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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-22-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-22-2016**. This week examine a reading from Proverbs and learn something about the Person of Jesus Christ. In the second reading we see how God uses trials in the life of a believer to make them grow in their faith and trust in Him. In the Gospel reading we learn about how Jesus promised His disciples how He would send the Holy Spirit to empower them to accomplish His work and to persevere through the tribulations that He predicted would come upon them.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Proverbs is a Book that provides wisdom from God on a variety of matters. Most of the Proverbs were written by King Solomon. While reading this section of the Bible we have to remember that these biblical principles were delivered to a people bound to the Mosaic Law. Additionally, we must keep in mind that they are general proscriptive principles and not prescriptive in every case. For example, Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it." While this is a good and godly principle all of us are acquainted with circumstances of parents who closely followed this principle but yet had wayward children. Proverbs 8 begins with the personification of wisdom, a common theme in this Book. "Does not wisdom call, And understanding lift up her voice?"

First Reading:

Proverbs 8:22-31 NAS95 22 "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, Before His works of old. 23 From everlasting I was established, From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. 24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, When there were no springs abounding with water. 25 Before the mountains were settled, Before the hills I was brought forth; 26 While He had not yet made the earth and the fields, Nor the first dust of the world. 27 When He established the heavens, I was there, When He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, 28 When He made firm the skies above, When the springs of the deep became fixed, 29 When He set for the sea its boundary So that the water would not transgress His command, When He marked out the foundations of the earth; 30 Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him, 31 Rejoicing in the world, His earth, And having my delight in the sons of men."

The reading opens with the idea of the eternity of a certain person, "me" in verse 22. While we can say that God foreknew those whom He also "predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29) and therefore knew us as believers in eternity past, the plain sense of these verses points to the eternality of the Person of Jesus Christ. The wording used by the author aligns with what John said about Jesus Christ in his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The proverb says about this Person that He was established from everlasting, "From the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth" (v. 23a). John said about Jesus, "We was in the beginning with God" (John 1:2). The proverb also speaks to the role of Jesus as the creator, while at the same time brings out the unity that exists between the Father God and the Son. Verse 30 says, "Then I was beside Him, as a master workman; And I was daily His delight, Rejoicing always before Him." Colossians 1:16 says, "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 through Him and for Him." Yet Isaiah said, "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, "I, the Lord, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself, and spreading out the earth all alone." Finally, in Genesis 1:2 we see that "the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" during creation. Therefore, the Trinity of God was involved in the creation process, we see a sense of this in today's reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from Romans follows Saint Paul's teaching on justification by faith alone. Today's reading opens with the word "therefore," and as always we need to reflect upon what this word is "there for." In the reading that follows, the "therefore" provides the linkage to Paul's persuasive argument to the Christians in Rome regarding how God had justified them through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Paul looked back to how "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Romans 4:3) Paul taught how Jesus "was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:25). Paul's point was that as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ we inherit the righteousness of God through our faith in Him, "just as if" we had never sinned at all. Understanding the legal concept of justification is essential

because otherwise it makes our salvation the result of our "good" works. Salvation is something which God has stated expressly we cannot earn. "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). Through our faith in the finished work of the Lord Jesus on the cross we have a new judicial standing before the throne of God, "just as if" we had never sinned. For once we believe God has "removed our sins as far as the east is from west" (Psalms 103:12). Our faith is extremely important in the eyes of God, for God sees us through the righteousness of Christ (Romans 13;14, Galatians 3:27, Job 29:14, Isaiah 61:10, Revelation 3:4).

[Note: Our online readers will benefit by being able to quickly peruse these verses by the verse lookup feature by hovering over each of them. We encourage everyone to study all of the quoted verses used each week in Mass Notes.]

Second Reading:

Romans 5:1-5 NAS95 1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Paul taught how through our faith we are justified and "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). Paul taught in Colossians how as nonbelievers we were alienated from God (Colossians 1:21). Interestingly, in that same section of Colossians Paul continued with the concept of rejoicing in suffering (Colossians 1:24), which is exactly what Paul did in verse three of today's reading. Paul said, "we also exult in our tribulations" (v. 3a). He said that the reason we are called to do this is because it builds perseverance which leads to godly character, then onwards to hope (v. 4).

In applying today's reading we may ask how tribulation produces perseverance, character, and hope? Tribulation, a word which literally means "suffering," are any type of tests to your faith. This includes things like health problems, broken or strained relationships, persecution by nonbelievers, financial concerns, and the death of a loved one. If we turn to God during our trials, we can expect to experience growth in our faith as we see how God delivers us through them. God may deliver us from them, or sometimes He may. But regardless, the promise in today's reading is that if when we persist in faith God will use our trials to conform us more perfectly to the image of Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant of God (Isaiah 53:1-12).

As I was reflecting upon the ways in which God has worked in my own life (see study question #2), I reviewed some of the thoughts that I had written in one of my prayer journals. In one journal entry dated 9/13/2011 me and my wife had been praying for a man we know to find a godly wife. I am pleased to report that he got married in the summer of 2015 to a very godly young woman whom he met at church. In another entry dated 12/4/2011 I had been praying for God to provide a means for

me to pay off a $25,000 surgical bill. In that case God provided through a combination of insurance and provisions through bonuses and my salary at work. As I continued to review my prayer journal I see how God has worked in so many different people's lives. Yet some of the people whom we have been praying continue to struggle. One in particular has had a half-down year long struggle in her life with chronic pain in her back. Perhaps God desires us to continue to pull together as believer to pray for her, and I am confident that He will continue to work in her life.

More recently however, God has been working in a miraculous way in my life. Men frequently don't share the struggles with their wives that they may have in their thought life. We should however share these both with God and when appropriate with a prayer partner of the same sex who would understand. Recently after watching a Christian movie that focused upon how God is able to produce miracles in the lives of people who pray boldly with faith I sensed a calling from God to present to Him a particular struggle that I was having with my thought life. After I was all pumped up spiritually after watching that Christian film, I brought this matter boldly to the Lord in prayer. After a week went by in which I did not struggle with this particular thought pattern, the thought occurred to me that perhaps God was up to something in my life. After a month had gone by I began to understand that God had indeed intervened in my life, and then began to focus upon ways to prevent myself from falling into this particular pattern again. What are some areas in which you are struggling? We encourage you to bring these to God and expect His answer as you persist in prayer to Him. If you feel your faith is weak, pray that God would first give you the faith that you need. Perhaps He will lead you to study a particular book, or meet with a particular person. But do expect God to show up when you come to Him boldly in prayer.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from John chapter 16 is Jesus' counsel to His disciples about how they will be able to prosper once He leaves the world through His sending of the Holy Spirit. They are to expect great persecution and be "outcasts from the synagogue" (John 16:2). In fact the deception of nonbelievers in world will be so bad that "everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (v. 2b). Jesus promised how then when He went away He would send the "Helper," Who would "convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (v. 8).

Gospel Reading:

John 16:12-15 NAS95 12 "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. 14 He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. 15 All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you."

Jesus taught His disciples how the Holy Spirit would "guide them into all the truth" (v. 13b). The prophecy of the Holy Spirit led to the inspiration of our Holy Bible. Peter spoke about this by saying, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke

from God" (2 Peter 1:21). The Word of God is but one of many ministries of the Holy Spirit that we as believers possess. The Spirit also works to draw unbelievers to faith in the Lord Jesus, convict both believers and nonbelievers of their sin, regenerate our spirits making us "born from above" (John 3:3), sanctify us in the Lord, help us in prayer, guide us in understand Scripture, provide us with comfort through His divine power dwelling within us, and provides us with gifts and fruits of the Spirit. Although Jesus' disciples certainly couldn't understand the implications of His prophecy concerning the coming of the Spirit, they spent their lives living out the fullness of all that the Spirit had to offer them even though they endured unparalleled tribulation in their lives.

We too are called to partake of God's divine gift through the ministry offered to us in the Holy Spirit that lives within us. It is this Spirit that empowers us to live lives pleasing to God. In order to take advantage of the Spirit's guidance "into all the truth" mentioned in today's reading, we must endeavor to become students of God's Word in the Bible. Our prayer is that these weekly studies will prompt you to go further in your study of God's word, and "test all things, holding fast to that which is true" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What is something through which you either are suffering, or have suffered in recent years? In what ways have you seen how God produced in you the character qualities noted by Paul of increased faith, perseverance and character?

2. Perhaps one of the most useful ways in which you can learn from the tribulations allowed by God in your life is to journal about your experiences and then look back upon how God used these circumstances for His eternal purposes and your own good (Romans 8:28). If you have written down anything in past years, retrieve these journal entries and review the changes that have occurred since then. In what ways can you see how God actively used these trials to produce perseverance and character in your life?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/052216.cfm

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Lectionary: 166

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-15-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-15-2016**, Pentecost Sunday. We open with the first reading from Acts that chronicled the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in the early church. Then we move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and discuss the gifts of the Spirit. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint John where we will examine what it means when Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The theme of the readings this week goes like this: In the first reading, we see God's sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the second reading, we see the revelation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we find the commissioning by the Holy Spirit for all believers to spread

the Gospel message. Let's begin with the first reading from the Book of Acts. This is the record of the momentous day on which God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (John 14:17). This event occurred fifty days after Jesus had risen from the dead and ten days after Jesus returned to heaven.

First Reading:

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

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

We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. His ministry through the believers in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. As we move to the second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we see some of the gifts sent to us by the Holy Spirit.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the second reading from 1 Corinthians is Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts. The

opening verses of chapter 12, from which today's reading are drawn make this clear and provide some important contextual information. "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led" (1 Corinthians 12:1-2). It's interesting how Paul wrote about how the Corinthian non-believers were pagans whereas by implication these new believers were non-pagans. Their conversion to Christianity resulted in a change of character, from pagan idolaters "led astray to mute idols," to those transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:2). Today's reading opens with the word "therefore" which provides a logical linkage to the people whose lives were transformed by God through their conversion by faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

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

In this reading, Paul cataloged some of the gifts of the Spirit and said that the purpose of the gifts was "for the common good" (v.7). Although this was not an exhaustive list of the gifts (see also Ephesians 4:7-13 and Romans 12:3-8) they included wisdom and knowledge (v.8), faith (v.9a), healing (v.9b), miracles (v.10a), prophecy (v.10b), discernment of spirits (v.10c), speaking in tongues (v.10d), and interpretation of those speaking in tongues (v.10e). Later in the reading, Paul stated that although the gifts of the Spirit were diverse with everyone having a different gift, they were delivered by God in such a way as to work perfectly together in the whole body of the church (vv. 11-13). Even though not everyone would have the same gift, the diversity of gifts among the believers would accomplish God's purposes through the unity of the believers (v.13). For example, only certain people were given the gift of prophecy, meaning either the ability to foretell future events or more prominently in the New Testament context to forth tell through the preaching of the Scriptures. In today's age, some of the gifts that Paul listed are more prevalent than other ones. During the early church immediately after God sent the Holy Spirit certain gifts such as tongues and healing were very important as "sign gifts" that greatly increased the spread of the Gospel to a culture thoroughly immersed in the worship of idols. God used these sign gifts in a powerful way as we can see in the first reading with the empowerment of the disciples to speak in various languages.

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

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

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

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

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

believers to preach to the world for the forgiveness of sin.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading records one of Jesus' post resurrection appearances to His disciples. Let's read what happened that Sunday evening when Jesus made a surprise visit to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

Gospel Reading:

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

What did Jesus mean when he said in verse 23, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained"? The key to understanding Jesus' teaching in verse 23 is found in the previous two verses. Jesus said "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (v.21b). Next in verse 22 He promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. This "sending" or "commissioning" of the disciples (and all believers) is one of the main purposes of the church as expounded in the Great Commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus instructed these ten men that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved, just as we saw in Romans Chapter 10. The interpretation of Scripture must always be consistent with the whole counsel of God's Word.

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

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As I am writing this week's study, I just returned from the funeral service of a friend back in our hometown. The man who passed away was quite young (his mid-50's) and was a lifelong believer in the Lord Jesus. As I have been reflecting upon his life, one of the things that stands out to me is his faithfulness. Although God gifted the man in various ways, he used these gifts in serving him faithfully up until he got sick and died quickly. Although he was a simple and uncomplicated man, he was always faithful in helping others. Although God doesn't call everyone to do the same things for Him, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Although we looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today, the full list of spiritual gifts can be found in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11. Read each of the other passages and see if you can locate the full list of spiritual gifts: Administration, Knowledge, Apostleship, Leadership, Discernment, Mercy, Evangelism, Miracles, Exhortation, Pastor/Shepherd, Faith, Prophecy, Giving, Serving/Ministering, Healing, Teaching, Interpretation of Tongues, Tongues, and Wisdom.

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

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

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

2. What is your spiritual gift or gifts? One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other believers for sometimes we cannot clearly recognize our own gifting. Another way it to use one of the many varieties of spiritual gift tests available online. Here is a link to one that I have found useful: http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1

In what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God?

Readings for the Week

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Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/051516-pentecost-day.cfm

Pentecost Sunday, Mass during the Day, Lectionary: 63

Source(s):

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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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-8-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-8-2016**. This week we will see in the first reading the murderous reaction of the Jews to Stephen's message in the Book of Acts. Then we continue the study from previous weeks from the Book of Revelation and conclude with the Gospel reading where we see Jesus' prayer on our behalf.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

This reading is from the Book of Acts and it shows the immense opposition the early church was under. In Acts 7:1-53, Stephen gave a courageous speech that pointed out the inconsistency of the Jewish people's ability to follow God. This is included at the end of this study in the Going Deeper section. Stephen was one of the seven men chosen from among the larger group of disciples to serve in the food service ministry because the twelve apostles felt that they "should not give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2). After Stephen's appointment, a group of Jews from the surrounding nations "rose up and disputed with [him]" (Acts 6:9) because "Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (v. 8). Evidently, Stephen had many other skills and spiritual gifts than just his food service ministry. Before we go to today's reading, let's read what happened after his convicting speech so that we better understand the context.

Acts 6:10-15 NAS95 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

In verse 12, the "Council" to which Doctor Luke (the writer of Acts) is referring is the Sanhedrin, which is the supreme Jewish court of justice, the same one that falsely condemned the Lord Jesus (Matthew 26:59-66). The Council acted the same way they did during the "trial" (using the term loosely) of Jesus in that they rounded up false witnesses to testify against Stephen (v. 13a). During the hearing, the Council provided Stephen with the ability to make a very long and reasoned defense (Acts 7:1-53). "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him" (v. 54) which is where we pick up with today's reading. *Note: The complete text of Stephen's speech is included in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's study.*

First Reading:

Acts 7:55-60 NAS95 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

The main point of the reading was the great similarities between the way Stephen died and the

death of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the same way that Jesus' death was filled with miracles (earthquake, darkening of the sky) Stephen's death was also miraculous in that he told how he saw a vision of the Lord Jesus exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven and graciously prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers. In both of these cases, the Council heard false testimony and then rushed to execute the death sentence upon them. Just as Jesus did (Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed right before his death for God's forgiveness of their great sin of killing him (v. 54). As the saying goes, the apples don't fall far from the tree. As Jesus' devout apostle, Stephen followed closely the way of his master including forgiving his tormenters before his death. Ultimately, instead of having the Jews' desired effect of stopping the spread of the Christian message, the persecution of Stephen did quite the opposite. Stephen's example of bold testimony in the midst of persecution emboldened those that went after him as the growing church spread out across the globe.

There are three other points that emerge from the reading. The first is the introduction of Saul, who we know later as the Apostle Paul (v. 58). Here we see Saul assisting in the persecution of Stephen in guarding the cloaks of the people who were stoning Stephen to death. This was just a foretaste because we know that in the next chapter Saul began raging a holy war against the Christians. There Luke records, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). A second point in the reading that can be drawn is regarding the posture of the Lord Jesus in Stephen's vision. The author of Hebrews records about Jesus, "When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3c). However, as Stephen was being killed he saw a divine vision of Jesus "**standing** at the right hand of God" (v. 55c, emphasis added). Jesus' position "at the right hand of God" means He is exalted with God the Father in heaven. Jesus' standing position is as one commentator stated His "active interposition to help, as Mediator and King, or readiness to receive His persecuted servant" (Annotated Bible Notes). Hebrews says, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). In the same way that Stephen saw Jesus interceding for him before the Father, when we die we can expect to see Jesus standing and interceding for us with the Father God. It is only through the righteousness of Jesus that we will be able to enter into the presence of God the Father. Finally, note that as the Jewish mob rushed to murder Stephen they covered their ears (v. 57). This is indicative of their response to hearing the sin of blasphemy, which gives an indication of the crime of which they were accusing Stephen of committing since blasphemy carried with it the penalty of death (Leviticus 24:16). Jesus foretold of the coming of this day when He said, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2).

An application of the reading is that as believers we can expect to face persecution. Saint Paul said, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). As we do, we should remember that the church often grows the most during these times, as well as we may experience the most personal growth in these circumstances. We should endeavor in advance to develop a philosophy of suffering under persecution to the extent that when it comes upon us we are prepared to respond in ways that lead us closer to God. The North African apologist Tertullian (c. 160 – 225) wrote much about suffering and persecution. He said, "But go zealously on, good

presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent" (Tertullian's *Apology*, Chapter 50).

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see some insights that Jesus provided to us through the Holy Spirit's recording of Jesus' prayer to the Father on behalf of all believers. Interestingly, just prior to this prayer Jesus warned His disciples about the coming persecution. But first we will hear from Jesus through His closing warning to the world in the Book of Revelation.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study in Revelation that we have looked at for the past several weeks. The context of today's reading is Jesus' closing words to the world as delivered by the angel to John. When John saw the angel, his immediate response was to bow down and worship him (Revelation 22:8). Instead, the angel told John, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:9). Regardless of who brought the message, as you read the words that John recorded from the angel you will see that the message is directly from Jesus Christ Himself. Although the text doesn't state this outright as happens in the Old Testament prophets when they say, "Thus says the Lord," verse 16 says that the message is from Jesus.

Second Reading:

Revelation 22:12-20 NAS95 12 Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying. 16 I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. 17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost. 18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus provides His seal of authority to the message by clearly identifying Himself as the sender of it in verse 16 ("I Jesus"). This crucial closing message of Jesus to the world opens with the phrase "I am" which also clearly identifies the speaker as God. This phrase is repeated no less than four times in this short section. This is indicative of the importance that readers should give to it because it reveals that the sender is explicitly identified as God, the "I am" of Exodus 3:14. The speaker uses many phrases in the reading to identify Himself as God including "the Alpha and Omega" (v. 13),

"the root and descendant of David" (v. 16), and "the bright morning star" (v. 16), and most importantly the outright statement "I Jesus" (v. 16).

Jesus' closing message is full of important scriptural truths:

- His return will be quickly (v. 12) in the sense that when it begins to happen the events will unfold quickly. Jesus bookmarked today's reading by closing with this same admonition, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (v. 20). Jesus said about this in the Gospel of Matthew, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). When the end-times events begin to unfold they will be concluded within a single generation.
- Jesus will reward those who served Him by bringing their rewards to them when He returns (v. 12). Justice will be provided by "render[ing] to every man according to what he has done." This means at least in part that He will bring punishment to those who don't serve Him when He returns. Verse 15 makes this clear, "Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying." In contrast, believers "take the water of life without cost" (v. 17) since they thirst for the ways of God and are the eternal recipients of His grace (unmerited favor).
- Believers are those who "who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city" (v. 14). They are those who "hears the words of the prophecy of this book" without adding to or taking away from them (v. 18) as the false teachers were doing (and are doing today). Countless theological cults engage in practices that either nullify the Word of God (take away from it) or add legalistic, religious practices that their followers must observe in order to be saved (add to it). Jesus provides a clear warning not to do either of these things because otherwise they shall be forced along with all the other nonbelievers to enter into the Great Tribulation. This is the Day of the Lord's judgement spoken of in Revelation and previously by the Old Testament Prophets such as Jeremiah.
- Jesus, in His grace, sent this message specifically to the churches (v. 16) in order that they may receive and learn from Him the only way to the tree of life (v. 19). Those who resist His message of salvation through faith in Him alone (John 14:6) will find themselves eternally locked out of the holy city.

We can learn a lot from this closing section of Revelation. Jesus is faithful to us in that He continues to tell the world the truth about the only way to find peace with God in spite of the fact that the majority of the world has and will continue to reject His message. As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see Jesus' heart for His believers as we listen in on a prayer that He gave on our behalf to His disciples before He ascended back to heaven.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the Gospel reading from John 17 is Jesus' high priestly prayer that He offered to God the Father just before His arrest and crucifixion. He opened the prayer in verse one of this chapter by "lifting up His eyes to heaven" and saying, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You. even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given

Him, He may give eternal life" (John 17:1-2). This sets the tone as He continues the prayer on behalf of both His disciples and those that will come to believe in their testimony.

Gospel Reading:

John 17:20-26 NAS95 20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 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. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; 26 and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus taught about the importance of a unified church in the reading. He said, "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 emphasis added). Unity does not come by coercion or oppression. It comes by individuals who understand their true identity in Christ. When believers in Jesus fix their attention upon Jesus and His glory, the petty issues that often divide followers will fade away. Jesus helps us to see that unity is the result of belief in Christ, who is one with the Father.

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). Jesus brought this out in verse 26, "I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

As we contemplate the three readings from today what stands out is the great value that we have in following Jesus regardless of what it may cost us. Knowing the Lord Jesus as our Savior empowers us to tell others about Him in spite of the fact that we may be ridiculed or even harmed because of our testimony. In the western world it is easy to take advantage of our religious freedom and forget the great sacrifices which Christians around the world are making for Jesus every day. As we live our lives we are called to pray for them that suffer for Jesus around the world, as well as to prepare for persecution in our own lives.

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Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways have you faced or are facing persecution for your faith? How does Stephen's example, which mirrors Christ and knowing the warnings about persecution in Scripture, help you to face it more strongly?

2. Choose one of the ways that Jesus is described in the second reading in Revelation 22 and reflect upon what this means and how this character quality can make a difference in your own life.

- Jesus is coming quickly
- Jesus is the rewarder
- Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end
- Jesus is the Root and descendent of David
- Jesus is the bright morning Star

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/050816-seventh-sunday-easter.cfm

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Lectionary: 61

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Going Deeper

The following is the text of Stephen's speech in the Book of Acts:

Acts 7:1-53 NAS95 1 The high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' 4 "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 "But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. 6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 7 "'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.' 8 "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. 9 "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11 "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. 12 "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13 "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 "Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. 15 "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16 "From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. 17 "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18 until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. 19 "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. 20 "It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. 21 "And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22 "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. 23 "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26 "On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? 28 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?' 29 "At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons. 30 "After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. 31 "When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33 "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. 34 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.' 35 "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. 36 "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and

in the wilderness for forty years. 37 "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' 38 "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. 39 "Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, 40 SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT–WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' 41 "At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 "But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? 43 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.' 44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. 45 "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. 46 "David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. 48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 49 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE? 50 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?' 51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Questions:

1. Synthesize Stephen's speech into one or two sentences.

2. Why do you think Stephen went into such great detail about Jewish history and did not mention Jesus by name?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-01-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **05-01-2016**. This week's study is long, but important. We challenge our readers to stick through it as we think that you will find great rewards in following the study.

The first reading from Acts we look at records the findings of an important meeting in the church called the Jerusalem Council. After this, we continue the study in Revelation in which we see how God presents a new, perfect Holy City that was made in heaven for the saints to dwell in forever. Then we close with the Gospel of John in which we see Jesus' foretelling of the promise to send the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of all believers.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts and records the event known as the Jerusalem Council. Leading up to the reading Paul had endured some tremendous persecution to the extent that while in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20). It's possible that during this time Paul experienced his visions of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). After Paul's miraculous recovery, he traveled with Barnabus back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch and "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23). Here Paul said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (v. 22c). Thus, Paul continued his leadership of the Gentile church and next journeyed to Jerusalem for a very important ecumenical council, meaning a gathering of all of the church leaders from both the

Gentile and Jewish realms.

First Reading:

Acts 15:1-2 NAS95 1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

[If you would like to read the section that was omitted it is included at the end of this week's study.]

Acts 15:22-29 NAS95 22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas–Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

As the reading opens, Doctor Luke records how some men from Judea began teaching that as Christians they must adhere to the practices of the Mosaic Law especially concerning the matter of circumcision (v. 1). This was the reason that Paul and Barnabas went down to Jerusalem, to discuss this extremely important issue. (The complete text of the ecumenical council meeting is included at the end of this study in the "Going Deeper" section). Evidently, James was the leader of the meeting; this is the James who wrote the biblical Book of the same name and a relative of Jesus. His leadership is implied since, at the conclusion of the council, he stood up unopposed and made the pronouncement that we see in verses 22 – 29. While this was an important finding of the council, we must remember the occasion that led to the initiation of the important gathering as well as the culture in which the events happened. Without saying it, James' bottom line gave believers confidence that they did not have to be circumcised according to the Mosaic Law. But they were to hold to other "essentials" including abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from the eating of blood, eating of meat from animals that had been strangled, and from the sexual sin of fornication (v. 29). These things were so repulsive to Jewish Christians who had just come out of Judaism that the Gentile believers were asked to be considerate in these ways for the sake of unity. Obviously when we read over this list, we understand the degree to which the Jewish and pagan cultures clashed and the context in which the early believers were immersed. This cultural context greatly influenced the findings of the leaders in the meeting. If converted Jews and pagans were going to get along in the

family of God, these bare essentials would help them achieve unity. We know later, Saint Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 8 that eating food sacrificed to idols was acceptable only if it did not violate one's conscience and that of those around them (1 Corinthians 8:10-13). The principle elicited by Paul in First Corinthians would seemingly also apply to the practices of eating strangled food and blood. However, the prohibition of sexual sin stands out on the list as a universal principle for believers of all time (for Old Testament believers and New Testament believers).

One of the big ideas in the reading is how God entrusted the ministry of the church to frail, imperfect believers to safeguard the treasury of truth with great diligence. The leaders of the church back then in this very crucial era in which the New Testament Scriptures were recorded were tasked with many great responsibilities. They were responsible for both keeping the church pure from false teachings while at the same time balancing the important cultural factors of their day including the movement of the church away from a purely Jewish organization to one containing a large proportion of Gentiles. The findings of the Council were important because it showed how the church leaders were willing to subjugate the Mosaic Law through their acceptance of Jesus' fulfillment of it through His death and resurrection. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). To the extent that the Law served to safeguard the conscience of the Jewish believers, it was important to them for conscience sake, but they were not to foist these legalistic practices upon the Gentile church.

Some application points that you could consider are regarding how cultural "baggage" affects our Christian walk and how that influences other believers. In what ways do we foist a list of requirements upon other believers around us who don't come from exactly the same cultural context as ourselves? Perhaps a good case would be a Christian who worships in a way that is different than your style (maybe they raise their hands, maybe they pray a spontaneous prayer) or a believer who votes for a different political candidate than you do. Is it possible to still be united in Christ, but differ on some of the unique expressions of faith? A good principle to follow, coined by St. Augustine in this matter: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the continuing study of the Book of Revelation. The context of the reading is after the conclusion of Jesus' one thousand year (millennial) reign on earth, a period during which Satan will be bound. Just prior to Jesus beginning this reign on earth, some three and one half years before, He had returned to the earth in fulfillment of Acts 1:11 and gathered all of the believers both living and dead with him to heaven. Believers that were already dead were rejoined with their bodies and given new glorified ones. Believers alive at Jesus' coming were gathered to Jesus in their living bodies after which they received their glorified bodies as well. Jesus had told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:3). It's evident that the New Jerusalem is the place that Jesus went to prepare and this perfect city is now being presented to the believers of all time as an eternal dwelling place. After the return of the Lord Jesus all believers now have real (but glorified), physical bodies so they require a real place to live. In contrast, when saints die in the

current age they go to heaven without their physical bodies and without the need for physical lodging. Therefore, Scripture seems to indicate that God provides them the New Jerusalem as their dwelling place from the moment they receive their glorified bodies at the time of the return of the Lord Jesus to earth. In summary, people with only a spiritual body in heaven rest in that spiritual place, whereas when they rejoin their physical bodies they will again require a physical resting place. This is in spite of the fact that the New Jerusalem is somehow built in heaven!

After Jesus' thousand-year reign on earth, Satan was released from his bonds and allowed to lead one last rebellion against God. In this huge battle of Gog and Magog (Revelation 20:8), he allied himself with the non-believers who had secretly held out during the millennial reign of Christ on earth. As these demonic forces surround the great city (Jerusalem), fire came down from heaven and devoured them (v. 9). Afterwards, every non-believer in the universe from all time stood before the "great white throne judgment" (Revelation 20:11). First, the devil joined the beast and the false prophet who were already in the lake of fire. Then the Scripture makes a very sobering statement concerning the universal judgment of non-believers, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). The lake of fire is called "the second death" (v. 14) about which Jesus said in the next chapter, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). God describes everyone who fails to trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation by these characteristics, regardless of how "good" they may have perceived themselves to be before the judgment against God's standard of perfection. As believers we understand that our perfection comes only through our acceptance of Jesus' finished work on the cross for us.

As the cataclysmic events grind to a sudden halt John records how the earth as we know it will be destroyed and replaced by a new creation in which there will no longer be any sea (Revelation 21:1). At this point one of the angels that poured out the last seven plagues introduced the bride of Christ, the group that we know as the church (v. 9). Today's reading opens with the New Jerusalem descending from the sky down towards the new earth. How the New Jerusalem that descends from the sky and the new earth relate to one another is unknown. We don't know if the city "touches down" or remains a heavenly dwelling place but within sight of the new earth, a form of "satellite city" in the sky.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 24-27 which were omitted are included below.

Revelation 21:10-14 NAS95 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. 12 It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. 14 And the

wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Revelation 21:22-27 NAS95 22 I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 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. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; 26 and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; 27 and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

John described the New Jerusalem coming down out of the sky as a city with twelve gates marked by the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, signifying that the Old Testament pointed the way to this eternal city. The foundation of the city, though, was laid by the "twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 14) identifying that this beautiful city was built on the testimony of the New Testament disciples (learners), who later were called apostles (sent ones). In the intervening verses that were omitted from the reading (vv. 15-21) John provides greater details about the gates of the holy city, the walls as well as the size, some fifteen hundred miles square (v. 16). He described the street of the city as "pure gold, like transparent glass," (v. 21) something which is hard to understand. How can gold be like transparent glass? Suffice it to say that our categories of beauty can't contain the world that is to come.

Rejoining the reading in verse 22, John describes how there is no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem because, "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." In verse 24 the Gentile nature of the church is specifically mentioned when John says, "The **nations** will walk by its light, and the **kings of the earth** will bring their glory into it," something about which we read in the first reading. The city is by definition a pure place in which "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (v. 27). We saw a similar list of prohibited people in the introduction. The principle of repetition marks this as an important point. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8) The "holy city, Jerusalem" (v. 10) will be just that, holy, forever and nothing unholy will enter it forever.

We can find rest in the fact that in spite of the current difficult circumstances we may be experiencing, or the haunting memories of things that have happened to us in the past, we will find eternal rest in a perfect place prepared by God for us. We will never again have to question whether someone is walking with the Lord, for everyone will be in perfect harmony with God. We won't be living in some ephemeral city consisting of wafting clouds as depicted in the media about heaven, but rather we will live in a perfect, physical city with a perfect, holy God forever. In this place we

will find perfect fellowship with people from all walks of life, both Jews and Gentiles, and this will mark the perfect end of discrimination forever in ways that the civil laws could never do.

An important take away point is for us to remember that this world is not our home and it's not all there is. The world will tell us that the one with the most toys wins, but we are not playing their "game." We are live with an eternal perspective that is not satisfied with the finite and dead end satisfactions of this world. When these things are in their right place, we can enjoy them. What is eternal about this world is the human soul. That is why it is important to settle the question of our eternal destiny now. This passage tells us how we can know if we are permitted into the New Jerusalem, God's eternal city. "Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will be allowed to enter. How do we know if our name is written there?

The Bible tells us that it is the Lamb's book, which is significant. Who is the Lamb? None other than Jesus Christ (John 1:29 tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away sins of the world). When sin entered the world through Adam, a blood sacrifice was required for the forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22). All through the Old Testament, lambs were sacrificed in place of the person who deserved to die for the sins they committed. Jesus' death and shed blood, as the Lamb of God, was the final and complete sacrifice to provide forgiveness for sins (Hebrews 10:12). First Peter 1:3-5 and 1:18-21 explain the importance of Jesus' sacrificial death for the salvation of our souls:

1 Peter 1:3-5 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:18-21 NAS95 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you 21 who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Therefore, you can have assurance that your name is written in His book of life if you are trusting in the Lamb of God to take away the penalty for your sin and looking to Him to give you a new life that is eternal. If you have not consciously made this choice to trust in Jesus' sacrificial death to cover the payment for your sin, you can pray right now to tell Him that you would like this free gift, which provides forgiveness of the debt you owe God and assurance that your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

The Gospel reading will teach us more about belief in Jesus, for Jesus told His disciples about how they could demonstrate their belief and love for Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 14. Jesus had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them (John 14:3), which was mentioned in the discussion on the second reading. Jesus also told His disciples that He wouldn't leave them as orphans, that He would come to them through the promise of a Helper, "that He may be with you forever" (John 14:16). In today's reading, we learn about this Helper Jesus promised to the disciples and to all believers who trust in His name. This discussion was prompted by the question in 14:22: "Lord, what then has happenedthat You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?"

Gospel Reading:

John 14:23-29 NAS95 23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. 24 He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. 25 These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. 28 You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. 29 Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe."

The reading opened with Jesus clarifying why He is disclosing certain things to the disciples and not to others. Jesus explains that those who love Him will keep His commandments (v. 23a). He is telling those closest to Him, the twelve disciples, these things so that they might no longer be slaves, but instead, be intimate, like friends, knowing the will of God (John 15:15). He says, *IF* you love me, then you will keep my word (meaning obey Him from the heart and have His value system become your value system). Loving God naturally leads us to keeping the commandments of God; it is love in action: loving God leads to godly actions. It seems that one of God's love languages is following Him, instead of following our own inclinations and misguided desires.

Next, Jesus, who had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them, told them how both the Father and the Son would "make Our abode with him"—him being the one who loves Jesus and keeps His word (v. 23d). So while Jesus was predicting His physical departure from this world, He reassured His disciples that He would still be with them, by making their hearts His new home.

He would make their hearts His home by sending the Holy Spirit to live inside of them. Jesus reminded them that this promise of the sending of the Holy Spirit weren't just His words, but the Word of the Father Who sent Him (v. 24), therefore all three Persons of the Godhead were involved. Jesus' promise was that He would send the Holy Spirit to them to "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (v. 26). This was to comfort them and bring them peace (v. 27) because He had earlier told them that He was going to be leaving them (John 14:3). Looking back on what Jesus said, it is important to note that the Holy Spirit can't teach us all things or bring

things to our remembrance if we are not putting His Word in our heart. We know that the Holy Spirit is the person who inspired the Bible, since Saint Peter said, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). We cooperate with God's work in our lives when we read, study and integrate the truth of God's Word in our daily lives.

Jesus told them all of this ahead of time so that when the Holy Spirit came, they would remember His promise of sending Him to them and be comforted. This is exactly what we find in the Book of Acts. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, many of His followers were confused and discouraged. But then, the promised Holy Spirit came, launching the Church in Jerusalem during the feast of Pentecost. The disciples, who had cowered in an upper room a few weeks earlier were now emboldened and spoke new and unlearned languages to preach the good news of salvation through Jesus. Such strange things were happening that Peter had to give an explanation to a large crowd who had gathered inquiring about the disciples. Peter's explanation was that Jesus had sent the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit, was the "culprit" for these signs and wonders: "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18) and that the Holy Spirit would teach them and bring to remembrance all things. He stands ready to do the same for us. The Holy Spirit is the Person of the Godhead who empowers believers for ministry.

The big idea in the reading is that Jesus promises not to leave any of us as orphans; but rather, He promises to give us peace through the presence of His Holy Spirit. We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives as believers in Jesus Christ. The Spirit's ministry to the hearts in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. There are many Christians who are trying to live the Christian life on their own strength, living as an orphan. That is not God's intention. He specifically tells us that we are to rely on the Spirit to live the Christian life. If we don't know how to do this, we can ask Him to teach us. When we read Scripture, we can look for what it tells us about walking in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:18) relying on the Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and having our mind set on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8).

There are manifold ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer; here are just a few of the things the Holy Spirit gives us:

- A second birth, a spiritual birth, making us "born from above" or "born again" (John 3:3) with a regenerated soul (Titus 3:5).
- Confirmation that as a believer we are an heir of God and fellow heir with Christ (Romans 8:15-17).
- Membership in God's universal church, which is baptism with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- The ability to understand and apply the Scriptures to our lives (1 Corinthians 2:12).

- Intercession on our behalf in prayer (Romans 8:26–27).
- A seal or guarantee until the day that we are redeemed in heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14).

We encourage you to look up each of the verse references and ponder how the Holy Spirit empowers you to accomplish God's purposes in your life.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the first reading we considered how one's cultural background impacted their Christian beliefs and how these beliefs affected the other believers around them. When was there a time in which you met another Christian from a much different cultural context than your own? In what ways did you need to reexamine your core beliefs in order to provide them with the grace or leeway to accept them as brothers or sisters in the Lord?

2. In what ways can you identify with Jesus' disciples who were discouraged when He said He was going to leave them? How have you felt like an orphan? Identify which characteristics of living as an orphan or living as a child of God in the table below resonate with you. Talk to God and other solid Christians about your desire to be shored up in the areas you are still living like an orphan. Praise God for the confidence He has given you as a child of God.

Orphan	**Child of God**
Anxious and worried about needs: no sense of God's infinite resources. It feels like I have to make life work on my own and who I am is not enough.	Content about God's provisions: Has a sense that my God shall supply all my needs according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:11-19).
Infused with a sense of conditional love and acceptance; you're only as good as your last performance.	Infused with a sense of unconditional love and acceptance; failure is not fatal (1 John 3:1).
Highly defended from a sense of vulnerability; needs to be safe, secure and right. Criticism either demolishes me or propels me to show them wrong. Either way, I protect myself from the gnawing voices of criticism. Shrinks back in fear and resists taking God-directed risks.	Learns that feeling inadequate is a natural consequence of the Fall. Instead of turning to self-protection, I try to find my adequacy in Christ (2 Cor. 3:5). This allows me to be realistic about my weaknesses and honest about my vulnerabilities with God and others. It allows me to overcome fear and take God-directed risks.
Prays when "on" or in crisis.	Prays throughout the day, knowing that the Spirit dwells in me and wants to relate to me (1 Thess. 5:17).

Uses "Christian freedom" to indulge the flesh, such as biting and devouring each other, being conceited, provoking and envying others. Gal. 5: 19-21 says: "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality,impurity and debauchery;[20] idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions[21] and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."	Uses "Christian freedom" to "serve one anotherhumbly in love" (Gal. 5:13). Starting to see the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23): [22] "But the fruitof the Spirit is love,joy, peace,forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,[23] gentleness and self-control." These are coming from the inside of my being, not just being imposed from the outside or merely trying to conform to Christian standards.
Needs to be in control and persuade people to see things my way. I am controlled by a need to impress people.	Becoming Spirit-controlled, which frees me up to submit to God-given authority, to let other people be "right" and to care more about incarnating Christ than impressing people.

3. Review the list of the ministries of the Spirit given in the Gospel lesson. How does the Holy Spirit help you overcome your feelings of separation and loneliness?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/050116.cfm

Sixth Sunday of Easter Lectionary: 57

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Keywords:

Ecumenical Council, lake of fire, Great White Throne Judgment, circumcision, eating of food sacrificed to idols, Gentile Church, New Jerusalem

Going Deeper:

The following is the text of the ecumenical council event that was omitted from the reading.

Acts 15:3-21 NAS95 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through

both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." 12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, 17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' 18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. 19 "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

List the important truths this council tells us about the following:

- God
- Gentiles
- Jews
- Salvation

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-17-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-17-2016**. This week we will study readings from the Book of Acts, Revelation and the Gospel of John. We will go into some great depth on the first two readings. We hope that you both enjoy and learn something this week from our study and that you are forever spoiled for the ordinary.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. Paul and Barnabus were on their first missionary journey to share the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues (Acts 13:4). So much happened in Jerusalem that they wanted others to know – Jesus Christ's death, resurrection and ascension had defined the Jewish faith in a whole new way. The Holy Spirit had been sent to the believers to empower them to be witnesses all over the world (Acts 1:8). Paul's and Barnabus were "set apart" to be witnesses to Who Jesus what and what He had taught them (Acts 13:1-3). They were also sent to help those who were lost in darkness such that they could see the light of the Good News that their sins could be forgiven and a new relationship with God could be established through faith in Jesus (Acts 13:38-39).

On their travels they often went to the Jewish synagogue to share how Jesus was the fulfillment of the promised long awaited Messiah (Acts 13:33-39). They gave convincing evidence to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles that Jesus matched the description of the One from God Who would provide salvation. Jesus had risen from the grave, therefore, sealing the case that He was the Christ (Acts

13:32-33). In today's reading, we find Paul and Barnabus being invited back to the synagogue to continue sharing their insights about God's work through Christ.

First Reading:

Note: Paul's speech in Antioch was omitted from the reading. If you would like to read the speech it is included at the end of the study in the "Going Deeper" section.

Acts 13:14 NAS95 14 But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Acts 13:43-52 NAS95 43 Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. 44 The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. 45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. 46 Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.'" 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. 50 But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51 But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

As a result of Paul's speech the previous week, a large group from the city gathered such that they didn't miss Paul's second address. The Jews received this second message of Paul very jealously which resulted in them instituting persecution of Paul and Barnabus by "incit[ing] the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city" (v. 50) such that they were driven out of the city. However, many of the Gentiles in the mixed crowd heard Paul's speech and responded in faith (v. 48). Paul and Barnabus did as Jesus had commanded the disciples (Matthew 10:14) and shook the dust of the feet in protest while they left that city and went on to Iconium (v. 51).

The reading marks the transition point of Paul's ministry from the Jews to the Gentiles (v. 46) which then became his primary ministry (see Galatians 1:16, Romans 15:15-16). Paul said later about this in Romans, "But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous" (Romans 11:11b). The outpouring of God's Spirit on the Gentiles was something that the prophets predicted long ago. Isaiah said, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). This marks the dawn of a new and unseen era, the church age. Paul spoke about this later in his ministry:

25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,

26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,

27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:25-27).

The big idea in the reading is that in the midst of rejection and persecution, the Word of the Lord is still able to penetrate and transform hearts.

Next, we move onto the second reading in which we will see the eternal impact of Paul's ministry on the eternal lives of believers from around the world.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from the Book of Revelation is a "parenthesis," or pause in John's revealing of the seven seal judgments being unveiled by Jesus. We cannot overstate the importance of understanding the context of any reading, but especially when we are dealing with the end-time events portrayed here in the Book of Revelation. When reading Revelation one has to understand that the story moves between visions of events happening on earth to things happening in heaven. Along the way there are frequent pauses in the action, or "parenthesis," where the vision shifts from earth to heaven or vice versa.

Looking back from today's reading in chapter 7, beginning in chapter 6 Jesus pours out a series of judgments on the earth (Revelation 6:1-17). With the unleashing of the sixth seal, great signs are seen in the sky (Revelation 6:12). This accords with what Jesus spoke about in Matthew 24:29-30. John said, "I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood" (Revelation 6:12). Jesus said about this in Matthew, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). The next verse in this section of Mathew provides is with strong clue as to the overall context of the signs as it relates to Jesus' promised return (Acts 1:11). Jesus said, "And **then** the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory" (Matthew 29:30, emphasis added). Jesus said that He would return after the display of the signs in the sky, which is just before the seventh seal judgment is poured out on the earth. This brings us to the parenthesis in the text from which we find today's reading, after the revelation of the six seal, but before the return of the Lord Jesus and the unveiling of the seventh seal.

The event that happens before the parenthesis of today's reading is another tangential pause in

which John records the gathering of 12 groups of elect saints (meaning believers) from within Israel. John records the details of this event in the opening of chapter 7:

1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: (Revelation 7:1-4).

The angels divinely mark 12 "tribes" of Israelites consisting of a large number of 12,000 from each group. The value of 12,000 is perhaps not a literal number but rather indicative of the fullness or total completion of the task. Regardless, this marking is such that these people are set apart in a way that they receive God's divine protection during the balance of the tribulation period, some three and half years. John makes this clear later in Chapter 12. "But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent" (Revelation 12:14). This "sealing of the bondservants of our God" is also indicated in the parallel passage in Matthew. Jesus says in that Gospel about this event, "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matthew 24:31). This divine sealing, marking or protecting occurs just before Jesus' return and the unleashing of the final judgements upon the earth including the seventh seal, seven trumpet judgements and seven bowl judgments. The bowl judgments conclude the wrath that God has stored out to pour out upon the unbelieving world at the end of the age. "Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished" (Revelation 15:1).

After the divine "sealing" is completed, the story moves to John's parenthetical vision of a large group of believers in heaven, which is where we pick up at today's reading.

Second Reading:

Note: Verse 13, which was omitted from the reading, is included separately.

Revelation 7:9 NAS95 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands;

Omitted verse:

Re 7:13 ¶ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes,

who are they, and where have they come from?"

Revelation 7:14-17 NAS95 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. 16 They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

In the reading John said, "After these things," meaning after the sealing of the "144,000" (Revelation 7:4) and the outpouring of the first six seal judgments upon the earth. The scene now shifts back from events happening on the earth to events happening in heaven. We must be cautious in our interpretation of the events in heaven because those occur outside of the space / time domain to which we are bound to on earth. However, John's juxtaposition of this parenthesis in this exact spot in Revelation is significant because it indicates the source of the great cloud of believers about which John is speaking in the reading. Verse 14 reveals that the source of the "great multitude" (v. 9a) are "the ones who come out of the great tribulation." These "tribulation saints" are the believers who are killed for their faith as the end of age grinds to a halt during the reign of the Antichrist on earth. Later John says about this wicked person, "It was also given to him to **make war with the saints and to overcome them**, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him" (Revelation 13:7, emphasis added). During this terrible time, the reign of the Antichrist will be so strong as to almost fatalistically determine the outcome of each person alive on earth at the time. "If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints" (Revelation 13:10). The saints that are killed during this time will be divinely protected in heaven forever; in contrast to the "144,000," we saw who are divinely protected on earth during the tribulation period. This group in heaven will no longer hunger or thirst, or be too hot or too cold" (v. 16) "for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd" (v. 17a). We will read more about Jesus' role as Shepherd in the Gospel lesson. Many of the Christian saints on earth during this time will be martyred for their faith, while the "144,000" will enter the Millennial Kingdom alive to repopulate the earth. When Jesus returns He will gather the saints (believers) that have survived up until that point as well as those saints that died in the Lord. Saint Paul said about this, "Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). This is the return of the Lord promised in Acts 1:11 and the rapture (or catching up) of all believers both alive and dead as stated in this verse from 1 Thessalonians.

The big idea in the reading is that even though this world does not recognize and treat God's people (saints) well, these verses reassure us that there will be justice and provision in the life to come with a sense of eternal comfort. We see how Jesus acted as the divine Shepherd of His sheep in heaven.

As we move onto the Gospel reading, we will see how Jesus portrays Himself as the Shepherd of His sheep on earth.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint John. The Book of John casts Jesus as the Son of God and speaks of eternal life in terms of knowing Him. The context of today's reading is Jesus' teaching on His role as the Shepherd of the true sheep in contrast to the false sheep and false shepherds that abounded in Israel during this time of extreme satanic activity surrounding Jesus' ministry.

Gospel Reading:

John 10:27-30 NAS95 27 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

The big idea in the reading is that God offers security to believers through the Great Shepherd Jesus Christ. Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God pictures Himself as the "Shepherd of the Sheep," and this occurs early in the Bible. The first time this concept appears is back in the Book of Genesis when Jacob was prophesizing about the twelve sons (and tribes) of Israel, this time about Joseph. "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a spring; Its branches run over a wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, And shot at him and harassed him; But his bow remained firm, And his arms were agile, From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)" (Genesis 49:22-24). The shepherd theme is reminiscent of the opening of Psalm 23, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want" v. 1). As we examine today's reading we find additional insight into the identity of this Shepherd of Israel. He emerges as a Shepherd-King figure Who has a special relationship with the LORD. This is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself, the about whom Jesus says of Himself, "I and the Father are one" (v. 30).

As believers in Jesus, we can find great comfort from John's writing. First, God will never lose any of His sheep, meaning that God Himself places a calling upon our lives to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (v. 28). Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). Second, we can trust that God will take care of us in the same way that a Good Shepherd takes care of His sheep. Finally, although we may feel judged by worldly people in this age, the only real judgment that counts is our True Judge the Lord Jesus Himself. We can trust that God's judgment will be correct in that as we enter eternity He will judge between the lost sheep and evil shepherds in our land and differentiate between the ones that do good in serving Him.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How does the reading from the Gospel of John give you assurance that you are one of God's sheep? Some characteristics of His sheep are:

- His sheep hear His voice,
- Jesus assures us that He knows us, and
- His sheep follow him.

How can you use this Scripture to help you know that you are in the sheepfold and to counteract the doubts that the enemy uses against you to make you question your faith.

2. Looking at the first reading, how does the fact that Paul and Barnabus were met with rejection and violence while at the same time experiencing a degree of welcome give you an interpretative framework for your own experiences of sharing the Word of God with others?

Going Deeper

The following is Paul's speech to the Jews and Jewish converts (proselytes, Acts 13:43) in Antioch:

Acts 13:15-42 NAS95 15 After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." 16 Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17 "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. 18 "For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. 19 "When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance–all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. 20 "After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. 21 "Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22 "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' 23 "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24 after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 "And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' 26 "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. 27 "For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. 28 "And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. 29 "When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. 30 "But God raised Him from the dead; 31 and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. 32 "And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, 33 that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' 34 "As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE blessings OF DAVID.' 35 "Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.' 36 "For David, after he

had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; 37 but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. 38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. 40 "Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: 41 'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.'" 42 As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath.

Study Questions:

1. Trace the history of God's work in the world to bring people to reconcile people to Himself. For example:

- God chose the Jews and made them great in a foreign land (v. 17)
- . . .

2. List all of the evidence given by Paul in this passage to prove Jesus' Messiahship.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/041716.cfm

Source(s):

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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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-10-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-10-2016**. This week we will examine the readings first looking at how the apostles were energized through God's power in the Book of Acts. We will see in the Gospel reading how Jesus restored Peter's position after his denial of Him during his trial. We will also examine a reading from the Book of Revelation and give some good context to help frame the reading.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is just after the story of Ananias and Sapphira both of whom attempted to lie to the Holy Spirit of God and were struck dead. God used this event to reveal the necessity of purity in the early, vibrant and growing church during a time when "many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles" (Acts 5:12). These events revealed how the church was both pure and powerful, like God. Just before today's reading the apostles were gathered in an area of the Jerusalem temple called Solomon's Portico (v. 12). All of the commotion going on eventually brought the attention of the high priest, who arrested the apostles and put them into prison (vv. 17 – 18). Next, "during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out" (v. 19). At daybreak the apostles reentered the temple portico and began teaching again (v. 21). Then the high priest convened "the counsel and all the senate of Israel" (v. 21b) meaning the Sanhedrin. At this point, the officers found the apostles missing from the prison while its doors remained secured (vv. 21c – 24). During this same time the

apostles remained teaching in the temple (v. 25). Next, the officers brought the apostles voluntarily to appear before the council (vv. 26 – 27) where today's reading begins.

First Reading:

Note: Verses 33 – 39 which were omitted from the reading were included below.

Acts 5:27-41 NAS95 27 When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. 30 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. 31 "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32 "And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." 33 But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. 34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. 35 And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. 36 "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. 37 "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. 38 "So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; 39 but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." 40 They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. 41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

An import point that comes out in the reading is about Peter, who during Christ's arrest denied Him three times, was willing to die rather than to forsake his Lord again. This is indicative of the power of the Holy Spirit working to energize him in his role in leading the emerging church. Later in the Gospel reading, we will see how Jesus forgave and restored Peter to his position. Peter was energized by the power given to him by God. After the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the apostles ministered boldly and powerfully to all who would listen. Their ministry emphasized "teaching," notice that this word appears twice in verse 28. This gives evidence to the importance of the teaching going on in the church, exactly what the Jews had earlier warned them not to do. The apostles were confronted by Rabbi Gamaliel, "a teacher of the law" (v. 34a), who was none other than the Rabbi who taught Saint Paul (Acts 22:3). This teacher possessed great wisdom, to such extent that the council accepted his profound advice (v. 40). Perhaps Gamaliel recognized the miracle that occurred when the apostles were delivered from with the locked prison. Whatever happened, after the Council accepted the Rabbi's advice even though the apostles were not charged

with a crime they were still flogged in clear violation of the Jews own law. This was done because they had disobeyed the previous order from the high priest not to teach (v. 28).

What are some ways that we can apply this reading to our lives? We cannot and should not expect miracles in the same way that they happened in the early church. We should not expect to be delivered from conflicts arising either with civil or religious authorities. We can however expect to experience miracles in other ways. We can expect to see God working in miraculous ways in our lives and in the lives of those to whom we are ministering around us. We can expect miraculous answers to our prayers in ways that we may not expect. We can expect miraculous delays in God answering our prayers. How among us hasn't proclaimed, I am glad that God didn't answer that prayer right away or in the way I expected? Second, Just because a religious group grows and succeed doesn't mean that it is a movement of God. Gamaliel mentioned the cults of Theudas and Judas of Galilee from his time. There are many examples in our era including the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, and Islam. Any movement of God will survive at least to the extent this His purposes are accomplish through the particular movement. God's purpose through the church will not be thwarted, and He will continue building movements of His Spirit until the Lord Jesus returns. Third, we are called to obey God rather than humans. We can expect to experience cases in our life when we will need to follow the commandments of God and not the commandments of man. This may mean that we will bump up against the civil authorities when they establish laws that are clearly against both biblical absolutes and biblical principles. Finally, we must remember the urgent call of evangelism as elicited in these passages and in the closing words of our Lord to His apostles in the Great Commission. Our primary ministry should be to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching** them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt 28:19-20, emphasis added).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Revelation. The context is after the message given in chapters 2 and 3 to the literal seven churches of Asia Minor in existence at that time. In these messages, we find many similarities to the various churches that exist in our era. The conclusion of the messages to the churches marks the beginning of the revelation to John regarding the things which "what must take place after these things" Revelation 4e), meaning after the conclusion of the church age. John receives these messages "in the spirit" while appearing before the throne of God in heaven (Revelation 4:2). These messages continue until the end of the Book. Chapter 5 opens with the gradual unsealing of a divine "scroll," something that we can regard as being the title deed of all the earth. This title deed is gradually unfurled, and as this is done a series of judgements are revealed including seals judgements, trumpet judgements, and bowl judgements. The scroll marked with the seven seals can be thought of as the overall container for all of the judgements. The "unfurling" of the scroll by the sequential breaking of the seals reveal the seal judgments that thereafter release the trumpet and finally the bowl judgements. This symbolic expression is a handy metaphor that God used to display the pouring out of the judgements upon the world in a way that early and especially Jewish Christians immersed in the Roman society would understand. People in

this society would understand how an important document like a deed would be sealed by a person in authority concerning that document and how each seal would have to be broken in order for the full content of the document to be revealed. In the case the title deed scroll is marked on both sides (Revelation 5:1) which indicates perhaps that not all of the content is secret except for the material contained behind the portion obscured by the rolled up area held in place by the seals. John was sad that nobody was worthy to open the seals on the scroll, but the "elder" revealed to him that the Lord Jesus alone was worthy, "the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (v. 5). Next four spiritual creatures, seemingly types of angels, along with 24 elders (likely 12 from Israel and 12 representing the church) exclaimed a victory song about Jesus and the priestly power of His believers. "And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth" (Revelation 5:9 – 10). This leads us to verse 11 with which we open today's reading.

Second Reading:

Revelation 5:11-14 NAS95 11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." 13 And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." 14 And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped.

The big idea in the reading is that the Lord Jesus, the "Lamb that was slain" (v. 11) is worthy of worship, whether it comes from angelic beings (four living creatures), or people, or every created thing (v. 13). The Scripture is clear that "EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD" (Romans 14:11, Isaiah 45:23). In the reading the text uses the term "myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands" (v. 11) was meant to portray the largest number that could possibly be expressed in the Greek language. The fact that God has so many creatures worshiping Him should remind us of the fact that He is worthy of our worship! The reading said about Jesus that He is worthy "to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (v. 12). As a divine human, Jesus is worthy of our worship, and not just ours but all of creation. We need to keep Jesus' rightful position as the only One worthy to open the seals in the forefront of our minds as we remember our own weaknesses as well as those of the servants of the Lord throughout the Bible. Jesus came the first time as a sacrificial Lamb, which is the good news of the Gospel. However, when He returns He will be the bearer of bad news for those that don't believe. Jesus is the only One that can unveil the judgments of the seals, trumpets and bowls. Saint Paul said, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1).

John's vision of the exalted Lord Jesus leads us to the Gospel reading in which we will see Jesus while He was still on earth just after His resurrection.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John. After Jesus' resurrection, Thomas had missed the first meeting of the apostles when they gathered in a locked room only to be surprised by Jesus' entrance. However, eight days later Jesus appeared again, at which time Thomas saw and believed. Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 21:29). Today's reading opens with another appearance of the Lord to the apostles this time along the Sea of Galilee.

Gospel Reading:

John 21:1-19 NAS95 1 After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He manifested Himself in this way. 2 Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing. 4 But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 So Jesus said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." 6 And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish. 7 Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea. 8 But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about one hundred yards away, dragging the net full of fish. 9 So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire already laid and fish placed on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish which you have now caught." 11 Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples ventured to question Him, "Who are You?" knowing that it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise. 14 This is now the third time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead. 15 So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." 16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep. 18 "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." 19 Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And

when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

There are two main reasons why John includes this story in the Gospel. The smaller story is about Peter's three statements, the larger one is about John's description of who Jesus is after His resurrection from the dead. Let's unpack the smaller story about Peter first.

As you may recall, one of Peter's last encounters with Jesus before His dead was when he denied Jesus three times. Jesus had warned Peter that this was going to happen (Luke 22:34) but in spite of this Peter still failed to stand up for his friend. You can imagine that Peter felt pretty awful letting Jesus down during His time of need (Luke 22:62). Although Peter had an encounter with Jesus in the upper room in Jerusalem, the issue of his betrayal had not specifically been addressed which is why today's story is so important. In the reading, we see how Jesus asked Peter three times, "if he loved him." This corresponded to the three times in which Peter denied the Lord Jesus on the night of His betrayal by Judas Iscariot. In Jesus' kindness, He gave Peter the opportunity to publically express his loyalty to Him thereby reinstating their relationship. Interestingly, Peter and some of the other disciples had returned to their fishing career, which was then interrupted by Jesus' appearance along the shore with the purpose of appointing them to career ministry. Similarly, when Jesus first encountered Peter, He called them out of the fishing industry into becoming a fisher of men. Jesus was now reinforcing Peter's primary calling. Peter was now being called to "shepherd" (or lead) the early church. Jesus used this occasion to publically reinstate Peter back into right relationship with Him and to reestablish his leadership in ministry.

The larger reason why this Gospel story is important for the early church is that John wanted believers to know that Jesus manifested Himself as a real person multiple times after His resurrection. He did so in ways that showed both His humanity and His divinity. We see Jesus' humanity in that He was a real person that they could see (not a ghost), and He ate food with the disciples. Even after Jesus' resurrection, we see Jesus still serving His disciples by preparing them breakfast beside the Sea of Galilee. We see His divinity is the way in which He directed the disciples to cast their net on the other side of the boat and obtain a miraculous catch. On top of that, another miracle was that the net didn't break even with such a large number of fish (v. 11). We see a sign of Peter's reverence for Jesus in that he dressed himself before he jumped into the water to be with the Lord. Another expression of Jesus' divinity was His prophecy of how Peter would eventually die a martyr's death (v. 18). You can imagine that this gave Peter some comfort and boldness in later years because he knew that Jesus had placed this mark upon his life. We saw this very clearly in the first reading in which he appeared before the council (Acts 5:27). Peter could have thought in later years something like, if I am going to die a martyrs death why be timid in my ministry? Additionally, since Peter knew that Jesus had predicted his martyrdom there is a certain amount of comfort that comes from "knowing that Jesus knows." We see in this a very intentional sense of God's sovereignty over Peter's eventual death. We too can find comfort in difficult circumstances through knowing that God is sovereign over everything that comes along.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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1. Jesus offers this same reinstatement to everyone who has denied the Lord. His death was the payment for the penalty that we all deserve to pay for the times in our lives in which we have denied God's ownership over our lives. What do you see in Jesus' treatment of Peter that you can apply in your own relationship with Him? List a few ways in which you tend to be like Peter and how you can receive Jesus' forgiveness as well.

2. Of what importance does the humanity and divinity of Jesus hold for believers today? Consider this in light of the following verses.

Heb 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

Romans 8:32-34 NAS95 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; 34 who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/041016.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Easter Sunday, 3-27-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **3-27-2016, Easter Sunday**. Happy Easter! On this joyful day of celebration we remember how God raised His Son, our Savior, Jesus from the dead. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have eternal life through faith in His finished work on the cross. Accordingly, this week's readings answer some of the most important questions that humans have ever asked about eternal life. The first reading is a message from Saint Peter that explains the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection that has been provided for all humankind. The second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians provides the implications of what believing in Jesus looks like in the life of the believer. Finally, we conclude with the glorious story of Jesus' resurrection from the Gospel of Saint John.

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

First Reading:

The first reading this week is from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10. The context of this section is Saint Peter's address to Cornelius, the gentile Centurion from Caesarea. A Centurion was a roman military leader who led 100 men. The story of what we are about to read happened a few days after Peter had seen a vision of a huge sheet lowered to the ground containing a variety of animals,

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

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

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

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

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

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

Second Reading:

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

Stepping back to look at the big picture, Paul's overall purpose in the Epistle was to correct heresy that was being taught in the church. The heresy had four elements that Paul addressed in chapter 2. These false beliefs included the denial of the sufficiency and preeminence of Jesus Christ (2:8), the exaltation of Jewish ritualism (2:11, 16-17), the teaching of the extreme denial of the flesh as a way of getting closer to God (known as "asceticism," 2:20-23), and the ungodly practice of worshiping angels (2:18). All four teachings clearly contradict the Scriptures. Paul corrected their

misunderstandings early in the second chapter by making some clear statements to help them stand in the midst of false teaching. Paul said, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:8-9). This statement addressed elements of all four of the heresies that were being taught and practiced by certain members of the church.

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

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

Paul said, "if you have been raised up with Christ. This has a threefold meaning. First, he meant this in the sense that **if** we have believed in Jesus' death and resurrection, then we are in a sense crucified with Him and therefore "raised up" on the cross with Him. Paul said in Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Second, we have been "raised up" in the sense that, if we believe, we have been "born from above." This is something that Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus (John 3:3), the man who evidently did later come to believe in Jesus since he came to help prepare Jesus' body for burial after He was crucified (John 19:39). Jesus used a Greek word "anothen" which had a dual meaning, above and again. Jesus taught Nicodemus that he had to born from above spiritually, and that he had to be born a second time spiritually in a process distinct from his physical birth. The instant a person "believes" they are "born from above," meaning that they received the gift of eternal life and the Holy Spirit of God now lives inside of them. The third meaning that Paul had in mind regarding being "raised up" with Christ is that in a spiritual sense after we die we will be "raised up" to a much greater authority in order to reign with Jesus Christ. Paul said, "If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us" (2 Timothy 2:12).

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

revealed when He comes again in glory with all of His believers in tow, that is us, His saints (Revelation 19:14, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:13, Acts 9:32, Acts 26:10, Romans 16:2).

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

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

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

Alternative Second Reading:

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

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

The narrative continues beyond what was covered in the reading:

10 So the disciples went away again to their own homes. 11 But Mary was standing outside the tomb

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

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

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

We can also have assurance of salvation which leads to eternal life by trusting in what the Scripture says about how a person does make it to heaven when they die. The first reading brought up the idea of "belief in Jesus." Let's recap what this means, for this is the foundation of our faith. First, God says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). God says that because of our sin the payment we will receive without some outside intervention is death, meaning eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). In that same verse, God says that the outside intervention has been given as a free gift: Jesus died on the cross for the payment of our sins. This good news can also be found in the famous verse that is often seen printed on cardboard signs held up at sporting events. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Saint Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Does this sound like something that is simple to achieve? It is simple, but if it's not necessarily easy. If it were easy then everyone in the world that ever heard the Gospel would become a believer. Peter said in Acts 2:38 that belief is intricately tied to repentance. When we believe in Jesus, it is because we are convicted of our need for a Savior. This leads us to repent of (or turn away from) our sins. This means that we have come to agree with God about our sins, and recognize them for what they are, deadly (Romans 6:21). The Bible says that even one single sin would keep us from entering heaven – forever (James 2:10). So repentance of sin, turning away from the destructive forces that once ruled our lives, is an on-going part of exercising faith in Jesus. One preacher said, "If your faith hasn't changed you, it probably hasn't saved you." This is not to imply that works are necessary for salvation. But it is to say that true faith is manifested in our lives being oriented around the values

that Christ had, because He is our life (Colossians 3:4). Jesus' death and resurrection were given as a gift to all, to cover our sin and provide us with the right to be accepted into heaven. As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, keep in mind the simplicity of this Gospel message that Jesus gave to the world.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

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

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

2. Perhaps you don't completely understand the meaning of Jesus in your life. Have you received the forgiveness of your sins through the only method possible: faith in Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection from the dead? Do you want to be with God and know that you will make it to heaven when you die? Let's pray to affirm or reaffirm our belief in Jesus this Easter.

Dear God, I recognize that I am a sinner, and that because of my sin I deserve death and eternal separation from You. I believe that Jesus died for my sins as payment of the penalty I owed. I believe that You raised Him from the dead and that He will come again in glory. I want to have this gift of eternal life that the Bible talks about through faith in Christ. I repent of my sins and ask You, in the name of Jesus, to empower me to set my sights on spiritual things above, not on earthly desires that have separated me from You. I pray this in Jesus' Holy name, Amen.

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/032716.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-20-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **3-20-2016, Easter Sunday**. This week we open the reading with the procession of the palms. Then we move to the first reading that gives us a glimpse of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah. The second reading shows the humility of Jesus, who came to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy of the Messiah having to suffer. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel account of Jesus' passion, our Messiah, Who paid the penalty for our sin.

Reading at the Procession of the Palms

Luke 19:28-40 NAS95 28 After He had said these things, He was going on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, 30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. 31 "If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.'" 32 So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34 They said, "The Lord has need of it." 35 They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. 36 As He was going, they were

spreading their coats on the road. 37 As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, 38 shouting: "BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." 40 But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!"

The time around Passover was a season of messianic expectancy, and there were many pilgrims in the city for the celebration. One of the issues that was fresh in the mind of the people was Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead just shortly before this last Passover (John 11:1-45). This would have played into His sudden popularity and for the people's desire to see Him. In messianic form, Jesus directed His disciples with exact precision, and when they followed His orders, everything worked out exactly as Jesus had said. Jesus asserted His authority over Jerusalem by riding into the city on a colt (v. 30, Mark 11:4), not a mighty stallion as would have been done by kings. This was in fulfillment of a prophecy from Zechariah (Zechariah 9:9). Evidently, according to Saint Matthew's narrative, Jesus rode on the colt and the donkey (it's mother) walked alongside.

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

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

Jesus came the first time as a humble, unblemished Lamb (Revelation 13:8). However, Jesus will return the second time as the glorious Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). He will return as the Almighty Warrior on a white horse, not a donkey as happened the first time. At His First Coming, many people missed His appearance. According to John, at His Second Coming He will not be missed. John said, "BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen" (Rev 1:7). When the "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (v.16b) returns, He will come in judgment to a people living "as in the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37) expecting things to continue as they always have in the past. Since God has given us this warning, we must ask ourselves "How now shall we

live?" While ignorance seems to be bliss, it does not lead to eternal life.

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

In this reading, the Prophet Isaiah speaks of himself as a "type" of Christ. Christ the Messiah has been given the Word of God, something that "sustains a weary one with a word" (v. 4). The Messiah is obedient (v. 5), even giving His back to those who strike Him and His "cheeks to those who pluck out [His] beard" (v. 6). God darkened the skies during the spiritually dark event of Jesus' suffering, and Jesus "set [His] face like flint" and wasn't ashamed (v. 7) to fulfil God's will in giving His life for us. Later in the Gospel lesson, we will read about the fulfillment of the suffering of God's servant (Is. 50:6 "scourged" and "spat upon") in great detail.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

Luke 22:14 – 23:56 NAS95 14 When the hour had come, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. 15 And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; 18 for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes." 19 And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 20 And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. 21 "But behold, the hand of the one betraying Me is with Mine on the table. 22 "For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!" 23 And they began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing. 24 And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. 25 And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' 26 "But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. 27 "For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves. 28 "You are those who

have stood by Me in My trials; 29 and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you 30 that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 31 "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; 32 but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." 33 But he said to Him, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!" 34 And He said, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me." 35 And He said to them, "When I sent you out without money belt and bag and sandals, you did not lack anything, did you?" They said, "No, nothing." 36 And He said to them, "But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one. 37 "For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, 'AND HE WAS NUMBERED WITH TRANSGRESSORS'; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment." 38 They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough." 39 And He came out and proceeded as was His custom to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples also followed Him. 40 When He arrived at the place, He said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." 41 And He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray, 42 saying, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done." 43 Now an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him. 44 And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground. 45 When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow, 46 and said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation." 47 While He was still speaking, behold, a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was preceding them; and he approached Jesus to kiss Him. 48 But Jesus said to him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" 49 When those who were around Him saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" 50 And one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. 51 But Jesus answered and said, "Stop! No more of this." And He touched his ear and healed him. 52 Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders who had come against Him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? 53 "While I was with you daily in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me; but this hour and the power of darkness are yours." 54 Having arrested Him, they led Him away and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a distance. 55 After they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them. 56 And a servant-girl, seeing him as he sat in the firelight and looking intently at him, said, "This man was with Him too." 57 But he denied it, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." 58 A little later, another saw him and said, "You are one of them too!" But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" 59 After about an hour had passed, another man began to insist, saying, "Certainly this man also was with Him, for he is a Galilean too." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." Immediately, while he was still speaking, a rooster crowed. 61 The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, "Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times." 62 And he went out and wept bitterly. 63 Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him and beating Him, 64 and they blindfolded Him and were asking Him, saying, "Prophesy, who is the one who hit You?" 65 And they were saying many other things against Him, blaspheming. 66 When it was day, the Council

of elders of the people assembled, both chief priests and scribes, and they led Him away to their council chamber, saying, 67 "If You are the Christ, tell us." But He said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe; 68 and if I ask a question, you will not answer. 69 "But from now on THE SON OF MAN WILL BE SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND of the power OF GOD." 70 And they all said, "Are You the Son of God, then?" And He said to them, "Yes, I am." 71 Then they said, "What further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth." 1 Then the whole body of them got up and brought Him before Pilate. 2 And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a King." 3 So Pilate asked Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And He answered him and said, "It is as you say." 4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no guilt in this man." 5 But they kept on insisting, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching all over Judea, starting from Galilee even as far as this place." 6 When Pilate heard it, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that He belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him to Herod, who himself also was in Jerusalem at that time. 8 Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see Him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. 9 And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing. 10 And the chief priests and the scribes were standing there, accusing Him vehemently. 11 And Herod with his soldiers, after treating Him with contempt and mocking Him, dressed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent Him back to Pilate. 12 Now Herod and Pilate became friends with one another that very day; for before they had been enemies with each other. 13 Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, 14 and said to them, "You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. 15 "No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. 16 "Therefore I will punish Him and release Him." 17 Now he was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner. 18 But they cried out all together, saying, "Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!" 19 (He was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder.) 20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, 21 but they kept on calling out, saying, "Crucify, crucify Him!" 22 And he said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him." 23 But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail. 24 And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted. 25 And he released the man they were asking for who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will. 26 When they led Him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, coming in from the country, and placed on him the cross to carry behind Jesus. 27 And following Him was a large crowd of the people, and of women who were mourning and lamenting Him. 28 But Jesus turning to them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. 29 "For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' 30 "Then they will begin TO SAY TO THE MOUNTAINS, 'FALL ON US,' AND TO THE HILLS, 'COVER US.' 31 "For if they do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" 32 Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. 33 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 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 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 are suffering 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." 44 It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, 45 because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. 46 And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT." Having said this, He breathed His last. 47 Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent." 48 And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts. 49 And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee were standing at a distance, seeing these things. 50 And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man 51 (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God; 52 this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain. 54 It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. 55 Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. 56 Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

We read this account of Jesus' crucifixion ever year but sometimes the meaning of it can get lost in the routine. It is important for us to understand the implications of the death of Christ in our own lives. Jesus endured a horrible death for one important reason: to bring sinful human beings back into right relationship with the Father. Saint Paul said, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23) and "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). Jesus paid the penalty required by the Father for our sin. Saint John said, "and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Propitiation is a word that means, "The offering which appeases the wrath of one against whom an offence has been committed" (American Tract Society Dictionary). The appeasement of the Father's wrath through Jesus' death on the cross is God's invitation to you to be in right relationship with Him. While it is a free gift (meaning you don't have to earn it), you do have to unwrap the gift. This means that you have to receive the gift through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. John said, "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).

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If you have not received Jesus into your life, you can do that by speaking to Him in prayer. There are not any magic words, just tell God about your belief that Jesus died for your sins. Ask Him to empower you to accomplish His work in your life through the Holy Spirit living in you. If you prayed this prayer, you are entering into a relationship with God the Father through Jesus. As with any relationship, there are certain sensitivities that we extend to the other person. When you find out what the other person values and loves then you cooperate with their plan especially when you know that they have your best interests in mind. That is how it is with God in our relationship with Him. You study the Bible to get to know who He is. You go to church to find more about His heart. You give up destructive habits that lead you away from God. Another important part of relating to God is learning to walk in step with His Spirit. Every believer has been given the gift of the Holy Spirit Who lives inside of us. To walk in step with the Spirit is to cooperate with God on a daily basis. All of these things are how we grow in our relationship with God.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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

2. How have you personalized the story of Jesus' crucifixion?

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/032016.cfm Palm Sunday

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-13-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **3-13-2016**. This week we open with the Old Testament reading from Isaiah in which we see his foretelling of an aspect of the New Covenant. In the second reading, we learn about Paul's passion in running the race for Jesus in opposing the false teachers of his era. We close with the story of the woman caught in adultery from the Gospel of John.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Let's review the background of the Prophet Isaiah from which the first reading was taken. Isaiah was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah shortly after the Northern Kingdom (called Israel) was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. Isaiah brought a dire message to Judah that God was going to use a foreign nation to judge them, like what had just happened to Israel. He also proclaimed a message of hope and restoration including a promise that a Messiah would come to restore all that would be taken from God's chosen people. He is one of the most important prophets because of all of the information he provided regarding the coming Messiah. He said regarding this future Ruler, "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" (7:14). He continued, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). His writings then moved onto the near term prediction about the coming invasion by Babylon and closed with a series of messages with a very long range view including the time during which Jesus will reign on earth during the Millennial Kingdom.

Today's reading is from a section in which we see how God reminds the people of Judah about God's greatness as well as His sovereignty. Chapter 43 opens with, "But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have

called you by name; you are Mine!" (Isaiah 43:1). God reminds the people of His unique covenantal relationship with them. He shows how He is with them during their hardships that He allowed to overtake them in order to accomplish His purposes. The second verse in the chapter says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, Nor will the flame burn you." We see similar wording in today's reading.

First Reading:

Isaiah 43:16-21 NAS95 16 Thus says the LORD, Who makes a way through the sea And a path through the mighty waters, 17 Who brings forth the chariot and the horse, The army and the mighty man (They will lie down together and not rise again; They have been quenched and extinguished like a wick): 18 "Do not call to mind the former things, Or ponder things of the past. 19 Behold, I will do something new, Now it will spring forth; Will you not be aware of it? I will even make a roadway in the wilderness, Rivers in the desert. 20 The beasts of the field will glorify Me, The jackals and the ostriches, Because I have given waters in the wilderness And rivers in the desert, To give drink to My chosen people. 21 The people whom I formed for Myself Will declare My praise.

Isaiah is providing comfort to those in the future who will return from the Babylonian Captivity some 150 years in the future. He reminds them of who God is because it will be hard for them to understand God in the midst of their discipline that came about through the exile. God reminds them of He acted powerfully during the first Exodus under the direction of Moses (vv. 16 – 17). Moses was the one to whom the Law was given (Mosaic Covenant). The Mosaic Covenant included the Ten Commandments and the other requirements, which the Jewish people had to fulfil in order to show their covenant relationship with God. Isaiah brings out a contrast in the next verses. In other words, he is saying something like, "if you through the Exodus was amazing just wait until you see what I do in the future." To which future event is Isaiah be referring, has it already happened or is it yet to transpire? Here are some characteristics of this future event.

- It comes on suddenly (v. 19b).
- It is undetected (v. 19b), the Jewish people will miss it.
- It is something supernatural because it defies the natural order of things (streams in the desert, v. 19c).
- Everything and everyone will praise the Lord, right down to the wild animals, jackals and owls (v. 20).
- It will completely satisfy people's spiritual thirst (v. 20, see also Isaiah 55:1-3).

Based on what Isaiah predicted, it becomes clear that he was referring to the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus. This is a new and better deliverance (and "exodus") which outshines the original Exodus from Egypt and the Mosaic Covenant. It started at Jesus' First Advent (His death and resurrection), but it will be fully realized at His Second Advent when everything will be made right.

In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews made the superiority of Jesus very clear as we see in

the following verses.

Hebrews 10:12-18 NAS95 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

What does this mean for our lives? Since God has been powerful and trustworthy in the past, we can trust Him to be powerful and trustworthy in the future. Even if our circumstances seem to be a desert experience, He will sustain us and eventually make all things right but it may not happen during our natural lifetime. As part of God's family through which we have been in-grafted (Romans 11:17) we can bring praise to God (v. 21) as we trust Him and sense Him working in our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Philippians, one of the "Prison Epistles" since it was written while Paul was under house arrest (Philippians 1:13) in Rome (Acts 28:16). Paul viewed this time of captivity as a special ministry of service to Jesus Christ as we see especially in Philippians 1:12-14. Paul said there, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel" (v. 12). Today's reading is from chapter three in which Paul discusses the great value of following his leader Jesus through the use of an athletic metaphor.

Second Reading:

Philippians 3:8-14 NAS95 8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, 9 and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; 11 in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul surrendered everything that he had on earth in order to serve Jesus Christ (v. 8). Paul was clear that even his most admirable achievements fell far short of earning his way into the kingdom of heaven, this came only through faith in the Lord Jesus (v. 9). This revealed Paul's heart for the people to find their true righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ alone which comes not by

striving but through God's power (v. 9). This was in contrast to the false teachers plaguing the church (see Philippians 2:21, and Philippians 3:2). These "dogs" as he called them in 3:2 just before today's reading, were those who interfere with spiritual matters about which they didn't have true knowledge. These "Judaizers" sought to impose the Old Testament Law upon the Gentile church, something which Paul wrote an entire epistle against in the Book of Galatians. The bottom line is that it is a distortion of the true gospel of grace given by Jesus Christ when anyone attempts to impose requirements for salvation outside of faith in Christ alone. In contrast to the false teachers who hoped in obtaining power and success in this life, Paul looked toward the eternal future. His hope was in gaining perfection through his personal resurrection from the dead (vv. 11-12), the first fruits of which we see in Jesus' resurrection from dead.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul used an athletic metaphor in saying that while running towards the future he was striving to forget what was behind him while racing ahead towards this future hope of resurrection "for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (v. 14). Paul frequently used such terminology in his letters as a means of connecting with his readers with symbolism with which they would have been familiar. He liked the Christian life as a race towards the finish, rather than a walk in the park in which we slouch our way towards the finish that is coming upon us whether we want it to or not. As an athlete, we take an active role in running the race, and are not just spectators on the sidelines as the others run by us.

What does this mean for us today? We are not to look to things like what the New Testament Jews desired like political power. We are also not to think that we can find righteousness through good works in obedience to an elevated (and false) interpretation of the Scriptures, as did the Pharisees. Believers are called to shift their focus not upon the things of this world but to "press on" in order to accomplish God's purposes. All the while we have to remember that the righteousness that we do finally obtain is from God, not our works. Paul said clearly in Ephesians, "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). We are to take our Christian lives seriously in the same ways that an athlete competes in a race. Although we can cheer others as they run, we too are called to compete in the event of the Christian life. During the race we can remember that Christ is the One from Whom comes our power, as Paul said "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 8 in which we see Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery. The event happened in the temple court after Jesus began to teach there early in the morning (John 8:2-3). As you will see in the reading we are not told about that other half, the man involved in the adulterous affair. In the early New Testament culture, the society tolerated a larger degree of sexual sin among men. In our day we might say something like, that is what men do. In that day we would expect more scrutiny upon the sexual sin of woman, especially one in Jerusalem that was outside of the sexual activities considered normal in the cults of the Roman pagan culture. So it is in the reading that the sin of the woman is brought front and center to Jesus who is placed in

a kind of judge position, something for which Jesus was appointed before the creation of time.

Gospel Reading:

Note: This particular section of the Gospel of John is not found in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and was first added to by Jerome in the year 382. If you are interested, we encourage you to research the findings on this matter.

John 8:1-11 NAS95 1 But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. 3 The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, 4 they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. 5 "Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" 6 They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. 7 But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. 10 Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" 11 She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

The two opposing groups known as the scribes (the scholars and lawyers) and Pharisees (legalistic lay people) had strong evidence against the woman, the evidence revealing that she was "caught in the very act" (v. 4). Jesus doesn't question the weight of evidence that they have against the woman. However, rather than responding to their legal question which was nothing more than an attempt to trap Him, Jesus simply stoops downs again begins writing on the ground "v. 6). Evidently He had changed his risen from His earlier seated position, since it says in verse 2 that "He sat down and began to teach them." One can imagine Jesus in a submissive, kneeling position with His head held low such that he could reach the ground on which to write. We are not told what He wrote on the ground, but it seems evident from the reaction of His listeners that it affected them deeply. The scribes and Pharisees expected an answer, and evidently grew impatient when Jesus failed to answer. After the lawyers questioned Him a second time, He responded by straightening up and saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7), after which He went back to His writing. This was the answer to their question regarding what should be done with the woman caught in adultery. The oldest in the crowd responded first by leaving, until one by one Jesus was left alone with the "convict." Jesus then admonished her to leave and "sin no more" (v. 11). The completely vulnerable woman who had previously surrounded by a covey of rapt prosecutors bearing overwhelming evidence which would certainly have convicted her was set free by the supreme judge of all the universe (2 Timothy 4:1).

The reading makes it clear that when we examine our lives we understand that we too are sinners in need of Jesus' forgiveness. We have committed adultery of the heart by going after things other than

God in which we find our pleasures. Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Sin is a serious matter, and God teaches us that the natural end of a non-believer living out their life of sin is death. Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a).We can identify with the woman caught in adultery; a person who in that society stood condemned and squarely caught in her sin. We can heed Jesus' warning to her in which he says, "From now on sin no more" (v. 11c). We don't naively think that the woman left the interaction with Jesus and become the most saintly figure in Jerusalem. However, we can imagine that after being set from the consequences of her sin that she was deeply affected by the "Word of God." During those times in which the Spirit of God indict us for our sin, we too can find healing from the eternal consequences of sin even if God doesn't deliver us from the temporal ones. In each incident in which we find ourselves confessing the depth of our sinfulness we can celebrate that as believers in the Lord Jesus we will be delivered from the eternal consequences of our sin.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. When was there a time in which you were caught in the very act of sin? Based upon what you learned in the Gospel lesson, how can you imagine that Jesus would have addressed you?

2. In what ways does the story of the woman caught in adultery help you to avoid your own sin? What about certain besetting sins that you keep committing, a cycle of sin / repent / sin?

3. How does the following verse speak to you about your own sin?

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/031316-fifth-sunday-lent.cfm

Source(s):

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-6-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **3-6-2016**. This week we open with a reading from Joshua. The successor to Moses, Joshua was one of only two of the original multitude that left Egypt who entered the Promised Land. The conquest of the land was accomplished under his leadership with victories, defeats, and noted events. The Apostle Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is the source for the second reading. These verses reveal God's wonderful plan of reconciliation (a big theological term) in its twofold aspect: for ourselves and through us for others. The final reading from Luke's Gospel includes stories of losses, a sheep, a coin, and a wayward son. The emphasis is on what we refer to as the "Prodigal Son." From all three readings we can learn a lot about God and His loving relationship with His people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first five books of the Bible are sometimes referred to as Law. The sixth book introduces the historical books, capturing the continuing story of Israel from their entrance into the Promised Land (under General Joshua) to their captivity and removal from the Land. In this first history book, Israel is taken into the Land, experiences ultimate victory (with significant defeats along the way), and comes into a period of rest. Chapters 1-4 detail the crossing of the Jordan River and the initial arrival in the land of Canaan. Today's reading reports on a divine encounter with God and the renewal of certain rituals.

First Reading:

Joshua 5:9-12 NAS95 9 Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of

Egypt from you." So the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. 10 While the sons of Israel camped at Gilgal they observed the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth day of the month on the desert plains of Jericho. 11 On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. 12 The manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.

God appears to Joshua in this passage to encourage him. Having completed the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Joshua is fully aware that only he and Caleb were among the original emigrants from Egypt. The long wilderness journey was as a result of the sin and disobedience of God's people, particularly their refusal to enter the Land when they first arrived there. What a tragedy! Literally hundreds of thousands of Israelites died on the journey. God in verse 2 seems to be telling Joshua that now the reproach of Egypt's opposition and the sin of the people were all in the past. The name "Gilgal" in the Hebrew language sounds like "roll." So their formal reproach was rolled off. This was a new, fresh start for His people.

Two startling events occur next. First, the people observe Passover. The Passover celebration is a vivid reminder of the deliverance of the people from Egypt. You can read about it in Exodus 12. God sent the death angel to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian families and their cattle. The Israelites were *passed over* if they splashed a bit of the blood of a slain lamb on the door posts and lintels of their houses. It's a magnificent illustration of the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus would make as the Lamb of God when He gave His life for the salvation of all who will by faith accept His work on their behalf and commit their lives to Him.

The second startling event occurred on the very next day. You will recall that for their entire wilderness journey, the people were provided manna (and later quail) for their daily food. It was a marvelous provision for the people, but how tedious it must have been to have the same diet day after day after day! So, here the people are finally in the Promised Land that was said to be a land of "milk and honey." On this day they were able to eat of the fruit of the land they were given. After that, the manna ceased, and from then on they could enjoy the produce of their new homeland.

How wonderful is God's provision for those who trust Him! More than mere physical food, He offers a personal relationship with Him that is made possible by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. Trust Him!

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians dealt with numerous problems that had arisen in the young church: disunity, sin, false teaching, to name a few. This second letter, in part, is a defense of his apostleship, for there were some who questioned his authority. He also writes to encourage the faithful and to strengthen their faith. The earlier portion of chapter 5 includes important teaching regarding the trials of life now for the Christian but the wonderful expectation for the future. Although we may struggle and ultimately die, he notes that "to be away from the body [is to be] at

home with the Lord" (v. 8). Then today's passage takes us into some deep but precious truths.

Second Reading:

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 NAS95 17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 18 Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, 19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Paul's statement that anyone in Christ is "a new creature" is astounding! He goes on to explain why that is true. The person who is "in Christ" is one who has confessed Jesus as lord and has by faith accepted His finished work on the cross as sufficient to cover his sin and make him right with God. Elsewhere Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." So, the believer is not only "in Christ," but Christ is in him. The born-again Christian (John 3:3) discovers that the things of his old life are no longer of dominant interest. Everything is seen in a new light; everything has changed.

As mentioned earlier, the next verses reveal God's wonderful plan of reconciliation (a big theological term) in its twofold aspect: for ourselves and through us for others. The term is more easily understood if we think of the frequent practice of reconciling our bank statement. The bank reports our balance is X number of dollars, but our checkbook may show a different number. We have to bring those figures into balance; that's called reconciliation. Verses 19 and 20 tell us how it has happened when we are reconciled with God. He did it through Christ. We had a debt to pay because of our sin. ("All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul wrote in Romans 3:23). Jesus paid that debt by accepting the punishment due us and satisfying God's demand for justice, so that he is "not counting [our] trespasses against [us]." So, we can be reconciled with God when we accept God's gracious provision.

Paul continues to show us that, having been reconciled to God, we now have the responsibility of taking that message of reconciliation to those who have not yet been restored to God by faith. He says that message has been "committed" to us. In fact, he calls us "ambassadors for Christ." When we share God's truth with others, we are officially representing God; we are authorized and commissioned to do so. It is not a responsibility we can shirk or take lightly.

The final statement in today's reading is mind-boggling. The whole matter of reconciliation (or salvation in the broader sense) is because of the willingness of Jesus to "be sin on our behalf." It's beyond human imagination: the perfect, sinless, holy Son of God, who experienced life as we do but without sin, was willing to take our sin, bear it and its penalty for us so we can experience God's

righteousness. If you have not yet accepted this gracious gift of God, do so now and begin living as that new creature he spoke of earlier.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Luke 15 includes three parables, all about lost things. Parables are stories with familiar images and characters that illustrate important truths—truths that are made clear by the telling of a simple story. Often, no interpretation is necessary; the application is obvious. At other times Jesus uses parables that are understood by His disciples but are not clear to hearers who are not sincerely looking for truth. Note that in this instance, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining that Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them." They were the audience that Jesus taught using these three stories.

Gospel Reading:

Note: Verses 4 – 10 that were omitted from the reading are included below for context.

Luke 15:1-32 NAS95 1 Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. 2 Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." 3 So He told them this parable, saying,

4 "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 5 "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' 7 "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8 "Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' 10 "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

11 And He said, "A man had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. 13 "And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. 14 "Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. 15 "So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 "And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. 17 "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How

many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 18 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' 20 "So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; 23 and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 "And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 "And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 "But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 "But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' 31 "And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 'But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

The first parable is simple to understand. For a shepherd to lose one of his flock is disastrous. He will go to almost any length to find that single sheep. When he finds it, he rejoices and calls his friend together to rejoice with him. Jesus makes an interesting application to the story. He likens it to the rejoicing in heaven when a single sinner repents and is reconciled to God.

The second story has a very similar concluding statement: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." In this story a woman has lost one of her ten coins, perhaps the total of all her assets. Like the shepherd, she goes on a serious search, checking every nook and cranny of her house until she finds the missing coin. She, also, calls her friends to come and celebrate the find.

One can readily conclude from these two stories that God is in the search-and-rescue business. As Peter put it, God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). All of heaven's beings rejoice when a rescue is successful and a lost one repents and returns to God. But Jesus tells one more story, this one in great detail that emphasizes God's great love for a lost one. It is commonly referred to as the story of The Prodigal Son.

The reader is probably familiar with the story. The younger of two sons asks his father for his inheritance. He doesn't give a reason, but the succeeding events indicate that he wanted out from the confining influences of home so he could live life as he wanted to. Surprisingly, perhaps, the father gives him what he asks and does the same for his older brother who remains at home and continues his usual life working the homestead with the father. The younger son goes far from home

geographically and in every other sense, as well. He spends his inheritance in "loose living," wasting it all on his selfish desires. His dream of fun and fulfillment was burst by his wastefulness that became acute in the midst of a famine in the land he had fled to. Life became a nightmare, and he was disgraced to take a job feeding pigs (exceedingly distasteful to faithful Jews).

"When he came to his senses," he realized that the servants at his father's house had it much better than he was experiencing life, so he vowed to return home, humble himself, and beg to live as a servant. Apparently, he had come to a full appreciation of what he had lost and that it was his own sinful pride, greed, and desire for the "good life" that had brought him down to the gutter. We can't be sure about what he expected of his father. Surely, he hoped for acceptance back onto the farm as a lowly servant, but he probably would not have anticipated the response of his father to his return.

What follows is an amazing illustration of the unfathomable love and grace of God. It seems that the father had been on the lookout for his son, and he hastened to greet him, to welcome him, and to present him with multiple tokens of his love and forgiveness. And like the first two stories, a celebration follows the son's return, and there are a banquet, gifts, forgiveness, and rejoicing. Oh, but there's a catch—not everyone rejoices. Now we are re-introduced to the elder son, who, perhaps, is the real prodigal. He has been faithful in his work for the father, but apparently, his heart is not open to receive or forgive his brother. The elder brother had enjoyed his home and work, and he had his inheritance. Why should he be upset? Why couldn't he rejoice at the return of his brother? Perhaps Jesus was drawing a verbal picture of some in His audience that day. Was He thinking of the Pharisees and scribes, who like the older brother were deceived in their own self-righteousness?

The three parables clearly illustrate the value of every human being. Like the sheep, the coin, and the son, God highly values the lost ones, and he deeply loves those who have not yet repented and accepted His gracious offer to reconcile them to Himself.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. With which of the sons in the story of the prodigal son do you identify with most, the elder or the prodigal himself? Why?

2. How do you feel about the reaction of the father upon the return of his youngest son? Do you feel that the youngest go what he deserved, or what he didn't deserve? In what ways does the father's love for his son(s) emulate the characteristics that we see of God the Father in the Scriptures?

Readings for the Week

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