisfied this requirement through the testimony of both the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Father at Jesus Baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). Jesus took up where John the Baptist left off, saying the same thing as John, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17). Then he settled in the same region that Isaiah prophesied would see a great light (v.16). Here Jesus called four men into discipleship and ministry: Simon Peter, Andrew, and finally James and John, called the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). As He began his ministry he went about teaching, proclaiming the Good News, and healing (v.23). How wonderful would it be to have Jesus with us in his human presence so that we could avail ourselves of His powerful ministry? The truth of the New Covenant is that He does live with us each day through the Holy Spirit – teaching us, proclaiming the Good News, and healing us of our destructive ways. May we learn to listen and receive the ministry of Jesus in our daily lives.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading from 1 Corinthians we mentioned the "transformation of the mind" for the purpose of spreading the Gospel message to the world through the power of God. Read the following verses and then answer the question below.

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2).

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

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. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 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. (John 3:16-18)

What are the prerequisites for someone to have his or her mind be transformed in order to be able to recognize the power of God? How does this come about?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 1-15-2017

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This week we will open with another of Isaiah's "Servant Songs." Last week we looked at the first of these prophetic messages contained in the first reading from Isaiah 42, and the fourth of the Servant Songs in the study question from Isaiah 53. We will look at the introduction to Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians them move onto the Gospel lesson in which we will see the event when John the Baptist announced the promised Messiah.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 49, the second of the Servant Songs in which God the Father addressed the Nation of Israel as a personification of His Servant, and secondly He spoke to His Son the Messiah. As you read, take note of the purposes of the servants, the servant Israel and the Messiah Servant that whom we know as Jesus.

First Reading:

3 And He said to Me, "You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory." 4 But I said, "I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity; Yet surely the justice due to Me is with the LORD, And My reward with My God." 5 And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength), 6 He says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:3-6)

The first purpose of the servants was to restore the Jews to God. The LORD said to His Servant Son that He "formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, in order that

Israel might be gathered to Him" (v.5b-ff). Though Israel was the God's servant (v.3, "My Servant Israel," this Servant Son was born with the express purpose of restoring the people of God to true communion with Him. Jesus said in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37).

The second purpose of the servants was to be a light to the Gentiles so that "My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v.6d). The mechanism through which the restoration came wasn't through Israel, but through Jesus. As we will see later in the second reading, the Church temporarily usurped the role of Israel as a light to the nations, a condition which will be restored during the Great Tribulation. Jesus said to His disciples, "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" (Matthew 28:19-20b). We see that the Church is yet the third servant of God. In spite of the temporary unbelief of some of the Jews, Israel's disobedience was used by God to bring light to the Gentiles through the ministry of this third servant, the Church of Jesus Christ. Saint Paul said that, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" Romans 11:25c). The Church hasn't replaced Israel, because once God has completed his divine plan through the refining fire of the tribulation period all of Israel will be obedient to Him. Paul said, "[A]nd so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB" (Romans 11:26).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The discussion of the Church as the servant of God brings us to the second reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul, a servant of God for the Gentiles (Romans 15:16) brought his message to this ungodly and carnal city of Corinth. The reading is from the opening section of Paul's first message to them. In this very important message his overall purposes were to deal with some divisions in the church, address some serious moral issues, defend his apostolic authority, and to specifically answer several questions from a letter they sent to him (1 Corinthians 7:1). As you read try to keep in mind the purposes of the servant Paul in the same manner we did in the first reading from the Servant Song in Isaiah.

Second Reading:

1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

Here is some background about Sosthenes mentioned in verse 1. This man, whose name means "safe in strength" and pronounced "sose then ace" was likely the amanuensis who wrote the Book for Paul, meaning the one to whom Paul dictated it through the inspiration of Holy Spirit. It's likely that this scholar was a man of high standing in the church, and also the converted synagogue ruler

who is mentioned in Acts 18:17. If this is the same man then he is the one who likely replaced the former ruler Crispus (Acts 18:8) who also became a believer in the Lord Jesus. Though Sosthenes probably wrote down the Letter, Paul added a greeting "in his own hand" at the end (! Corinthians 16:21).

Just as we did when we studied the Servant Song of Isaiah in the first reading, we will cover the purposes of the servant Paul in the opening of First Corinthians. The first purpose of the servant Paul was to speak to the church with the authority of God. He said he was "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" (v. 1a). Later in Chapter 3 he said, "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave [opportunity] to each one" (3:5). It's significant that Paul opened the letter with a statement of authority which stated that his role was ordained by God (v.1a). He made the same statement in the openings of Second Corinthians (2 Corinthians 2:1), Ephesians (Ephesians 1:1), and Colossians (Colossians 1:1). This stamp of authority was very important in order for Paul to be able to speak with God's power to the Corinthians who were struggling with a variety of difficult issues in their church. In fact there was open immorality in the church with a man who was having a sexual relationship with his stepmother (5:1).

The second purpose of the servant Paul was to affirm the holiness (or sainthood) of all true believers (v.2c). Paul affirmed this in the Letter to the Romans when he said, "to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints" (Romans 1:7). The idea behind the usage of this particular word translated as "saint" from the original is holiness, meaning to be set apart. This means that one should be morally pure or blameless, unique from the ordinary culture that does not view human beings as much different than animals. Some Bible versions have used the word "holy" instead of "saint." Either way, the people of God are both called to *be* holy and are affirmed *as being* holy in Paul's opening statement. This "already, not yet" call to holy living is echoed throughout the Epistles. Through belief in Jesus the righteousness of God *has been* imparted to a believer (Romans 3:21-22). However, God calls believers to live righteously on an ongoing basis. Paul said in Romans, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, **acceptable to God**, which is your spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1, emphasis added). So we may remark that someone is a "saint" when they display unusual patience or kindness, but truly each child of God is a saint. Let's live up to this glorious calling in our moment by moment choices, attitudes and lives.

The third purpose of God's servant Paul was to affirm and call for the unity of the church. Paul said, "with **all who in every place** call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **their Lord and ours**" (2d, emphasis added). Unity in the church was one of Paul's most important purposes as later in Chapter 1 he launched into this critical topic for the Corinthians. He said, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). He continued, saying, "For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's [people], that there are quarrels among you" (v.11). Later in the Letter Paul explained the importance of unity in the Church. He said, "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" (12:12). Then, he extended this analogy to a theoretical conversation between parts of the human body. "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body" (12:15). Since the human body has to be united in order to function, the Church of God must also be unified in their purpose.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, keep in mind how Paul spoke with the mind of God when he announced his purposes in the opening of the Letter to the Corinthians. In the opening verse of the lesson today from Saint John Chapter 1, John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest man that ever lived (Matthew 11:11), announced the beginning of the ministry and purpose of Jesus Christ. He also affirmed his authority as one who was appointed as the forerunner and witness of Jesus' baptism by both water and the Holy Spirit.

Gospel Reading:

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.' 31 And I did not recognize Him, but in order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." 32 And John bore witness saying, "I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him. 33 And I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29-34)

John the Baptist affirmed Jesus' mission to the world when he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (v.29b). The use of the word picture "Lamb of God" would have alerted those familiar with the sacrificial system the nature of Jesus' mission. By His death on the cross, He made the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. But we must accept this sacrifice on our behalf for it to save us. Have you recognized Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away your sin?

John announced that although he was baptizing with water (as a sign of the people's repentance from sin), Jesus would baptize in a different way, with the Holy Spirit of God (v. 33d). This baptism of the Holy Spirit is the gift that Jesus left the Church. Jesus said, "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; [that is] the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, [but] you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you (John 14:16-17).

A second purpose of John was that he affirmed his personal humility and faith in God's announcement concerning the Messiah. He said, "And I did not recognize Him" (v.33a). Does this means that the even the greatest man that ever lived didn't immediately recognize the Messiah? He certainly knew Jesus as a person, but not as the Messiah, until it was revealed to him explicitly by God through the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the way in which the Holy Spirit would come

upon the Promised One. Imagine the life of John the Baptist. From the day he was born, he was told by his parents and then through divine messages from God in the form of the Old Testament Scriptures that he was to be the one that announced the long awaited Messiah. Then when Jesus actually arrived on the scene to begin his public ministry he stated that he didn't recognize Him as the Messiah until God granted him a divine revelation that this was indeed the One whom he was expecting.

How about us, are willing to humbly admit our inability to see Jesus? Do we trust in God's word concerning Him, as John the Baptist did? It's like the little boy Johnny who always wanted to be a fireman, in a region that hadn't had a fire in hundreds of years. His parents told him he would be a firefighter. His friends told him he would be a firefighter. When he graduated high school, he enrolled in training to be a firefighter. One day the alarm bell rang in the training center and he knew that he was going to see a real fire. When he got there, he said, "Boy, I have never actually seen a fire before, that doesn't look like a fire." At that the fire chief said, "Johnny, that's a fire," which quickly settled the matter. Johnny may have looked a bit silly in front of his classmates, but he truly spoke what was on his mind. John the Baptist, whose whole short life was dedicated to the express purpose of the forerunner of the Messiah, the one to announce His ministry; was in a similar spot. When he saw Jesus he didn't recognize Him right away as the Messiah. But, when God spoke the matter was confirmed once and forever.

Let's be humble like John the Baptist and admit we need eyes to see the reality of the Messiah as we read Scripture and we live our lives. Since God wants to reveal the Messiah, He will help us to see with fresh awareness the glory of Jesus as the Messiah and what a difference He can make in our lives even today.

Reflection Questions

1. What about us, what has God raised us up to be watching for? What are the purposes that God has placed upon *our* hearts as servants of the Lord? Consider taking the following action. Pray right now for God to reveal one or two things, write them down, and reflect upon them this week.

2. If all true Christians are "saints" how does that change your view of your life's purpose and meaning? How can you live into the identity of being set apart for special use?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 1-8-2017



Although the gift-giving season of Christmas has just passed from our radar screens, the tradition of gift giving is found in each of the readings of the mass this week. In the Old Testament reading, we see that people will give gifts to Jesus, the King, who will reign on earth during His second advent. The New Testament reading shows us how St. Paul was God's gift to the Gentiles. And the Gospel reading recounts the story of the Wise Men who came from the East to give gifts to Jesus during His first advent.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week we are first going to examine the second reading from Saint Paul because the first reading from Isaiah and Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew must be studied together in light of the insights from Paul. The second reading is Ephesians Chapter Three where Paul unveiled a mystery that had been hidden throughout the ages until after Jesus' First Advent, what we just celebrated at Christmas. As you read this section of Ephesians (without all of the skipped verses) try to select the single verse that Saint Paul provided which summarized this mystery.

Second Reading:

1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles– 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; 3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. 4 And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; 6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel, (Ephesians 3:1-6)

Even though Saint Paul did minister to the Jews (see for example Acts 13:14) his *primary* ministry was to the Gentiles. In contrast, Peter's main ministry was to the Jews. Paul, through the providence of the Holy Spirit, said that God placed him into the position of stewardship over the Gentile believers in the Church (verses 1 – 2). He said elsewhere in Galatians, "But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the Gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:7). God determined that the *primary* focus of his ministry was to give the Gospel to the Gentiles, the same way that He sent Saint Peter to bring the message to the Jews. Though God set Paul apart to concentrate his ministry on the Gentile people, his background was that of a devout Jew (Philippians 3:5) and his heart was set upon winning the Jews to the Kingdom of God.

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted (Romans 11:17) into the people of God through the Church. It is important to understand, at least from a high level, Paul's background while we discuss this mystery which was revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who from all accounts would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strictly Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the

Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The quotation above from Isaiah brings us to the first reading, found in Chapter 60. As we said before, with the benefit of history and hindsight we understand that this section of Isaiah refers to the Second Advent of Jesus Christ, namely when He returns in glory. With this context in mind, study the reading and take special note of the gifts that the Gentile believers will bring to the LORD.

First Reading:

1 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth, And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you, And His glory will appear upon you. 3 And nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v.2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v.3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for November 2, 2013. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

Note the types of gifts that the future Gentile leaders will bring to King Jesus. "They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6d). Throughout history, gold has been the most valuable of all metals. It's a rare and valuable treasure, and the perfect commodity that never degrades – making it an excellent gift to bring to Jesus, who is reigning as LORD. Frankincense is something very familiar to any Catholic, as this material produces a most pleasant aroma when burned and has the smell of perfume in its native form. I was an altar boy for most of my younger years and was frequently in close proximity to the priest burning this sweet swelling material. The burning of incense is symbolic of the prayers of the faithful rising

to heaven (Revelation 5:8). The future world leaders will present their gifts of gold and incense directly to the Source of their salvation, the Lord Himself! What a joyous occasion this will be!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This brings us to the Gospel lesson from Matthew Chapter Two in which we find the Magi presenting their gifts to the King of the Universe. Read the text and take particular note of their **three** gifts.

Gospel Reading:

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." 3 And when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he began to inquire of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 And they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet, 6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER, WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called the magi, and ascertained from them the time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, "Go and make careful search for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, that I too may come and worship Him." 9 And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. 10 And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way. (Matthew 2:1-12)

The context of this section is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, probably less than two years old as we see from Herod who later in Matthew made a plan to kill all infants two years old or younger. The Magi were likely people from the Babylonian region along the Euphrates River in present day Iraq south of Baghdad. These mysterious scholars were highly educated people that were part pagan priest, part magician, and part scribe. They were also interested in astrology and this was woven into their mystical religious beliefs. Nowhere in the text does it say that there were three of them, as in the famous song about the three wise men. This designation comes from the three gifts they brought with them to present to the King. There were likely a small group of them but they would have been accompanied by a large number of guards and servants. Thus this would have made their arrival that much more disturbing to King Herod.

The Jewish priests and scribes told the Magi the prophecy from the Prophet Micah, which they evidently weren't aware of, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This must be the case or they would have gone directly to Bethlehem in the first place and avoided King Herod.

Verse 9 said, "And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they **had seen** in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was" (emphasis added). Then, the star reappeared! So what did they do? Did they stop and ask for further directions? No, followed it and went to Bethlehem! Now they had both the prophetic prophesy from the Jews, and the star to guide them. Therefore, they kept going on the journey, but had to BELIEVE God's revelation and follow it.

Finally, when they arrived in Bethlehem and located Jesus, they presented their *three* gifts to him. The Magi's gift of gold would have been very useful to the holy family during their subsequent flight to Egypt necessary to flee King Herod. Notice the similarity of their gifts mentioned in the first reading from Isaiah 60 but with one glaring addition: myrrh. Myrrh was something used throughout the eastern world as an embalming agent. These kings of the east presented Mary and Joseph with a precious gift that could be used for the future burial of their Son. Look at it this way. One day you attended the baptism of an infant in the church, and afterwards one of the guests presented the happy couple with a beautiful new coffin for the child. Yes, the coffin could be sold and the money used to raise the child, but what kind of a message would the presentation of such a gift make to the parents? The magi, unbeknownst to themselves, predicted the death of the Messiah. Little did they know that His death was a necessary part of the redemptive story so that you and I might have eternal life. In a future age Gentile believers will present gifts of gold and incense to Jesus, the need for myrrh has been done away with because Jesus rose from the dead and conquered death for you and me.

The chain of ideas that emerged from the text is as follows. First, God gives revelation in order to find Jesus. Second, God calls us to believe his revelation and follow it. Finally, when we truly meet with God our response is joy, worship and giving! The bottom line is this. God calls us to believe and follow His revelation about Jesus and when we do our response is joy, worship and giving.

Reflection Questions

1. Think about the message that you send implicitly when you send someone a gift. A child gives his father a pair of gloves for Christmas. Another child gives his mother a box of candy. In light of the New Year and the idea of making resolutions for the next twelve months, what single gift could you present to Jesus this year?

2. It is easy to criticize the Pharisees for judging the Gentiles and for considering them "unworthy" of being saved. The definition of grace is that no one is worthy of it. It is God's unmerited favor. Think about your own attitude towards those who seem unlikely to become Christians. Is there someone who you can identify as unlikely to be a fellow heir, a fellow member of the body and a fellow partaker in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel? Commit to pray for this person and look for ways to be like St. Paul by loving them and speaking the truth of the Gospel to them.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-25-2016



Christmas Day, Mass at Dawn. Merry Christmas and welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week in this brief edition, we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's been an interesting couple of weeks for me as I write this in December, 2016. Although I have been very busy at work due to a colleague on leave to help his wife with their new son (praise God), my heart has been moved by the loss of two friends in recent days. The first, a dear saint of the Lord was taken after a brief illness brought about as the result of an auto accident. I am thankful that his suffering only lasted a few weeks and am very grateful for his Christian testimony that he left behind. I went to school with David from kindergarten to 12'th grade. Although his funeral was held on the other side of the country, through the wonders of technology, I was able to watch it live online. The second one was a former coworker who fought a decade long battle with breast cancer. The passing away of friends is always hard, but when it happens at Christmas it's worse. All that we can do is to look forward to Jesus' eventual return to destroy death forever. This is how we can look at today's readings. We seek to understand their challenges and learn how they too looked forward

to the eternal reign of the perfect Messiah on a perfect earth with people made perfect by God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Isaiah is a continuation of God's promised blessings that were to come upon the land. Isaiah's words looked far into the future to a point during which "The sun shall be nor more your light by day" (Isaiah 60:19a). We see this same era described by John in the closing section of the Book of Revelation. "And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). Isaiah transcribed events given to him by God such as to collapse near and far terms events together, and spoke of events that have both a near term and distant fulfillment, such as the prophecy of the birth of the child in Isaiah 7:14. There we see the birth of a son to Isaiah as a sign to King Ahaz, as well as the prophecy of the birth of The Son Jesus to the Virgin Mary. The opening verses of this chapter continue the explanation of how the Hebrew nation, exemplified in His holy city Jerusalem, will be a light to *all* of the nations, not just to those in our current age who believe.

First Reading:

Isaiah 62:11-12 NAS95 11 Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth, Say to the daughter of Zion, "Lo, your salvation comes; Behold His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him." 12 And they will call them, "The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD"; And you will be called, "Sought out, a city not forsaken."

Isaiah proclaimed God's message about how God would bring salvation to the ends of the earth through a Person, with God's people and holy city as a beacon displaying His holiness and beauty. Verse 11 is the case were with the benefit of hindsight we see a dual fulfillment, First, we see salvation as coming in the form of a Person, "Behold His reward is with Him," prefiguring the beginning of the Lord Jesus' ministry. Second, we see the promise of the completion of the Messiah's ministry that Scripture says will happen at His second coming when He will establish His kingdom reign on earth. The proclamation in this verse is directed towards God, something that we also see in a similar way in Cyrus' proclamation to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (see 2 Chronicles 36:22-23). The Lord has proclaimed to the ends of the earth that His Righteous One will come and bring His rewards to all who believe with Him. In Isaiah's day, the temple in Jerusalem was the beacon of God's holiness to His chosen people the Jews. One day, Jerusalem, the holy city and beacon of God's chosen people, will no longer be called "forsaken," but "sought out" (v. 12).

What does Isaiah's message directed to the Hebrew Nation back in the eighth century BC mean to us today? Although we too may feel forsaken as we endure pain, suffering and death, we too can focus upon and believe that God will one day fix everything! Although we may struggle today, we are promised by God with a proclamation that reaches until the ends of the earth that our future restoration is coming. God proclaims a message to everyone so that they will believe, and "is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Second, as Christians we too are called to be beacons of God's good news like the

Jews. We too are the "sought out" (v. 12) ones, a people who God went selected to believe through the free gift of faith in His one and only Son Jesus. Although in our era we cannot relate to how God's holiness was manifested in the temple in Jerusalem, we have to remember that when Isaiah wrote this although the temple was standing its destruction and ruin was in the near future. God spoke through Isaiah as if the eternal temple of God was already manifested to His people. God calls us in a similar way to remember that although the "temples" of our bodies will be destroyed, God's holiness will be displayed through our future restoration to a kingdom in which there will be no pain. There we will be God's eternal beacons of His holiness forever.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from Titus is Paul's teaching on the characteristics of godly leaders in the church. In verses 1 – 2 of this chapter Paul gave a list of things that leaders were to do, followed by a reminder of the evil ways in which they used to live before they found faith in the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

Titus 3:4-7 NAS95 4 But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, 5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Today's reading opens with the phrase, "But when," which provides a linkage back to the list of ungodly characteristics which God had delivered them from as the result of His indwelling Holy Spirit after they had believed. Paul went on to explain in today's reading how God saves people not because of their good works, "but according to His mercy" (v. 4c). He delivers us from our former sinful state through "the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" Who was manifested to us through the person of Jesus Christ (v. 6) so that "being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (v. 7).

The "But when" phrase in the opening harkens back to what Paul wrote in Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." But for God all of us would be dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). As Paul did in Ephesians, he explained in today's reading how good works do not earn a person merit with God that counts towards their earning their way into heaven. Rather, salvation is a free gift of God for everyone who believes. Good works flow out of a heart changed by God as evidence of the Holy Spirit's transformation ministry.

This reading along with many others reveals the nature of salvation as a free gift, not something that we can earn, no matter how hard we try. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Our justly deserved payment for our sins is death, "for the wages of sin is death but the **gift** of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23, emphasis added). Saint Paul also said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the

gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). How appropriate it is to understand during this Christmas season if we are fortunate enough to open presents that salvation is the greatest gift of all that comes only through our faith in the risen Lord Jesus! May we recognize this grandest of all gifts and share this gift with others by telling them about Jesus' plan for their lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Luke and records the details just after Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem. The "Angel of the Lord" had just appeared to a group of frightened shepherds in the field and brought a message to them. "But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12). Next, "suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased'" (Luke 2:13-14).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:15-20 NAS95 15 When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. 17 When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

The shepherds were so deeply moved by their experience with the angels that they went immediately to Bethlehem, the City of David, as told by the angel. Here they found the baby Jesus lying in a manger just as the angel said it would be. How fitting it was for Jesus to be born here, "the Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), since this is where all of the sacrificial lambs had to be born. In the closing verses, Dr. Luke records how Mary quietly "treasured all [of] these things" (v. 19a), while the shepherds went off publically proclaiming the miracle and praising God. This differing response reflects Mary's self-reflective nature, although many commentators have made much discussion concerning it. Regardless, the shepherds began the proclamation of the good news of Jesus' birth in a way that glorified God (v. 20). We can only wonder about the joy that Mary and Joseph must have felt in their hearts!

Perhaps the shepherds weren't the most unlikely group to whom the angel would reveal the prophecy about the birth of the Lord Jesus in nearby Bethlehem. Although they were a group of people who were considered some of the lowest in the society, Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Therefore, what better way for God to reveal His plan to the world than

through a group of shepherds near Bethlehem?

We too come like lowly shepherds seeking the Lord Jesus Christ. As we saw in today's readings, Jesus is the free gift about Whom the prophets and shepherds proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Let's pray that today that no matter what comes upon us this Christmas season that we maintain our focus upon this greatest gift that was ever given, the Lord Jesus Christ who died to take away our sins. Merry Christmas.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do you feel that you are trying to earn your way to heaven? How does the second reading help you to understand God's truth about the way one comes to possess eternal life with God?

2. If Jesus was to be born in our present day, who would be the group of "shepherds" in our society? How does understanding the revelation of Jesus through this lowest social class in the ancient society help us to relate to how Jesus reveals Himself to us today?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-18-2016

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This week as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ like last week we will be studying some important prophetic voices from the Old Testament. We will also be reading from the Gospel of Saint Matthew to hear how he confirmed that the coming birth of Jesus would fulfil these predictions made centuries earlier.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Before we turn to the first reading from Chapter 7 in Isaiah it's important for us to explain the personality of King Ahaz, the King of the Southern Tribe of Judah, about whom Isaiah will be speaking. Ahaz was son of King Jotham, the latter whom was a godly ruler of Judah. King Ahaz came into power when he was 20 years of age and he went bad immediately at the beginning of his reign. Second Chronicles provides an important insight into the personality of the King. "But he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel; he also made molten images for the Baals" (2 Chronicles 28:2). Not only was Ahaz an idolater who caused the circulation of idols to the god Baal, but he even burned his own children as sacrifices to false gods. The Scripture said, "But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, and even made his son pass through the fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had driven out from before the sons of Israel" (2 Kings 16:3). He went from bad to worse after the attack of the King of Assyria who had already overtaken the Northern Tribes.

20 So Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria came against him and afflicted him instead of strengthening him. 21 Although Ahaz took a portion out of the house of the LORD and out of the palace of the king and of the princes, and gave it to the king of Assyria, it did not help him. 22 Now in the time of his distress this same King Ahaz became yet more unfaithful to the LORD. 23 For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Aram helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they became the downfall of him and all

Israel. (2 Chronicles 28:20-23)

As if that wasn't bad enough, Ahaz then went on to block the entrance to the temple in order to prevent the true worship of God (2 Chronicles 28:25). King Ahaz started out bad and continued in his ungodly rule until the very end of his life without ever having a change of heart and repenting of his sin. It's with this understanding of the king that we turn to the text of the first reading from Isaiah.

First Reading:

10 Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz, saying, 11 "Ask a sign for yourself from the LORD your God; make it deep as Sheol or high as heaven." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, nor will I test the LORD!" 13 Then he said, "Listen now, O house of David! Is it too slight a thing for you to try the patience of men, that you will try the patience of my God as well? 14 "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:10-14

The Lord gave King Ahaz the opportunity to trust in Him by asking for a sign. Instead of asking for a sign, King Ahaz spoke out of the pride and self-reliance of his heart, which displeased the Lord. God had given him an invitation and he refused to accept it. This "tried" the patience of the Lord because he persisted in his independence and refused to trust in God's provision of a sign to assure him. God used this event of obstinate disobedience to foretell of Messiah. This prophecy was ultimately fulfilled through the birth of Jesus by the Virgin Mary.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Because the Gospel reading relates to the prophecy of Isaiah from the first reading we will consider that passage next. This reading is from the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew.

Gospel Reading:

18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. 19 And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. 20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 "And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins." 22 Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, 23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." 24 And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, 25 and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

While many of us are already familiar with the narrative concerning the birth of Jesus, this passage highlights important truths for our lives. First, Saint Matthew brought out the fact that Jesus was born not through natural human relations but through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. This is important because since God is without sin this was the only means by which the sinless God-Man could come into the world. Second, since the virgin birth was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy we can trust other prophecies that speak to areas of our life and ministry. This includes things like how the second coming of the Lord will play out, how the world will be eventually unified under Jesus' earthly reign. Third, Jesus was sent to save His people from their sins. This is God's special invitation to counteract the destructive nature of sin in order to stand before a Holy God and not be rejected at the judgment. This is not only "a" plan for salvation, it is "the" plan. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Matthew's Gospel also brings out an important prophetic fulfillment regarding the title of Jesus as Immanuel. This title means "God with us" which is an important relationship aspect of the Messiah's advent. The Messiah reveals the heart of God as One who lives among us. The implications of Jesus being called Immanuel are twofold. First, Jesus came so that we might come to the Father through Him. Second Jesus moved into the neighborhood to stay in order to show us God's love so that we might live eternally with Him. Christianity is the only belief system that purports that God became a man and died for our sins. That is the powerful implication of Immanuel, God with us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the second reading from Romans, Saint Paul also confirmed the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding Jesus. While these are introductory remarks and salutations, there are many meaningful truths contained here.

Second Reading:

1 Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, 4 who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake, 6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; 7 to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1-7)

It would be easy to read this passage casually and gloss over the deep insights, but Paul confirmed the following truths about Jesus and His people.

1. Jesus birth and ministry was predicted by Old Testament Scriptures (v.2).
2. Jesus would be born in the line of King David as to his earthly genealogy (v.3).
3. He would be the Son of God and as God would have the power to be resurrected from the dead (v.4a), and be filled with the Holy Spirit (v.4a).

4. He would be perfectly holy (v.4b).
5. He would be the Lord of the Church.
6. All grace would flow through Jesus (v.5)
7. Jesus would establish the apostles of the church, including Paul (v.5).
8. His Church would bring about obedience and faith (v.5).
9. Paul's ministry would extend to the Gentiles (v.5).
10. All believers would be called "saints" and, like the apostles, called out to ministry (v.7).

Saint Paul knew Jesus in a multi-faceted way, which should be a model for us as followers of Him today. Most importantly, we need to recognize Jesus as the Son of God who was raised from the dead and lived a holy life through the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can receive His grace. Receiving His grace means that I am now in good favor with the Father and I am declared righteous.

Reflection Questions

1. Review the list above from the second reading in Romans 1 about Jesus. Choose one point and think about how this truth affects your life.

2. What difference does it make to you to know that Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us"?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-11-2016

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading today is from Isaiah Chapter 35. Before we read the text, it's important to take note of the context, the audience to whom Isaiah was speaking, and information that we can glean from other prophetic voices in the Bible. This prophet ministered to the people of the Southern Tribes of Israel including Benjamin and Judah during the time that the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Assyria. Micah and Hosea were prophets speaking on behalf of God at the same time as Isaiah. His message was one of repentance and subsequent hope for the future. Isaiah was a forerunner, one that announced the coming Messiah and his future kingdom, much like John the Baptist in the New Testament. Like the other prophets, Isaiah often saw near and far term events "telescoped" together, but even more so because of the greater range of his visions. This is called by the theological term "prophetic foreshortening." When we look back in hindsight, it's easy for us to differentiate between the near term events and those in the distant future that have yet to be fulfilled. However, when we look at the events which haven't been fulfilled yet, such as the future era known by biblical scholars as the Millennial Kingdom, it's more difficult to determine the order

and timing of the events. This portion of Chapter 35 concerns the coming Kingdom which would be brought in by the Messiah. Looking back we understand that this would be fulfilled at Jesus' Second Coming. But Isaiah did not have the advantage of knowing the difference between what would happen when Jesus came the first time and what is yet to take place at His second coming. This is why it's important to understand the whole of Scripture when we read isolated portions of the prophetic Books.

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

First Reading:

1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus 2 It will blossom profusely And rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, The majesty of our God. 3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. 4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 And the scorched land will become a pool, And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes. 8 And a highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it will be for him who walks that way, And fools will not wander on it. 9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there. But the redeemed will walk there, 10 And the ransomed of the LORD will return, And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10)

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

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century

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

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

Micah said that the kingdom of the Messiah would be a time of peace, when weapons of war would be turned into peaceful use (v.3). In this age the city of Jerusalem would be the capital city of the universe (v.1) and the King would serve as the perfect judge over the entire world (v.3). The Jews misinterpreted this to mean that the Messiah would immediately usher in His Kingdom when he came, and who can blame them? It was only after Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and explained the Scriptures (Luke 24:27) to them that **some of them** understood. Even then, some doubted (Matthew 28:17).

Malachi was another prophet who called the people of God to be patient. He provided clear details about the events concerning the coming of the Messiah. In fact, Malachi announced that a forerunner, who we know as John the Baptist, would precede Jesus. He said, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). This New Testament Prophet would come in the spirit of the Prophet Elijah (John 19:21), and that Elijah would return during the coming tribulation period. Malachi said, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Exercising patience is very important especially when we expect God to come rushing in and fix the events in the fallen world. This is even more important when, like the Jews, we experience injustice at the hands of our civil rulers. In the second reading today from Saint James, we see this important

leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:13) cautioning the young Church about the need to be patient concerning the return of the Lord Jesus.

Second Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

2 Now when John in prison heard of the works of Christ, he sent word by his disciples, 3 and said to Him, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" 4 And Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM. 6 And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over Me." 7 And as these were going away, Jesus began to speak to the multitudes about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces. 9 But why did

you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' 11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:2-11)

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he

who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:16-21)

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

How do these Scriptures provide you with hope, especially during the Christmas season? Perhaps you would be willing to leave a comment on our web page or Facebook.

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-04-2016

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What are you looking forward to? This question may have a myriad of answers: Christmas, time with family, a new year, a raise . . . But after all of this comes and goes, what else are you looking forward to? At the end of your life, what do you have to look forward to? When nothing seems to be going right, is there something outside of the rollercoaster of this life to look forward to?

The Bible speaks much about expectation, hope and things to come. Because it is divinely inspired, it has the unique voice to speak to us from an eternal perspective about real hope and what we can look forward to. This week we will begin with Isaiah's prophecy to the Jews in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah, the Jewish hope of a Deliverer. Next, we will study what Saint Paul had to say about Jesus as the hope of the Gentiles, and conclude with a Gospel lesson from Matthew about John the Baptist's pronouncement of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Today, both the first and second readings as well as the Gospel lesson were either directly from Isaiah or drawn from this Old Testament prophet. As a review, Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the period from about 740 to 700 BC. He spoke words of both condemnation and hope to the tribes of Benjamin and Judah concerning their impending capture by the Babylonian empire. This was during the same time in which the Northern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 BC.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah Chapter 11. Isaiah writes in a form called "prophetic foreshortening" in which two events (one near and one far away) are written in such a way that seems to convey that they happen at the same time. Study the text and see if you can locate the transition point where the prophecy regarding Jesus shifts from the First Coming to His Second Coming.

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First Reading:

1 Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, And a branch from his roots will bear fruit. 2 And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him, The spirit of wisdom and understanding, The spirit of counsel and strength, The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 And He will delight in the fear of the LORD, And He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; 4 But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. 5 Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, And faithfulness the belt about His waist. 6 And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them. 7 Also the cow and the bear will graze; Their young will lie down together; And the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 And the nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD As the waters cover the sea. 10 Then it will come about in that day That the nations will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious. (Isaiah 11:1-10)

Isaiah revealed some important truths about the source of the Messiah, the nature of the Messiah, and the nature of his future "millennial" kingdom on earth. Isaiah said that Jesus would come from the line of Jesse (v.1), who was King David's father. He said that He would possess the "Spirit of the LORD", wisdom and understanding, and the "spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (v.2). Next, in verses 3-4 a transition occurred which pointed to the future reign of Jesus initiated at His Second Coming. Isaiah said, "He will not judge by what His eyes see, Nor make a decision by what His ears hear; But with righteousness He will judge the poor, And decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; And He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, And with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked." This means that justice will finally reign on the earth because Jesus will be physically ruling and reigning. Right now in this era of human history, evil is not always immediately punished and many times the wicked prosper by their cunning schemes. Not so in the millennial reign of King Jesus. The first time Jesus came to the earth as a Servant and like a Lamb (Isaiah 53:7). But when Jesus returns a second time He will rule the earth with a rod of iron (Revelation 2:27) and as a Lion (Revelation 5:5). Jesus' reign will occur during the future Millennial Kingdom when Jesus will reign over the earth for a thousand years beginning immediately after the end of the Great Tribulation period. If this sounds terrifying to you, it doesn't have to be. When you place your faith in Christ's righteousness, you do not have to fear His rule and reign, because you are united with Him forever. "There is therefore, now, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). If you are not in Christ Jesus, then your fear should be a wake-up call to consider your eternal destiny.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading from Romans 15:4-9 (plus the skipped verses 10-12), again we

find a writing from Isaiah, one of the most frequently quoted of the prophets. The text opens with an important admonition about the value of the Old Testament Scriptures. As you read, note the importance of this admonition as well as the connection to the first reading from Isaiah 11.

Second Reading:

4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; 6 that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO THEE AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO THY NAME." 10 And again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." 11 And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." 12 And again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." (Romans 15:4-12)

The opening admonition was that "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (v.4). Saint Paul went on to quote from several Psalms and then Isaiah. In verse 12 Paul quoted directly from the same section of text that we read in the first reading, Isaiah 11 verses 1 and 10. Paul did so to show that this portion of Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus at His First Coming, and to give hope to the Gentile Roman believers. He said, "Let all the peoples praise Him" (v.11a), not just the Jewish believers but believers from every tribe and nation. We can encourage one another through these words since we see that the Scriptures are true, and that this prophecy is fulfilled through Jesus. We can trust that the since the prophesies concerning Jesus' First Coming were proven to be true we can trust that the prediction of the things that will happen at His Second Coming are also true.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Before we move onto the Gospel lesson, I want to share a section in the Gospel of Saint Luke Chapter 4 because it helps to illustrate the importance of Isaiah's prophetic writings. When Isaiah wrote his Book all of the events concerning Jesus were yet future. Yet in this section in Saint Luke Jesus quoted from Isaiah and said that a portion of it was being fulfilled at that very instant. But Jesus stopped his quote exactly at that point at which the prophetic timetable turned to events concerning His Second Coming. In Luke Chapter 4, Jesus is just beginning His ministry and he had returned to his home town of Nazareth. The context of this section is just after Jesus' baptism, which is the same time period as the Gospel lesson today in Matthew that we will look at later in this study. Read the text from Saint Luke and carefully note Jesus' quotation from Isaiah that is marked in all CAPITAL LETTERS.

16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWNTRODDEN, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

In this section of Luke, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1-2a but stopped short of the concluding portion of Isaiah 61:2. Verse two, with the section highlighted that Jesus omitted from Isaiah, said "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, **And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn**." Jesus said in verse 21b of Luke 4, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v.21b). It's very significant that Jesus stopped where he did when he was quoting from Isaiah because it is important to understand the distinction between the purpose of His First Coming and of His second coming. We live in the "pause" between the First and Second Coming of Christ. This era allows us time to choose to embrace the favor of the Lord (grace) through faith. The next era, though, will usher in the day of "vengeance of our God." Who can stand in the midst of Him setting the record straight? None of us has a chance outside of God's wonderful provision through the death of His Son, Jesus at His first coming. Understanding this distinction will make it possible to properly understand the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. It also helps to interpret the future events in the Book of Revelation including the purpose of the Great Tribulation period that we discussed last week.

The Gospel lesson today was from Matthew Chapter 3. Again, the text contained a quotation from the Prophet Isaiah as indicated by the capital letters.

Gospel Reading:

1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'" 4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I,

and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:1-12)

In this Gospel reading, John the Baptist announced the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. He quoted from Isaiah 40:3 showing that he was the one about whom the Prophet Isaiah was speaking when he said, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT." Next, Matthew described the ministry and nature of John the Baptist including his opposition from the two prominent groups that later also opposed Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees. John the Baptist warned that Jesus would eventually judge these oppressors (v.12). In retrospect we understand now that Jesus' judgment of them will not occur until His Second Coming, something which was unexpected – likely even to John the Baptist. The apostles expected Jesus to set up His Kingdom at any moment (John 6:15). The text today was just before Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:16). After Jesus was baptized another portion of Isaiah 11 was fulfilled when the Spirit of God descended like a dove and came to rest on Jesus (Matthew 3:16). Looking back to the first reading we see, "the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him (Isaiah 11:2a).

What's the importance of this Gospel reading for your life as a believer in Jesus Christ? First, we can trust the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus' First Coming because we can read about the facts of their fulfillment in the New Testament. Second, since we can trust the prophecies about Jesus' First Advent we can trust those about His Second Coming. Jesus' Second coming is when the believing world will realize the wonderful promises from God including restoration of the world to its pre-fallen, sinless condition. Isaiah said in the first reading, "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We have hope that Jesus' Millennial Kingdom will be a world of universal peace. This promise should motivate us to reach out to those in our community who don't know Jesus Christ personally. Thirdly, the Gospel reading warns us to not be deceived about our standing before God. The Pharisees and Sadducees were putting their trust in the wrong place (being children of Abraham). John the Baptist confronted this false belief and pointed them to put their trust in the only One who could truly save them, Jesus, the Promised Messiah.

Reflection Questions

1. Even though prophecy constitutes about one third of the Bible the importance of this genre is frequently downplayed and the interpretation is often spiritualized. Yet we know that living with a proper anticipation of the Lord's return encourages holy living as well as dedication in loving Jesus with our whole heart. Read the following Scripture. How does this cause you to live a more holy life as well as to reach out to others that don't know Jesus?

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7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint. 10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:7-11)

2. List a few characteristics of a forerunner, one who goes before someone. In what ways are you as a believer in the risen Lord Jesus Christ called to be a forerunner, like John the Baptist?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 11-20-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about the appointment of godly King David. In the second reading, we learn about our position in Christ as believers. In the Gospel lesson, we see how faith in Christ leads us to eternal life the moment we believe, even if we have committed horrible crimes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Samuel. At this time in Israel's history, the nation was divided. David had become King only over Hebron, while a large portion of the country was still holding allegiance to Saul's lineage of rulership through his son Ish-bosheth. Upon Ish-bosheth's death, the leaders realized that they were like sheep without a shepherd and finally gave David their allegiance to be king over them as well. This passage tells how David became king over all of Israel.

First Reading:

2 Samuel 5:1-3 NASB 1 Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Behold, we are your bone and your flesh. 2 Previously, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and in. And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will be a ruler over Israel.'" 3 So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them before the LORD at Hebron; then they anointed David king over Israel.

The leaders of the tribes of Israel made a public declaration of allegiance to David as King. It might have been a little uncomfortable to admit defeat and finally give allegiance to the rightful king that God had anointed, but they finally did. They relayed several reasons for being willing to give David their allegiance: 1) He was one of them, they are brothers; 2) David had proven his trustworthiness; 3) David was God's appointed ruler. These leaders had to come to terms with their misplaced

allegiance in order to give their full support to David as King. With this public declaration, Israel was now united under one ruler and the civil war that had devastated the people for many years could now end.

This is a significant passage in the redemptive story of God's people, Israel, for God had predicted that David's kingdom would have no end. This passage verifies that God's will was accomplished, even though it took many years and many trials for David to finally be anointed King over all of Israel.

This passage also points to a future King who would be of our bone and flesh (Heb. 2:17), who would show His trustworthiness through His sacrificial leadership (Rev. 19:11), and who would be the good shepherd of people who would surrender their lives to His rulership (John 10:11). Jesus came from the line of David and "He will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Putting our faith in Jesus is a worthy endeavor as we see the evidence of His competent leadership.

May we be like the elders of the tribes of Israel in this passage. They could no longer hold onto their vanity; instead, we see them surrendering to the king. This sort of scenario gets replayed over and over again as those who are guilty of spiritual treason finally let go of their allegiance to a false king and unconditionally surrender their lives to the rightful king, Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Let's take a look at what Saint Paul had to say to the Colossians in the second reading today.

Second Reading:

12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities–all things have been created by Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. 19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, 20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. Colossians 1:12-20

Paul provided some deep truths about the nature of our relationship to God as believers in Jesus Christ. These truths are so profound that it's hard to comprehend all that Paul said in this short section. He said that "we have been delivered from the devil's kingdom" (v.13), which is Satan's empire (Matthew 4:9) into which we became citizens when were born. However, after we were born from above (John 3:3) through faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8-9) God forgave our sins and transferred

us into His holy kingdom (Col 1:14). God created everything for His own purposes (v. 16) and He is the Head of the Church, the preeminent One (v.18, also John 3:16 "the only begotten Son"). It was through Jesus' death on the cross as the sin bearer that He made peace with us through His precious blood that was poured out for us (v.20). The peace that Jesus earned for us extends not only to the earth but to the entire universe including heaven (v. 20).

These truths about our new life in Christ are so deep that it reminds me of the words of the Christian hymn "How Great Though Art" of which verse three reads as follows.

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,

Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;

That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,

He bled and died to take away my sin.

Jesus bore *our* burdens on the cross. He did it gladly knowing that through His finished work there He would take away our sin and disarm the powers of darkness (Col 2:15). With these truths in mind let us move into the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel this week in Luke Chapter 23, we jump forward to the Good Doctor's account of the crucifixion of Jesus. This is a sudden turn of events since last week in Chapter 21 Jesus gave a prediction of the destruction of the temple and looked forward to the time of His **second** coming. Read the lesson for today and pay particular attention to the insights that you picked up from Isaiah 53.

Gospel Reading:

32 And two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. 33 And when they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. 34 But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. 35 And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One." 36 And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" 38 Now there was also an inscription above Him, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." 39 And one of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" 40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." 42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" 43 And He said to him, "Truly I say

to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Luke 23:32-43

It played out exactly as Isaiah said it would. Jesus had his possessions divided (v.34), was crucified with others (v.32), and proclaimed to be a King (v.38). Yet even at the hour of His death Jesus showed compassion for others. First, Jesus prayed to God the Father to forgive the people that were bringing about his crucifixion. He said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (v.34a).

Second, when one of the criminals on the cross expressed repentance and faith in Him (v.42) Jesus told him, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise." Isn't it amazing that this criminal's simple faith resulted in Jesus' promise of eternal life with Him in heaven in spite of the fact that he wasn't baptized and had never gone to church or synagogue?

What is the relevance and importance of Luke's teaching for us in our lives today? First, we can be reassured that like the repentant thief on the cross since we too have repented of our sin and trusted in Jesus' finished work on the cross that we will be and are saved. Second, we can trust that we won't receive what we deserve for our deeds but will instead receive rich blessings from God purely as a result of His grace and not as a result of anything that we have done to earn it (Ephesians 2:8-9). Since Jesus already entered His Kingdom these blessings will come to us in both the present time and also in the future when we meet Jesus face to face. "And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,

Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in. How great Thou art!"

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect upon Jesus' words to the repentant thief on the cross. "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42).

A. In what ways is it hard for you to accept that someone who was never baptized, never attended church, or never participated in any sort of religious activities was granted eternal life with Jesus?

B. How long of a time period did Jesus promise would elapse between the present earthly time when the criminal was hanging on the cross and when he would be in paradise with Jesus?

2. Read this verse again from the second reading. "*13 For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*" Taking both this verses and what we learned about salvation in the Gospel lesson, is Jesus making us a promise that we too will inherit eternal life the very day that we die?

3. In the second reading we read from the second chapter of Colossians in which were some very

important truths concerning our position in Christ. This continues the theme Paul began in the opening chapter. In that previous chapter were more truths that are important concerning our position in Christ. Read and reflect upon Paul's Letter the Colossians, Chapter 1 verses 13-14:

"For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

What are the some practical implications of what these verses mean in your life as a believer in Jesus? Answer this question in light of the following contexts:

– When I am feeling afraid

– When I am feeling that evil people are encompassing me

– When I feel that I need to try harder to be a better person and not miss Mass

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-13-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The Bible teaches throughout both the Old and New Testaments the importance or recognizing the immanency of the coming of the Lord Jesus and His eventual return. Later in this lesson we will look at readings from the Old Testament Book of Malachi and in the New Testament the Gospel of Luke that address these topics. In spite of these frequent teachings it's easy to get caught up in our daily lives and overlook the possibility of meeting the Lord ourselves at any given instant. That was the case for me one Sunday afternoon back in the late spring of the year 2000.

It was a breezy afternoon when after church I decided to travel from Metro Detroit to a place called Kettle point in Canada to do some windsurfing. This spot on the southern end of Lake Huron was famous for having very large waves on windy days. This day was no exception and the waves were forecasted to be ten feet tall! Even though it was not normal for him, my brother decided to ride along to watch. I had an excellent afternoon riding the large, smooth waves in the bay. Just before I was going to stop for the day, I came in for a brief rest, and then decided to go out for just one more run. I had a very uneasy feeling as I was carrying the windsurf board back to the water and was compelled to pray very hard for God to keep me safe on this final run.

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I made a turn on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board which sent it flying one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile that same large wave crashed on top of me with my sail! I let loose of the sail and soon realized that I was drowning. I quickly noticed that I was unable to float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves and soon got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air in between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray. As

I continued fighting I had a strange realization and began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real, and is difficult to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me. Yet I continued to fight and pray.

As I was fighting for my life in Lake Huron that day, two things came immediately into my mind. First, I made the vivid realization that I wasn't in control of the timing of when I would meet the Lord, it was up to God! It had been easy for me to think that I was the master of every element of my life. However, when my close call to death happened God used the opportunity to show me that **He** was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He was in control of my life and he had already set the exact day I would meet Him. Who was I to say that I would be alive when he returned as the Bible taught? Second, life-threatening times like this were not a very good time to search out a new relationship with God. You either have one, with Jesus as the Lord of your life and your only hope for salvation, or you don't. The Bible says, "Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

Before I finish the story about what happened to me at Kettle Point, let's look at some of the Scriptures that will be covered in Mass this Sunday and learn about the importance of understanding the prophecies regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus. For this further solidifies that point that we are not in control of the future, God is.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Malachi. Malachi was a prophet who wrote around the time of the closing of the Old Testament Canon. He is one of the Minor Prophets, meaning their Books are shorter than the Major Prophets. This Minor Prophet who wrote one of what I call the "index books," because you shouldn't feel bad if you need to use the index at the front of your Bible to locate them. Malachi is a bit easier to find because it is the very last Book in the Old Testament just before the New Testament Book of Matthew. Malachi's message to Israel was a call to repentance concerning the corrupt priesthood, rampant divorce among the people, their lack of tithing, and poor social justice. The reading for today is from the first two verses in Chapter 4 (some versions mark the verses differently). If we look back to Chapter 3 we see that Malachi predicted both the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). In verse 5 we see the promise of God's future judgment of His people, but in an interesting way. "Then I will draw near to you for judgment" (v.5a). God says that He will be near to the people of Israel but it's for the purpose of judgment. This verse is helpful because it should remind us that as God judges His people He is still near to them, and His judgment is ultimately for their good. Let's read the text from the first reading in Chapter 4 but continue until the end of the chapter.

First Reading:

1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will

be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall. 3 You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." Malachi 4:1-6

Some insights from this text are as follows. When Malachi said "the Day" he was referring to the Day of the Lord (abbreviated DOL) which we spoken about before (link). The DOL is the future period of judgment which commences at the midpoint of the time known as Tribulation Period and marks the beginning of the Great Tribulation (Rev 13:5). The purpose of the Great Tribulation is to bring the Jewish people back to communion with God. Malachi conditioned his prophecy of this terrible time period with a blessing to those who turned to the Lord and repented of their fallen condition. "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth . . . "(v2a,b). Malachi also told another remarkable prophecy when he quoted God stating, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD" (v5). One of the marks of the tribulation period will be the return of the Prophet Elijah. John said in the Book of Revelation, "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophecy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth" (Rev 11:3). Although it's not explicitly stated in Revelation that one of these witnesses is Elijah, his return is predicted by Malachi and this does seem to align with the text in Revelation.

What is the relevance of Malachi's teaching for us in the Church today? As we discussed in those previous lessons, we find in the teachings of Saint Paul that God has granted an escape to all believers alive at His second coming. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). Malachi's call was for the people to repent of their sin and turn the Lord. This is precisely the call for everyone alive on the earth today, from every tribe and nation. Malachi's message serves as both a warning for people to heed the call to turn to the One True God but also to let believers know that God hasn't forsaken His people Israel. God will work actively to redeem His people and show them the need to turn their hearts to Him, even if it means subjecting them to terrible judgment. He will leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is missing (Luke 15:4). If God loves his people Israel so much to go to this length to save them, how much more does He desire that everyone alive today turn to him through faith in Jesus? Saint Paul said, "But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart' –that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"

Romans 10:8-10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 2 Thessalonians is Paul's teaching on avoiding fellowship with anyone holding to false teachings. Believers, Paul said later in this same chapter, were to warn these people, not associate with them, but attempt to win them back to correct teaching (see 2 Thess 3:14 – 15).

Second Reading:

2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 NASB (plus skipped verse 6)

6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

Paul provides advice to the Thessalonians who were struggling with persecution (2 Thess 1:4-6) to break fellowship with those who didn't follow God's teaching (v. 6) but instead to emulate Paul's behavior in serving without an expectation of payment. Although Paul had the right to work as a paid minister he chose not to so as to set an excellent example for others to follow (v. 9). The principle he gave was, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat" (v. 10b). Paul had heard that some among them were not working but were instead "acting like busybodies" (v. 11c). Paul admonished these people with a word from the Lord to emulate him and "work in quiet fashion" (v. 12).

An important point that Paul makes is his connection between work and worship, which is also closely tied to godly stewardship. Paul's admonishment is relevant for us today in that God calls all of us to serve Him in order to be good stewards of the gifts which He has given us. We are called by God to offer our bodies up to Him as "living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). Through this we offer ourselves through our work to God as our "spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1e). Thinking of our work as a form of worship helps us to better understand God's holistic picture and plan that He has for our lives. Perhaps this view is easier to understand for those employed say as musicians in which they can clearly visualize how they are serving God through the beautiful music that they make flow through their instruments. But Paul's admonition to connect work with worship goes beyond the musician even to those who clean streets for a living or run parts in a machine shop.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel lesson today God provided a message which continued the theme of the coming great and terrible Day of the Lord. Let's read the Gospel text from Luke Chapter 21.

Gospel Reading:

5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." 7 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" 8 And He said, "See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is near'. Do not go after them. 9 When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." 10 Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, 11 and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. 16 But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, 17 and you will be hated by all because of My name. 18 Yet not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:5-19

In this text, as was also the case with many of the Old Testament prophets, when Jesus told the story he used a theological construct known as "prophetic foreshortening." This means that when he spoke of events which were in the near term (as we look back in history) he combined them with events in the distant future such that the two events appear stacked together in the Gospel narrative. This was also the case in the first reading from Malachi today when he said, "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (4:2) just one chapter after he predicted the first coming of Jesus in 3:1. What Jesus was predicting was actually two events, though they may appear from first glance to be just one period of time. First, the temple would be destroyed. We know that this was fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Second, He was predicting the coming of the Great Tribulation period. In between these two events Jesus said certain other events would happen, and it's this in-between period in which we find ourselves today. The events typifying this period, according to Jesus, will include, 1. The appearance of false Christs (v.8), 2. Wars, earthquakes, and famines all over the earth(vv. 9-11), and 3. Persecution of believers for Jesus' name (vv. 13-19.

What's the importance of Saint Luke's teaching for us as we live our lives as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? First, we should expect to see the types of events that Jesus spoke of as happening during this period. We should be surprised to be persecuted for our faith. Second, we must not be

surprised to hear about false messiahs such as cult leaders who claim to be Jesus or start whole religious movements through new ways of interpreting the Bible. Many false religious movements have arisen such as the interpretation of secret "Bible codes." Jesus said not to be surprised by these events. Third, we should expect to see terrible natural disasters on an unprecedented scale. As I'm writing this the news is coming in about the awful destruction brought about by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Another implication of this text for our lives is to provide comfort and trust in God that He knows what He is doing. When life is chaotic (inside and out) it is helpful to remember that nothing is out of His control. We must turn often to Him for help and hope.

Yet, there is hope. As we saw in the first reading from Malachi, "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (v6a). Jesus said in the reading today, "Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives (vv. 18-19). . If He were offering physical protection, then the Apostles wouldn't have had to give their lives for the defense of the Gospel. No, He wasn't saying that we might not be harmed in the physical sense, but that spiritually we will be protected.

Have you placed your trust in the Lord Jesus for the promise of eternal life through faith in Him? Hearing about all of the bad things going on in the world doesn't provide us for much hope in this life, but there is much hope for the life to come.

Let me tell you the conclusion to what happened to me at Kettle Point. Somehow I came to realize that if I pulled on my wet suit I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. So somehow I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot long mast with a flag attached. Between the huge waves I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and eventually someone riding a jet ski spotted me and came over and yanked me out of the water. As I walked back up the beach I praised God and someone offered me a ride in their truck so I could hurry back to tell my brother the amazing story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition. Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario I had my first meal as a truly "born again" man. Although I am much more careful while windsurfing, I recognize that I don't have the choice to know when I will meet the Lord Jesus. It's up to Him and could happen at any time. We must be prepared for we never know the day or the hour.

Reflection Questions

1. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you almost faced the Lord? Were you a believer in

the Lord Jesus when this happened? If you were, did the event lead you to a closer walk with Jesus? In what ways was it possible that this event was a means of God's judgment in such a way as to draw you closer to Him?

2. In our modern age we have often compartmentalized our lives thinking that worship belongs to Sunday while work is a Monday to Friday kind of thing. Have you ever considered your work as a form of worship? As we saw in the second reading, Saint Paul calls us to emulate his godly behavior in working without being a burden on others while continuing to serve without an expectation of reward. In what ways can you reconsider your work life as worship? How would taking on this new mindset help you to A. Relate to others at your workplace, B. Have a more accurate view of your service to God even if you are not engaged in full time ministry?

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about how believers can be comforted through hard times as well as some insights into God's eternal kingdom he has prepared for us. The first reading is from the Apocrypha and will not be covered.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. In this second Letter Paul addresses the people at Thessalonica with some important information regarding comfort during times of suffering.

Second Reading:

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, 17 comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word. 1 Finally, brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you; 2 and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. 3 But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. 4 And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. 5 And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. (2 Thessalonians 2:16 – 3:5)

In today's reading, we see that Paul experienced suffering and prayed for the Thessalonian believers to be comforted in their affliction. I t is important to note that a biblical perspective never assumes that Christians will not suffer. The difference is that we have hope beyond this world, as Paul says, "eternal comfort" (v.16). It is God's love that provides comfort, hope and strength to keep walking in the good works that He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Instead of being

sidetracked by suffering and opposition, Paul asked his fellow believers to pray for them that God would cause His Word to spread and be honored among the people who have not yet heard. Paul recognized the reality of suffering, but did not see the situation as hopeless. He turned to God for help and hope.

The question for us to consider is, "What do *we* turn to for help and hope? Some turn to alcohol to deaden the pain, or prescription drugs. Others to turn people like their spouse, children, or parents. While not all of these sources are bad, they are all finite. God is the only One big enough to take care of us. May we learn to turn to God for help and hope. Moreover, may we learn to share or need for prayer with others like Paul did so that we are not alone.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Luke chapter 20 and provides some very important insights into to the nature of God's eternal kingdom. Let me provide some historical background to help you to understand Luke's message. First, although the concept may seem strange to us today, the Sadducees argument related to the Jewish legal concept known as Levirate Marriage found in Deuteronomy 25:5. "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her." The usefulness of Levirate Marriage in that society was something that we saw wonderfully displayed in the life of Ruth found in the Old Testament Book of the same name. Boaz, said, "Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birth place; you are witnesses today" (Ru 4:10). Levirate Marriage provided an important means of insuring the continuance of a family line. Ruth's marriage to Boaz was ***extremely*** important to God because it was through Ruth that Jesus was born! "Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse" (Mt 1:5).

Second, The Sadducees were an interesting bunch of legalistic Jewish believers who held the majority power in the religious court authority called the Sanhedrin in First Century Israel. They held different beliefs than the other group called the Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in the afterlife, and only held the first five Books of the Bible to be authoritative. This last thing led them to hold some unusual beliefs since they didn't have the benefit of the vast array of historical or prophetic Books in the Old Testament Bible through which to properly interpret the Jewish Law. With this background in mind let's take a deeper look at the Gospel text.

The Sadducees approached Jesus with false motives. They were not truly seeking truth from Jesus, but instead were trying to stump him. They wanted to trip Him up in this theological chess game. Looking back to the previous section Luke said about the scribes and Pharisees, "So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some

statement, so that they could deliver Him to the rule and the authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20). This previous verse was directed at the other group known as the Pharisees, ones who *did* believe in the resurrection. In the Gospel text today Jesus addressed the particular beliefs of the other group, the Sadducees. Jesus, seeing the Sadducees motives and the faultiness of their presuppositions, treated them with dignity and grace. Yet they set up an impossible scenario for Jesus to answer based upon their belief system. Jesus explained where they were off base in their reasoning, and His points were as follows.

- Marriage is a valid paradigm for this age but not in the one to come.
- In order to receive eternal life, one must be considered worthy. How does one become worthy of life after death? He states they must be "sons of God" (v.36). How does one become a son on God? Jesus said in the Gospel of John, Chapter 20:31-32, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this Book; 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 20:30-31). Also, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live even if he dies" (John 11:25).
- We will not experience death in the life to come. There we will be like angels in that we no longer will have the capacity to die. We will be eternal and in that regard, will be like God. "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" (1John 3:2).
- Sons of God are the sons of the resurrection. God's resurrection life lives in us, making us like Him. The Apostle Peter said, "For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (2 Peter 1:4).
- Jesus pointed to the Old Testament Pentateuch, which was the only piece of the Bible in which the Sadducees believed, to prove His point about the resurrection. Jesus said that since Moses used the present tense in describing the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this proved from the Sadducees own Holy Scriptures that there is life after death on earth. Checkmate, game over!

Gospel Reading:

27 Now there came to Him some of the Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection), 28 and they questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that IF A MAN'S BROTHER DIES, having a wife, AND HE IS CHILDLESS, HIS BROTHER SHOULD TAKE THE WIFE AND RAISE UP OFFSPRING TO HIS BROTHER. 29 "Now there were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died childless; 30 and the second 31 and the third took her; and in the same way all seven died, leaving no children. 32 "Finally the woman died also. 33 "In the resurrection therefore, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife." 34 And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age

marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage; 36 for neither can they die anymore, for they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 37 "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB. 38 "Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him." (Luke 20:27-38 NASB)

The main point of this passage was Jesus' teaching of the truth of the resurrection, which is the central hope for Christian believers. Jesus taught His disciples that he would be resurrected, and later all of His believers have the hope that they too will one day rise from the dead with an eternal, perfect body. The Apostle Paul taught a great deal about the importance of the resurrection of Jesus. Let's take time to read what he said.

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:13-19)

Even though the Sadducees only believed that they would go around once in life, they believed in the biblical truths from the Old Testament Pentateuch. Jesus showed them that they were responsible for their actions in this life. Jesus graciously taught them through their own Scriptures that their eternal destiny was a direct result of their choices made during their lives. They were responsible for paying careful attention to the walk with God. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Believers are transformed through the resurrection into a "world" that is also transformed, a place where sin no longer exists and God will walk among us. As believers, we can look forward to eternal life with God through the promises made by Jesus that "we are saved by grace through faith and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

1. What is the importance of the resurrection for you? What difference does knowing the truth of the resurrection make in your day to day life as a Christian?

2. Describe the importance of sharing your faith with nonbelievers. How does the promise of God to give you a new eternally perfect body free from pain and one in which you will be free from sin and able to stand with God in your renewed, eternal flesh, motivate you to share with others this good

news?

For Further Study

Listen to Os Guinness's video message about, "If God is God then why do bad things happen?" (24 minutes, Day of Discovery TV program, RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan):

https://dod.org/programs/if-god-is-god-why-do-bad-things-happen-part-i/

For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/ Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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