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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-29-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah 63 in which we include a great deal of the surrounding context and learn about God's frustration with the Jewish people during this era. Then we move to the second reading which is the opening verses of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. We conclude with a lengthy analysis from Mark's Gospel on the section known as the Olivet Discourse.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is in Isaiah 63-64. Israel was experiencing the consequences of turning away from God. Isaiah, who was God's spokesperson, cried out to God on behalf of the people. The people were suffering as a result of keeping God out of their lives. But this was a necessary part of the training process, for how else would they know that surrendering to God was actually for their good unless they experienced the harsh reality of living apart from God? We will examine the portion of the reading in chapter 63 first, then continue with the rest.

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The bold text is what will be read in the mass, the normal text is the biblical verses that provide the context.

First Reading:

16 For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us And Israel does not recognize us. ***You, O LORD, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name. 17 Why, O LORD, do You cause us to stray from Your ways And harden our heart from fearing You? Return for the sake of Your servants, the tribes of Your heritage. 18 Your holy people possessed Your sanctuary for a little while, Our adversaries have trodden it down.*** *19 We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, Like those who were not called by Your name. (Isaiah 63:16-19)*

As a prophet, Isaiah was in a tough position. He desired to see God move in the hearts of the people, but he knew that the Israelites were unwilling. God is a "gentleman" and does not barge in where He is not wanted. And so the people's hearts grew harder and harder, to the point where God's protective presence was no longer felt in Israel. Isaiah's complaint was that they had become just like the surrounding nations that did not have a covenantal relationship with God. He said, "We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, Like those who were not called by Your name" (v. 19).

The reading continues below beginning in chapter 64.

1 Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Your presence– 2 As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil–To make Your name known to Your adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Your presence! 3 When You did awesome things which we did not expect, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. 4 For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, Nor has the eye seen a God besides You, Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him. 5 You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways. Behold, You were angry, for we sinned, We continued in them a long time; And shall we be saved? 6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities. 8 But

now, O LORD, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand. *(Isaiah 63:16 – 64:8)*

Isaiah's response to their predicament was to call God to hurl down His judgment upon the nations that were attacking them (vv. 1-3). He looked back and remembered God's power when He did "awesome things [they] did not expect" (v. 3) and finally admitted their great sin. Isaiah said, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (v. 6). The connotation of the "filthy garments" here is that of a woman's menstrual rags. This is a strong word picture of how God views our "good deeds" done in our own power. This theme is echoed in the words of King David who said in Psalm 14, "They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3). Seven hundred years later Saint Paul quoted these verses to explain how every person stands condemned before God because of the stain of sin. He said, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He further explained that as result of our sin the penalty is death (Romans 6:23). This passage teaches that we cannot save ourselves. There is no such thing as a cosmic scale that weighs our good deeds versus our bad deeds. All of our deeds, even the so-called "good deeds" are as filthy garments, good only for the trash heap. If this is the case, we must analyze what we are trusting in for salvation. If we are trusting in ourselves, we are going to be sorely lacking.

Isaiah points to a redemptive solution in this passage by showing the need of trusting in God's righteousness. He described God's character: "Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him. You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, who remembers You in Your ways" (vv. 4-5). There is an implied sense of relational dependence to which Isaiah is pointing. He continues this theme of relational dependence at the end of the section saying: "But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You are our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand" (v. 8). The redemptive solution to the dire situation we find ourselves in as sinners is to throw ourselves on God's mercy and to trust in Him to save us. In the New Testament, we see even more clearly God's redemption in Jesus. He bore the wrath of God and forgives us of our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As believers in the finished work of Jesus we are forgiven of our sin and have a special relationship with God, Who at the moment we believed sent His Holy Spirit to live within us (Ephesians 1:13).

What does this means for us today? We must consider carefully in what/whom we are trusting for salvation. Isaiah is very clear, that we cannot be good enough to be saved on our own merit. Becoming a Christian means to lean your full weight on Jesus and trust His righteousness to save you. As believers we have a special relationship with God, in a way that is similar but yet unique from God's chosen people Israel. There will be untold blessings for all believers when they pass into

eternity with God the moment they die. Saint Paul quoted from the first reading and said about believers in the Lord Jesus, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). God allowed judgment to come upon the people of Israel for the purpose of bringing them back to the Lord. As we transition to the second reading, which is also from 1 Corinthians, Paul celebrates with the believers in that region the forgiveness they received through Jesus Who "died for their sins according the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). We can celebrate that we have come to believe even without having to endure a military invasion and being carried captive into a foreign land as happened with the Jews. Although the Jewish people about whom Isaiah wrote in the reading had turned away from the Lord, one day all of Israel will repent of their sin and be saved (Romans 11:26).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is the opening of Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. Paul founded this church on his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 18. The Corinthian church was in a major cosmopolitan city in southern Greece, immersed in the surrounding godless culture of a worldly crossroads city. This was actually Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he mentioned the first letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9 that was subsequently lost.

This study includes verses 1-2 which were omitted in the mass reading.

Second Reading:

1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, 6 even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

Paul began by affirming his apostleship, meaning that he was someone who saw the resurrected Lord Jesus and was personally called by the Lord to his ministry. This happened to him while he journeyed on the road to Damascus as was recorded in the Book of Acts (Acts 9:3-5). Second, Paul provided the name of Sosthenes who was most likely his secretary. This man had suffered for the Lord when he was beaten for taking Paul in front of a Corinthian civil court (Acts 18:12-17). The mention of Sosthenes is significant because it reveals that this important Jewish leader of the synagogue in that region (Acts 18:17) came to faith in the Lord Jesus. Third, Paul affirmed the holiness of anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus. He said, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours (v. 2). Sanctification is the concept of being set apart for the purposes of God. This word comes from the Greek "hagios" meaning "separation," and is the same Greek word that is translated "holiness."

This is a one-time, forever event, but also has an ongoing, growing element, in that as the author of Hebrews stated, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). Finally, Paul says that in the end, believers in the Lord will be "blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 8). This is a common theme for Paul, we also see it in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 as well as in Philippians 1:6 and 2:15. Paul said in Colossians, "yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach–if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister" (Colossians 1:22-23). Believers are blameless in their positon before the Lord, meaning they are justified as if they had never sinned. However, the ungodly behavior that Paul noted later in 1 Corinthians was not indicative of true believers, for only true believers are blameless before the Lord. Paul said in the closing verse of the reading, "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 9). Although as we saw in the first reading, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), continuing in the faith is a sign of a true believer.

We can celebrate that as believers we have been set apart from the world for the purpose of serving God. Most of us do not get too excited about holiness, because holiness has the connation of being no fun. But that is the deception of the Enemy who makes us think that holiness is a drag. The idea of holiness is to be set apart for special use, and which one of us doesn't want to be "special". That is a longing that everyone has. We see a world full of people trying to be special based on the world's value system, using their looks, their personality, their wit, their charm, their money, and their talents to try to stand out from the rest of the crowd. Wanting to feel special is a legitimate longing, but unless it's met in Christ, we will try to meet it in some illegitimate way, which is sinful (even if it is not immoral). So the moral of the story is to recognize that God's imparted holiness to us is what meets this deep longing to be set apart for special use.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Something Paul said in the second reading provides an entry point to transition to the Gospel lesson. Paul said that the Corinthian believers were "awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). In the Gospel lesson from Mark Chapter 13, Jesus provides some important insight into just how that event will come about. This reading is from the portion of Scripture known as the Olivet Discourse because Jesus told it while on the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron Valley from the Jerusalem temple. The Discourse is found in the Gospels of Matthew (chapter 24), Luke (chapter 21), and Mark (chapter 13). There are slight differences between and an understanding of these help to guide the overall interpretation. Although today's reading only covers the last portion of this message, in the overall message the Lord predicts the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He also provides a glimpse into the distant future when God will pour out His judgments upon the world just before He returns to usher in His Millennial reign on earth.

In order to understand today's reading from the end of the Olivet Discourse it is important to recognize the context and meaning from the previous section and the Discourse overall. The Discourse opens with Jesus' prediction of the destructions of the temple. Although this prophecy was partially fulfilled with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, the final fulfillment will be in the future when the Old Testament prophecies regarding the "Day of the Lord" will be poured out upon the unbelieving world. A worldly figure known as the "Antichrist" will arise and wreak havoc upon the Jewish people worshiping in a restored temple in Jerusalem.

In the end times, a period which began when the Lord returned to heaven (Acts 1:11), some events run in parallel throughout our current age up until the return of the Lord; while others run sequentially, as the end times tribulation proceeds according to prophecies in the Bible. Some of the parallel events are as follows. Quotations are provided from Mark's version of the Discourse when appropriate.

- The persecution of believers (Mark 13 4:9).
- An overall decline of morality and godly living (2 Timothy 3:13). Both of these conditions will grow worse and the persecution of believers will intensify until the close of this age and the return of the Lord Jesus.
- An increase in natural and manmade disasters (Mark 13:6-10). In Mark 13, beginning in verse 6, Jesus provided an overall description of the age preceding His return. This period was to marked by "wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6), earthquakes and famines (v. 8), world wars (v. 8)

and with the emergence of many false Messiahs (christs, v. 6). Jesus said that the Gospel must first go out to the entire world (v. 10), which we see will be fulfilled by an angel in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:6), in spite of the best efforts of Christian missionaries to achieve this goal.

- The coming of many antichrists (Mark 13:22). Many antichrists have arisen in our age including figures like David Koresh, Joseph Smith (Mormons), and Charles Taze Russell (JW's). An interesting one is the case of a man named Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. This rabbi from New York was a very influential Jewish leader in the world. When he died in 1994 his followers expected him to rise from the dead in you guessed it, three days. As of this writing, he is still in the grave.

Some of the events are sequential, here are some of them.

- Jesus' prediction in Mark 13:1-3 of the destruction of the temple, which was fulfilled in AD 70. In examining the parallel accounts in Matthew and especially Luke it is apparent that this event foreshadowed the ultimate destructive event heralded by the Antichrist at some future time.
- The coming of the ultimate Antichrist spoken of by the Prophet Daniel and in the Book of Revelation. Saint John said in his day that many antichrists had already come (1 John 2:18), but the Bible predicts the coming of one known as the Man of Sin (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This is the one that will bring about the "abomination of desolation" described by Jesus in verse 14. This will mark the establishment of a global ruler known as the Antichrist (1 John 2:18, Daniel 7:8 "the little horn," Revelation 6:2 –the rider on the white horse), and the false holy spirit figure known as the false prophet (Revelation 13:11-15).
- Persecution of believers on a tremendous scale unknown throughout history (Mark 13: 9-13).
- There will be signs in the sky (Mark 13:24-25).
- The unveiling of God's judgments described in the Book of Revelation including the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls (Revelation 6, 8, 11, 15, 16). These are judgments of God as declared in Revelation: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve. … Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments" (Revelation 16:5-7).
- The return of the Lord Jesus at some unknown time, I call it the return, resurrection and rapture (R-R-R). This event is a resurrection of dead believers throughout the ages, both Christians (1 Thess 4:13-18) and Jews (Ezekiel 37:12), along with a "catching up" or rapture of living believers to meet Jesus in the air. This will commence first with the believers that have already died, then those believers alive during that time. This is clearly revealed by Saint Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. *""For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise*

first. 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 4:16-17).Ezekiel spoke of a the same event but from a Jewish perspective. "*Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel*" (Ezekiel 37:12).

- Once the church is removed from the world because "God has not appointed us to wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9), the cascading series of events known as the Great Tribulation period will commence. The time that follows is known throughout the Scriptures as the "Day of the Lord."
- Supernatural protection of the Nation of Israel in a special place prepared by God (Revelation 12:6).
- The "abomination of desolation" (Mark 13:14). This is when the Antichrist figure will establish himself as God and set up his own image in the temple to be worshiped. Paul said this about the Antichrist: "who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2Thessalonians 2:4). The Jews were familiar with something like this happening before when Antiochus IV Epiphanes sacked the temple and rededicated it to the god Zeus in 167 BC, and sacrificed a pig in the temple to his god. This "abomination of desolation" was a type of the one to come, a prefiguring of the time that the Antichrist would establish himself as god in the temple to be worshiped by everyone in the world, not just Jerusalem as happened in the earlier time.
- The destruction of the Antichrist's religious and civil empire known as "Mystery Babylon" (Revelation 18:2).
- Marriage Supper of the Lamb with all believers in heaven (Revelation 19:7)
- Return of the Lord Jesus to earth with his victorious church (Revelation 19:11-19).
- Antichrist and False Prophet thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:20)
- Satan bound for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:3) then released for a final battle (Revelation 20:7)
- Satan thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10).

With context in mind read today's reading which focuses upon the theme of being prepared for the return of the Lord Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

33 Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. 34 It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. 35 Therefore, be on the alert–for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning– 36 in case he should come suddenly and

find you asleep. 37 What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'" (Mark 13:33 -37)

Jesus told His disciples, and by application all believers, to be prepared for His return. He did so by telling them (and us) a parable of a master that went on journey while leaving his servants in charge. An appointed doorkeeper was to keep careful watch of the door, even during the midnight hours, in order to watch for the return of His master. The meaning of the parable is that Jesus is the Master that went away by ascending into heaven, a foretaste of the resurrection that will happen at the R-R-R event. Jesus the Master appointed pastors to shepherd His servants (believers). Paul said, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11). Jesus commanded His doorkeepers to be alert, meaning that our pastors are to be alert for His return and to teach others to do the same. As the reading closes Jesus repeated the principle application, "Be on the alert!" (v. 37b).

What does all of this mean for us today? First, Jesus cautioned His disciples to be aware of their future destiny so that they were living rightly today. By using the parable of the fig tree earlier in the Discourse (Mark 13:28), something with which the people in the Mediterranean region were very familiar, they could see the signs of the times and live in a watchful and purposeful way. In the same way that Jesus cautioned His disciples to beware of by watching for the signs, we can know that Jesus' return is imminent by watching for the signs ourselves. This means that we should not delay in accomplishing the work that God has placed in our hearts to accomplish. For, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Because God's prophets so accurately predicted events that have already occurred, including Jesus' (the greatest prophet of all) prediction of the destruction of the temple, we can trust that the events will play out exactly as God as described in the Scriptures. Because God has so accurately predicted the future, we can trust Him when He tells us how to enter into an eternal relationship with Him through faith in His Son, the risen the Lord Jesus Christ. We can rest in the fact that everything is going to turn out fine for anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus alone for salvation. Those with faith in the Lord can trust that even if they find themselves thrown into tribulation they will forever be with the Lord in peace.

Finally, although the Scripture provides some phenomenal insights into how the end times will play out, we must be careful not overestimate or underestimate the significance of our current worldly events. Instead, we are to go about the Lord's business while being watchful for His return, for nobody knows that time when that will happen. Although we can know the season of Jesus' return,

including the happening of the events we described in the introduction to the Gospel reading, nobody knows exactly how it will all play out. Until then we are called to work as God's good and faithful servants (Matthew 25:23) until the day He returns. Although God tells us that we will suffer tribulation, and those alive right before the Lord return will suffer even more, we can rest upon God's promises for our eternal life and peace with Him. Peace with God is something that was given to us the moment we believed (Philippians 4:7).

Reflection Questions

1. How does knowing how the Grand Story ends influence how you live today? What values do you have as a result of knowing that God wins in the end? What values do you want God to develop in you based on this knowledge of the end times?

2. The first two readings dealt with humankind's lack of righteousness (Isaiah) and the Corinthian's being called saints. Think about this contrast that is spoken about throughout the Bible. The worse the bad news is, the better the good news is. Explain why the coming of Christ to die on the cross for our sins is called "the good news." How has this become good news for your life?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-22-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Ezekiel in which we see the contrast between the ungodly shepherds and God the Good Shepherd. We include a great deal of the surrounding verses in order to help us to understand the meaning of the reading based upon its context. Then we move onto the second reading from 1 Corinthians in which we study the truth of the resurrection of believers and how this provides us with great hope. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25 in which we study the coming judgment of everyone who lives in the world at the end of the tribulation period. We pray that this study gives you much more insight as you attend Mass this coming Sunday.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is just after God told Ezekiel that although the people recognized him as a prophet and came to listen to him (Ezekiel 33:30-31c) they did not take his words into account and change their lives (Ezekiel 33:31d-ff). Instead, God told them that it would be afterwards that they would look back and "know that a prophet has been among them" (v. 33). In Ezekiel's time, and also in the present age God is not pleased with people going through the motions of dead religion, especially when they don't listen to God's word and let Him operate on their hearts and minds to change their behavior. Chapter 34, the section from which today's reading is taken, opens with God's scathing critique of the "shepherds of Israel," meaning the ungodly

leaders of the nation including kings, priests, and prophets (except for Ezekiel, Daniel and Jeremiah his contemporaries). We get our word "pastor" from the Latin word for "shepherd." These passages are messianic, meaning that they prefigure the revelation of the True Shepherd Jesus Christ. In those days the people were as "sheep without a shepherd," something eerily reminiscent of what Jesus said some six hundred years later. "Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36-37). As usual in these study notes it is crucially important to understand the context as the reading provides a **contrast** between the ungodly "shepherds" of Ezekiel's time and the Godly Shepherd God and His ultimate fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ. This contrast is important enough to understand that we have provided the first ten verses of the chapter leading up to today's reading.

First Reading:

Verses before today's reading:

1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? 3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. 4 Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. 5 They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. 6 My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.' 7 Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 'As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock;' 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'"(Ezekiel 34:1-10)

This is the text of the reading for today that follows the opening of chapter 34. *Note: Verses 13-14*

which were skipped in the reading were added in order to provide the full context.

11 For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. 14 I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. 16 "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. 17 As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats." (Ezekiel 34:11-17).

Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God pictures Himself as the "Shepherd of the Sheep," and this occurs early in the Bible. This theme in the reading from Ezekiel occurs frequently in Ezekiel's Book, occurring some 15 times in chapter 34 alone. 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). We see this clearly in today's reading. "I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God" (vv. 14-16). 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. If we look beyond today's reading to verse 34, we see a continuation of this contrast between the evil shepherds and the One True Shepherd. "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23). "David" in this verse prefigures the One True Shepherd that was yet to come at the time Ezekiel wrote this passage, the Person of Jesus Christ. It is also evident throughout Scripture that the resurrected King David will also play a role in governing Israel in the future Millennial reign of the Lord Jesus on earth.

As believers in Jesus, we can find great comfort from Ezekiel's writing. First, God will seek His sheep

that are lost, meaning that God Himself places a calling upon our lives to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (v. 11). 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, since God keeps His promises that He made to Israel, He will keep all of the promises that He has made to us. One of those promises made to Israel is that He will re-gather this nation Israel at some future time. "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land" (v. 13a). Third, 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 (v. 17). We can trust that God's judgment will be correct in that as we enter eternity He will judge between the evil shepherds in our land and the ones that do good in serving Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading, we will see more about the Person Jesus Christ, since He was made alive at the resurrection, we too will be made alive when our bodies are resurrected from the dead. The reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's vigorous explanation of the bodily resurrection of believers, first the Lord Jesus and then all people who put their faith in Him. Paul opens this section with a caution to his readers for them to "hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2b,c). The main theme that runs throughout the chapter is that the risen Lord Jesus is the hope of all believers, in spite of the fact that some in the church had denied the teaching of the future resurrection of the dead (v.12). Paul said, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (1Corinthians 15:13-14). He closes the section just before today's reading by saying, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1Corinthians 15:19), something which denies the conventional wisdom of our age that would say that the Christian life is a noble way of living. With these concepts in mind let's move onto today's reading. *Note: Verse 27 which was skipped in the reading was provided in order to provide the full context.*

Second Reading:

20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. 21 For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, 24 then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom

to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be abolished is death. 27 For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. 28 When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

Paul said that since Christ **has** been raised from the dead, is the first One to be resurrected (v.20), He is the one through Whom came life and is a precursor of the hope of resurrection for all who believe (v. 22b, 23). As we saw in the first reading from Ezekiel, Jesus' rulership will be established on earth, which is one of the aspects of the resurrection. Jesus will "come in glory," (Matthew 25:31) something that we will read about in the Gospel lesson today. Paul quoted from Psalm 8 when he said that Jesus would totally subdue all of His enemies, "put them under His feet" (vv. 25-26). The evil shepherds spoken of by Ezekiel will be subdued and judged forever. The greatest enemy that Jesus will conquer is death through the victory of the resurrection, first Himself and then all believers. The culmination of world history will be marked by the end of Jesus' one thousand-year (millennial) reign on earth. This will be concluded with Christ handing over His kingdom to His Father in heaven (vv.24 -28), something that would fall into the category of what Saint Peter called "things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). After Christ has handed His kingdom over to the Father, His eternal reign will begin (Revelation 21, 22).

As believers, our greatest hope lies in the hope of resurrection. We can rest in the historical fact that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead, something that is one of the best proven historical events throughout all of history. As our bodies wear out and grow old, we can rest in the fact that one day we will be given a new eternal body that will never grow old. In the same way that Paul comforted the Corinthian believers with these facts, we can find comfort and give comfort to other believers through hope in our future resurrection.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we transition to the Gospel lesson, earlier we mentioned in the first reading how God is the Righteous Judge and in the second reading how one day He will come in Glory to rule and reign over the earth. One of the elements of rulership is acting as a Judge, and at the end His reign on earth Jesus will judge those who have survived the tribulation period at the conclusion of the Day of the Lord.

The big picture context of Jesus return was provided by Jesus earlier in Matthew 24. The world will grow worse and worse, and many false Christs will arise (Matthew 24:5). Wars and famines will ravage the world (vv. 5-8). Believers will experience great persecution to the extent that the true nature of belief of many will be revealed as false (v.10). At some unknow time Jesus will return and many of the dead in the earth will arise, "some to everlasting life and some to everlasting shame and contempt" (Daniel 12:2). It seems that the Old Testament Jews arise at this time (Ezekiel 37:12), along with all of the New Testament believers who have gone to be with Jesus (1 Thess 4:13-17). This event is marked by what Jesus said beginning in verse 40, "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left" (Matthew 24:40). The one that is taken is a believer who is taken alive to heaven, the one left behind will then enter the Great Tribulation (or Day of the Lord). This is similar to what happened to the nonbelievers during Noah's flood. Jesus said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be (Matthew 24:37-39).

Today's reading looks beyond the return of the Lord Jesus to the period after Jesus' Millennial reign on earth, some 1,000 years after the end of the Great Tribulation (Day of the Lord). The reading describes the final judgment, the Great White Throne in which Jesus separates the "wheat from the chaff."

Gospel Reading:

31 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' 41 Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in;

naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 44 Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46)

In the reading we see how nonbelieving "goats" are forcibly separated from the believing sheep by the Good Shepherd Jesus. During these "goats" lives, they lived amongst a mixed multiple that Jesus described in the kingdom parables earlier in Matthew 13. There, Jesus described how the wheat and the weeds would live side by side each other until the time of the harvest when the two would be separated by the master (Matthew 24:24-30). Today's reading is that separation in which the mixed seed is sifted and the weeds are tossed out to be burned (Matthew 24:30c).

In today's reading, Jesus used a shepherd analogy that we saw in Ezekiel. The Good Shepherd who knows His Sheep will divide these two groups on the basis of their heart condition. The criteria that He will use was something He explained to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3, "You must be born from above (or again, Greek "anothen") to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3, with my explanation). Jesus said in that same Gospel, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28). Although Jesus as God knows His sheep instinctively, just like any shepherd, and they look the same on the outside, His sheep bear distinctive markings on the inside. These markings display themselves in their **behavior**, which is a way that even the worldly people can recognize them. This becomes clear in verses 35 -40. **Some** of the good works of a believer flow from a heart that has been changed by God (John 3:3), as James said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14). The sheep indulge in a variety of "sheeplike" behaviors. They feed the hungry (v. 35a), give drink to the thirsty (v. 35c), clothing to those without (v. 36a), visit the sick (v. 36b), and visit those in prison (v. 36b-c). Jesus then went on to explain that anytime you do these things for others it was as if you were doing it directly for Him (vv. 37-40, 42-45). Jesus also made it clear that the eternal destination (v. 46) for nonbelievers is the "eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). It's interesting to note that Jesus' sheep sit at His right hand, while Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (1 Peter 3:22).

The Gospel lesson helps us to prioritize and value what God cares about. In this world, attending to the needs of those who are marginalized in society is an opportunity for us to display what's really in our hearts. Do we have the love and compassion of God or ware we still living only for ourselves? Jesus shares specific types of needs that were commonplace in His day and age including hunger, thirst, lack of sufficient clothing, and imprisonment. You might be encountering other types of needs that God is asking you to meet (helping a child learn how to read, sacrificing some of your income to

provide a home for someone, giving a friend a ride to work while their car is being repaired. The opportunities to meet other people's needs are endless. So, we'll need to ask for wisdom to know which needs are our opportunity to love Christ by serving others.

What does all of this mean in our lives? First, we can trust that the Good Shepherd Who was the first to rise from the dead will also come for us one day when we enter eternity (John 14: 3). Second, even though we may be tortured by the ungodly behavior of people in the world, we can trust that God knows the intentions of our heart and those who are His. God will work it out, "Vengeance is mine says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Third, We can rest in the fact that our good works flow out of a heart changed by God (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:3) and these are evident to those who are unknowingly (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) on the broad road to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Our good works will be evident to them and will shed light on their evil works (John 3:20). Finally, we can trust that since we are believers we can trust in the fact that when we sit before the Lord in judgment it will be for the basis of rewards and not to determine our eternal destination.

Reflection Questions

1. In the Bible the word translated "faith" brings with it the idea of expecting to have the things hoped for or living in light of an unseen reality. In your life, what does it mean to have faith? How does faith play into obedience? Are these two separate things in your mind or are they connected?

2. The Greek word translated "obedience" (hupakoe) according to Strong's Concordance (5218, drawn from 5219) means "attentive hearkening, i.e. (by implication) compliance or submission." Read the following Scripture and answer the question that follows.

25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to ***obedience of faith****; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, emphasis added)*

In light of what you learned today along with Paul's teaching above on obedience of faith, what does it mean for you to walk in obedience of faith? How is your faith evident to others?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-15-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Proverbs in which we see the wise stewardship of God's resources by a godly woman. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with a kingdom parable from Saint Matthew in which we also see God's call for careful stewardship of the resources He has given to us.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Proverbs. This Scripture was written by King Solomon and is a book of wisdom regarding practical and godly living. The main theme in the reading is how a godly

person is a careful steward of their time, talents, and treasures given to them from God. This is the same theme that we will explore later in the Gospel lesson.

Note: All the skipped verses between 31:13-31 were included in order to provide the full context.

First Reading:

10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. 13 She looks for wool and flax And works with her hands in delight. 14 She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar. 15 She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household And portions to her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds herself with strength And makes her arms strong. 18 She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle. 20 She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22 She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land. 24 She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future. 26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. 27 She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: 29 "Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all." 30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. 31 Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Among other things that emerge from the reading, foremost among them we see that the "Proverbs 31 woman" is one who fears the Lord (v. 30). The big idea from the reading is that a godly person is a careful steward of the gifts they receive from God.

Many points arise from the text, here are a few.

- The godly woman works willingly, not under compulsion (v. 13, "in delight"). She also goes to

great lengths in order to get things done (v. 13b-ff).
- The godly woman is a servant to others, even to her own servant (v. 15). She is not a sluggard, but works hard in her service to others.
- She is an entrepreneur (v. 16). In that era her husband would have had to make the actual transaction for the purchase of land, but she was the instigator of it and the one who took care in planting and tending the vineyard.
- She understands that what she gains is from God (v. 18).
- She is optimistic about her future, because she knows that she belongs to God (v. 35, 30b).

The bottom line is that the godly woman is like Jesus, a servant, Someone who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). She is a faithful steward of the gifts that God has given to her. Faithfulness and careful stewardship are common themes throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. We will see this theme continue later in the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's discussion of the Day of the Lord that we discussed in a previous edition of Mass Notes. This is the period of time at the end of the tribulation period in which Israel finally returns to worship of their Lord. The reading today is a warning to the people living in that era to be watchful for the Lord's return. Watchfulness for the return of the Lord Jesus is a continuing theme in the New Testament.

Second Reading:

1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6)

Just like the parable of the virgins that we will discuss in the introduction to the Gospel reading,

everyone is called to be watchful for the return of the Lord. They are to be certain that they find faith in Jesus Christ while they still have the opportunity to do so (Romans 13:11) because nobody knows the hour when the Lord will return (Matthew 24:36). As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God places a high value upon not only being watchful for His return, but also in being a good steward of the things that He has given to us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The reading today is part of what is called the Lord's "Olivet Discourse" which encompasses Matthew 24:1 – 25:46. In this Sermon Jesus describes what is going to happen at the close of the church age. This portion of Matthew contains "kingdom parables" that begin with our Lord using the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like." Today's reading begins in chapter 25 verse 14. The chapter starts with Jesus saying, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to . . ." (Matthew 25:1a). The Lord then goes on to tell the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), which has the same theme of watchfulness seen in the second reading.

Being watchful for the Lord is closely related to being **prepared** for His return, meaning we must already be a citizen of the kingdom before He comes. In the parable of the ten virgins, the Lord described how five of the virgins were prepared for the bridegroom and five were not. In Jewish culture the practice was for the groom to come at an unexpected time. The application of this parable is that half of the virgins were prepared for the Lord Jesus' return by studying the Scriptures and coming to a saving knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ, while the other five were lost and destined for eternal separation from God in Hell. In the context of chapter 25, the application is that at some point during the end times the Lord Jesus will return to gather His Church. Those who are left behind will enter into the time of God's judgment known as the Day of the Lord. Only God knows people's true hearts so no one should wait to receive God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because it may end up being too late.

The reading today opens with another of Jesus' "kingdom parable" introductions, "For it is just like" (v. 14a). What Jesus is saying is, "The Kingdom of God is like . . ." As you read, try to determine the main theological idea that emerges from the reading.

Gospel Reading:

14 For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18 But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 29 For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)

The big idea that emerges from the reading is that stewardship is based on knowing and trusting the heart of the Master. Misguided understanding of the Master's heart leads to living in self-protective, ungodly ways with one's talents, as was the case with the man who buried his talent. The ones who understood and trusted the Master's generous heart were able to take risks and multiply what was entrusted to them. Notice the misconception of the "wicked and lazy slave." He miscalculated the Master's heart when he revealed his deep distrust of him: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground" (verses 24-25). He was blaming his wickedness and laziness on the Master's seemingly unpredictable and untrustworthy character. But the Master smartly revealed the inconsistency in his argument. If he was truly afraid, it seems that he would have at least been wise enough to produce some interest, even if out of fear, if nothing else. The man made an eternal miscalculation when he did not trust the Master's heart.

This kingdom parable is very relevant to our lives today. Here are some ways in which understanding and applying Jesus' teaching to our lives helps to accomplish the plans He has for us.

- Knowing and trusting the Master's heart is of utmost importance. We should be spending our time and energy on this endeavor so that we become wise stewards of what is entrusted to us. We look forward to the day when we will enter into our Master's joy. We can trust that it will all be worth it to hear these words of affirmation.
- Although people in this age are entrusted with different levels of abilities and worldly good, if they are faithful in being good stewards of them they are equally rewarded and entrusted with more responsibilities in heaven. Jesus said to the servant that gained five talents from the original five invested, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21, emphasis added). Likewise, He told the one that was entrusted with only two and gained two, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 23, emphasis added).
- The world is a profitable place for investing God's gifts, both for God and for the people who are entrusted with them. The five talents that God invested in the world became ten (v. 20) and the two talents became four (v. 22). This magical doubling is from God even though it came through the agents to whom He entrusted it.
- Faithful servants have "gifts" to present to their masters, while unfaithful servants have only that which was given to them by God who owns it all in the first place. As believers we are called to invest our time, talents, and treasures in the service of God so that we may have something to present to him when we too stand in judgment before him. Our judgment won't be for salvation, but for rewards.
- Believers come to the understanding that all that they have is from God, as we saw in the first reading about the godly woman in Proverbs 31. In contrast, unbelievers never come to this understanding, because they are carnally minded (Romans 8:6). Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).
- The world's resources flow through a worldly power structure of ungodly masters (v. 24b). Although there are exceptions to this principle, the richest people in the world are almost universally nonbelievers (with an exception being John Rockefeller). Although they don't understand their responsibility of stewardship of God's resources during their lives, they will after they die.

The reading closes with Jesus' teaching that Hell is real, just as heaven is real. Unbelievers will be far worse off in Hell than they are on earth (v. 29). They will be very worried (v. 25) when they stand before the Lord who will judge them for how they used the resources that he gave to them. Though in the parable the unfaithful servant was nagged with worry about giving his report to his master, in the end his judgment will be far worse.

These are sobering words from our Lord and are far from the only time that He warned anyone who would listen about the reality of Hell. Jesus spoke about it in Matthew 11:23 where he described the place with the name "Hades." In Matthew 5:23 the word for hell is rendered from the Greek "Gahenna" while in today's reading the term in "outer darkness" (v. 30a). In the Bible we count some 38 times where this dark destination is designated as the future home of the wicked beginning with Psalm 9:17 and ending with Revelation 21:8. Jesus implores people to take radical steps to prevent themselves from entering this place. In Mark chapter 9 Jesus told the people to even cut off their hand if it causes them to stumble, for "it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43).

As believers who trust upon the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins we have not to worry about going to hell. Saint John reminds us of this through the firm authority of God's word. God says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). Jesus said in the John's Gospel, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God testifies to us through His word that we can never suffer our way to heaven. Suffering is a part of life but the only way that we can merit heaven is through a foreign righteousness, that of Jesus Christ that is placed upon us the moment we believe (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Today's readings remind us of the urgency of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are perishing. God calls us to bring light to the lost generation who without faith in the Lord Jesus will enter the place He described in the Gospel with no hope of escape. My readers may remember a story that I once told about a deeply troubling dream I had many years ago about such a place. I believe that God gave me this to remind me of the urgency in reaching people for the Lord Jesus Christ. In my dream I was in a place that was far away and I felt an utter sense of hopelessness and utter doom. I felt that I was in a place that I would never leave, and was without hope. I pray that nobody would ever have to experience such a dream, and even more that nobody would enter such a place for real at the end of their life on earth. The media may make light of hell as a place guarded by a man in a red suit with a pitchfork in his hand, but the reality of hell is all too real for those who enter there. I pray that through today's study all of us may remember our mission in reaching people with the good news of the Gospel.

Reflection Questions

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1. How do you view the Master's heart? Is He generous and gracious, thereby freeing you from self-protective ways, so that you can take risks with what He has entrusted to you? Or do you view Him like the one talent servant, who saw God as a harsh task-master, blaming God for his own laziness and wickedness?

2. The world we live in is unpredictable. We don't know what each new day will bring, but God has given us some landmarks of the end times. How does the Proverbs 31 woman face the future? How did Paul encourage the Thessalonians to face the future? What truths about the Master's heart and the future will allow you to face the near and eternal future with confidence?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-08-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we study two readings dealing with the second coming of the Lord. We go into some detail about the signs and events that will precede His coming.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom.

Second Reading:

Wisdom 6:12-16

Resplendent and unfading is wisdom,

and she is readily perceived by those who love her,

and found by those who seek her.

She hastens to make herself known in anticipation of their desire;

Whoever watches for her at dawn shall not be disappointed,

for he shall find her sitting by his gate.

For taking thought of wisdom is the perfection of prudence,

and whoever for her sake keeps vigil

shall quickly be free from care;

because she makes her own rounds, seeking those worthy of her,

and graciously appears to them in the ways,

and meets them with all solicitude.

In the ancient writings, wisdom was often personified as a wisdom. Wisdom was something to be actively sought and cherished. In today's reading we see wisdom portrayed in this way, as something that is unfading and actively pursued. Wisdom is, from the author's perspective, something that itself seeks out the people who cherish and seek after her, but yet somehow comes to the seekers by unmerited favor, meaning grace. There is a close connection in the Bible between wisdom and God's Spirit, and we see this in the reading with the aspect of wisdom begin unmerited to those who seek it, but yet God has a desire that we do indeed seek it. To those who seek wisdom more will be given, such as we see in Matthew 13:12. "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him." Also, James said, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). God calls us to seek Him, Who is the ultimate form of wisdom personified in the person of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The Book of First Thessalonians concerns Paul's address to the people in this region to encourage them in light of false teachings that had entered the church and to exhort them to practice a godly lifestyle. The fourth chapter open with an exhortation to the latter. "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more" (1 Thess 4:1). It then moves to the former matter, confronting false teaching that the church had experienced.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 NAS95 13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that

Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 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. 18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.

Paul explained to the believers that just as the Lord Jesus promised, He would return first to gather those who had already died (v. 14), then some instant later the believers who remained alive until His coming (v. 15). This second coming (or rapture) would proceed first with a shout from the Lord, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. Students of the Book of Revelation will recognize this description as following the pattern in that Book (Revelation 11:15). There we see how the return of the Lord Jesus will follow a period of momentous persecution of Jews and Christians (Revelation 12:13-17, we encourage you to study it). Paul then told them to "comfort one another with these words" (v. 18). If we look a bit beyond today's reading we will see that phrase "comfort one another" a second time, but in the context of the promise from God that believers will not enter into the Great Tribulation (or Day of the Lord's judgment, "DOL").

It is helpful in understanding today's message to read forward to 2 Thessalonians where Paul provided an insight into why providing comforting words was necessary. In 2 Thess 2:1 Paul said, "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (vv. 1-2). He went onto explain that the second coming of the Lord Jesus wasn't something that they could miss because Jesus' return would not happen until the worldwide revelation of the Antichrist, the man of sin (2 Thess 2:3). Before the Lord Jesus returns, a world ruler will emerge who will at some point will take his seat in the temple and proclaim himself to be god (2 Thess 2:4). In this section, Paul told them not to let anyone deceive them as these events would be patently obvious (2 Thess 2:3). When Jesus returns, believers will be unable to miss it! The world however will go on about their daily business (Matthew 24:38).

The Thessalonians were falling for false ideas about Jesus return and the same continues until today. The false religious cult of Jehovah Witnesses has taught over the years this very same doctrine, however with a unique twist. They teach that Jesus returned invisibly. This false doctrine is exactly what Paul corrected in today's reading.
Note, if you would like to learn more about the JW's teaching regarding this matter just place the search phrase "Jesus returned invisibly" into a search engine.

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues the theme of the second coming of the Lord Jesus. Today's reading follows Jesus' famous sermon known as the Olivet Discourse where He explained to His disciples the events that would follow and the signs to expect before His return. He told them that the temple would be destroyed (Matthew 24:2), many false messiahs (christs) would come and lead many astray (v. 5), the world would be filled with war (vv. 6-7), natural disasters would increase with famines (v. 7c) and then great persecution would begin against believers (vv. 9-11), and much of the world would fall away from following the true faith revealed in the Scriptures (v. 12). Jesus taught that believers were to endure all of this until the end at which point the Gospel would be preached to the entire world, an event clearly displayed in Revelation 14. "And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Revelation 14:6). Interestingly, nowhere does Scripture teach that believers will be excluded from the persecution leading up to Jesus' return. Rather, believers in the end times are presented with a message saying, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Revelation 13:10, 14:12). The balance of the previous chapter (Chapter 24) is dedicated to Jesus' teaching about His return, how their will be signs in the sky and on the earth (Matthew 24:29-35), and how His coming will be unexpected for those not watching (Matthew 24:36-44, 50).

The key ideas advancing in the section leading up to today's reading are a call to watchfulness and faithfulness of believers. In today's reading a third theme emerges, that of readiness. With this crucially important context in mind, let's study today's reading. [We encourage you to read all of Matthew 24 before today's reading.]

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 25:1-13 NAS95 1 Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to ten virgins, who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were prudent. 3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4 but the prudent took oil in flasks along with their lamps. 5 Now while the bridegroom was delaying, they all got drowsy and began to sleep. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 "Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the prudent answered, 'No, there will not be enough for us and you too; go instead to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they were going away to make the purchase, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other virgins also came, saying,

'Lord, lord, open up for us.' 12 But he answered, 'Truly I say to you, I do not know you.' 13 Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.

The reading is a "kingdom parable," in which Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to an earthly event to present a spiritual meaning. The reading opens with, "the kingdom of heaven will be comparable" pointing to the future, heavenly sense (v. 1). The spiritual kingdom, Jesus teaches, is like a group of ten brides, the first five who are prepared for His coming and the second five who are not. The Old Testament portrays Yahweh of His people (for example in Hosea 2:19), and here in the parable Jesus as the husband of the brides (v. 1). According to Jewish customs, a bride would leave their homes with a group of friends who gather in a procession to meet the bridegroom. The groom who would then join them at the marriage feast but at some unannounced time. Since the feast often occurred at night, lamps were necessary and along with them was required a sufficient amount of oil to keep them burning during the wait of an unexpected length. In our day we can at least partially relate as we often leave the wedding ceremony and wait at the reception hall for the newly united couple to join the group at some unexpected time. After riding around in a limousine drinking champagne perhaps this comes at an even later time than expected!

After a very long wait, both groups of people fall asleep (v. 5). This reminds us of how Jesus' own disciples fell asleep during the night before He willingly surrendered His life to be crucified as a substitute for our sins (Matthew 26:40). This is where the story takes a turn. At midnight, there was shout and both groups got up and trimmed their oil-fired lamps (v.7) but only the prudent ones had sufficient fuel to light the way to the feast with the bridegroom. The imprudent virgins begged for fuel and then had no other choice than to head off at midnight in the dark to buy fuel from some sort of 24-hour Walmart which didn't exist in that era.

In the parable we see the theme of readiness. There are two groups of people, the first ones who are ready for Jesus' return, and those who are not. The first group is qualitatively different from the second in that they are "prudent" in contrast to the second group that is "foolish." The foolish group recognizes the need at some point to barter with the prudent ones upon seeing the imminent signs of Jesus' return, something that we discussed in the introduction regarding the signs of His coming (Matthew 24:1-13) However, in the same way that Jesus described in Chapter 24 regarding those left behind to perish in the worldwide flood in Noah's time (Matthew 24:37-39), the foolish group will be locked out of the kingdom of heaven (v. 10, "the door was shut." We must not make too little of the significant difference between the two groups of people.

There are two groups of people in the world, those who believe and those who do not. God loves the

world so much that He gave He sent His only begotten Son to us, so that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Go says, "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). Believers travel along a narrow road filled with obstacles allowed by God to deepen their dependence upon Him, whereas those in the second, larger group follow the broad road carried along by the ways and whims of the world (Matthew 7:13-14). When Jesus returns it will be too late for those on the broad road to seek faith in the Lord Jesus and they will be eternally rejected from the presence of the King (John 3:36).

As believers in the Lord Jesus we are called to patiently await upon Jesus' return while going about the business building and equipping the kingdom of God. Unlike the foolish who are unprepared for Jesus' return, we are aware of the many signs and prophecies given to us in the Scriptures regarding this imminent event. God calls us not to be believe the false teachings that we have been left behind because the Lord has already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). God has given us a profundity of signs to expect before His return such that we **will** be prepared unless the foolish ones who will be forever locked out of the kingdom of heaven.

I remember well the dark day that lived in infamy, now known as "9-1-1." I was in our office in suburban Detroit that morning, and first heard about the unfolding tragedy when one of the secretaries from the law office across the hall came knocking on our door to tell us about it and to invite us to watch it unfold on the television set that they had in their waiting room. As the tragedy grew worse and worse, me and my Christian coworker were struck by the terror of the whole thing and began to talk to the other two employees in our office about whether this was somehow signaling the end of the world and the return of Jesus. These two people came from a background of nominal Christianity, having been raised in families that attended church services at least on Christmas and Easter, "chreasters" some have called them. Because of the state of shock I was in, I found myself pleading with these two to find faith in the Lord Jesus for protection from the curse that was coming upon the country as the scene in New York and elsewhere unfolded. They looked at me in a state of dumfound amazement that I will remember forever.

In a few days the reality of what had happened settled in and although some people were moved to attend church services and seek God, many slowly returned to the normal paths of their lives. My two fellow employees also returned to their lives, and neither of them, at least as far as I know, ever made a move to find faith in God through faith in His Son. Although these two men are some of the smartest people I have ever worked with, they were not wise enough to read the signs of Jesus' imminent return. For Jesus will meet us one way or the other and we can be in one of four groups, and today's readings greatly inform us about them.

1. Believers who die before the return of the Lord Jesus. These will meet Jesus when they die (John 14:3) at which point they will enter heaven for an eternity only to return with Jesus in the air during the Second Coming where they will receive glorified bodies (1 Thessalonians 4:15).

2. Believers who are alive and meet Jesus when He returns (1 Thessalonians 4:14) and receive their glorified bodies at that instant while still alive.

3. Nonbelievers who die before the return of the Lord Jesus. These meet the Lord Jesus as their judge with inevitable sentencing for their sin with no means of repaying their eternal debts (Matthew 7:23, Matthew 25:41)

The people in the first three groups are the wise servants, those who procured the oil of the Holy Spirit before the coming of their Lord. In contrast, those in the last group were foolish and persisted in their nonbelief until it was too late. Today's message is a call to do the work Jesus has called us to do in reaching out to those in this last category. Perhaps all of could benefit from a sort of personal 911 emergency to motivate us to reach out to our lost friends and coworkers.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does knowing the signs of Jesus' coming help you to be better prepared to serve the Lord Jesus in the area(s) that He has called you? In what ways does knowing the signs comfort you during the significant challenges you face in your life?

2. Understanding the big picture of the end times is essential to be able to recognize the gradual progression of events we see around us leading up to Jesus' return. Read the following summary which provides a high level of some of the things we talked about today but also includes events promised to those "foolish brides" who ignore God's teaching on the matters of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Then, answer the question that follows.

The return of the Lord follows the conclusion of a period of judgment known as the "Day of the Lord," a prominent theme throughout the Old Testament. This period was first mentioned by the

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Prophet Isaiah who said, "For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty and against everyone who is lifted up, That he may be abased" (Isaiah 2:12). The Day of the Lord, or DOL, is mentioned at least another 18 times in the Old Testament including Ezekiel 13:5, "You have not gone up into the breaches, nor did you build the wall around the house of Israel to stand in the battle on the **day of the LORD**" (emphasis added). This time, also known as the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) is the conclusion of the period of time during which God will pour out His judgments upon the unbelieving world left after the church has been "caught up" from the earth as described by Saint Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. After Jesus returns with His church (Revelation 19:11,14) the world is restored to a time of worldwide peace under the rulership of the Lord Jesus Christ for a period of one thousand years (Revelation 20:4).

In what ways does understanding the eschatological picture (the end times) help us to reach out to share the Good News of the Gospel with people who don't believe?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-01-2020



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. This week we open with a reading from the mysterious Book of Revelation where we will explain in detail some of the background and context to bring out the meaning of the text. Then we move to another reading written by John from the Book of First John. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew from the section called the Beatitudes. I remember reading those passages many years ago in Mass and feeling that I needed to be a better person and to try harder to please God. Find out what God's Word says about my feelings and what would have been a more biblical response to them.

I know someone that has been a Christian for a very long time while a certain uncle of hers was resistant to believing in Jesus Christ right up until near the end of his life. As he grew older, he steadfastly refused to bow his knee to Jesus Christ although almost everyone around him were followers of Jesus including his niece who told me the story, and her husband was a pastor. One night he went to bed expecting to awaken the next morning just like every other day. However, God had a different plan for him. As I was a new believer in Jesus Christ myself when I heard this story I remember how it profoundly impacted me as I listened with baited breath about what was going to happen next. The next morning when the man arose and looked at himself in the mirror, he found a depression in the bone of his forehead in the shape of a cross. He instantly recognized this as a miracle as a seal of God calling him to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ which he quickly obeyed. As others encountered him throughout the last years of his life, he testified of God's grace in marking him in this unique way such that he could no longer deny the one and only Savior Jesus Christ. This marking remained on his forehead for the rest of his life as a seal or marking of him as a follower of Jesus Christ. This week we will read about how God will in some future day "seal" a group of Jews in order to protect them from the wrath of the Antichrist who like many others before him will persecute God's chosen people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Revelation. This Book tells the story of the unfurling of a series of judgments upon the world culminating with what the Old Testament calls the "Day of the Lord." Throughout the Book, John moves his focus back and forth from events happening upon the earth and those in heaven with frequent parenthesis (or pauses) in the chronological progression of events. Understanding of Revelation requires a thorough understanding of the Old Testament and especially the Book of Daniel. John uses much symbolic language throughout the Book, and the reader is challenged to understand the meaning behind the symbols as well as to what extent the language is meant to foretell literal events in heaven and on the earth.

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In order to understand the Book of Revelation and today's reading, it is necessary to understand from a high level the primary events that will transpire during the end times. The order of the main events that will unfold are as follows. The sin of the world will grow worse and worse (Matthew 24;12), and many false christs will come. (2 Timothy 3:13, Matthew 24:5). The world will be consumed by "wars and rumors of wars," there will be "famines and earthquakes" (Matthew 24:6-7). This will mark the beginning of the end times. (Matthew 24:8) The AntiChrist will come on the scene and falsely claim to have been resurrected from the dead (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, Revelation 13:3). A peace treaty will be made with Israel providing for resumption of animal sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Daniel 9:27). Large-scale persecution of believers will escalate leading many false believers to fall away (Revelation 13:7, Matthew 13:9-10). This point marks the unfurling of the scroll of the first six seals of Revelation. As the AntiChrist rules the world with terror, at some point the believers in God will be reunited with Christ and taken to heaven at His second coming (1 Thessalonians 4:14-18). Somewhere during this time a group of elect Jews will be protected by God as described in today's reading. The final stage will then begin with the unbelieving world left behind and then God will unleash His judgments during the final "Day of the Lord" completing the total destruction of the AntiChrist's worldly and religious empire of mystery Babylon. This is the time when God unleashes His judgments upon the world as stated just prior to today's reading in Revelation 6:17, "for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand." At the conclusion of these events, Jesus will return to set up His reign on earth.

The particular context of today's reading in chapter 7 is the divine protection of a believing remnant of Jews alive during the time when the AntiChrist will be unleashing increasing persecution upon believers in God. God will protect this surviving remnant in order to complete His promises to them.

First Reading:

Note: Verses 5 – 8 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

Revelation 7:2-14 NAS95 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: 5 From the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand, from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand, 6 from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand, from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand, from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand, 7 from the tribe of Simeon

twelve thousand, from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand, from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand, 8 from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand, from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand, from the tribe of Benjamin, twelve thousand were sealed. 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; 10 and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen." 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?" 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.

In the days before Jesus' return (see Acts 1:11), a powerful world ruler will emerge called the AntiChrist who will persecute any believers alive during this time including both Christians and Jews. As the AntiChrist hurls his bloodshed upon the Christians, God will protect a remnant of the Jews who through this terrible persecution will come to faith in the Lord Jesus (Zechariah 12:10). To do this God grants His authority to an angel to set His mark upon this group of Jews from the twelve tribes of Israel – except that some of them were designated by different names because of the curses pronounced in the Old Testament. (Astute readers can find out more information about this by studying Deuteronomy 29:16-10). In ancient days, the kings used their signet ring to emboss a special marking into wax or clays seals that were placed upon documents in order to show their sign of authority and authenticity. In the last days of the devil's reign over his current world empire, the angel of God's divine marking provides protection to the believing Jews from the wrath of the AntiChrist. The Prophet Malachi said about this, "I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). Whether this is a literal number of people or it is symbolic of a large but finite number isn't readily discernible in the text. However, they will have been regathered for the opening of the rebuilt temple and the resumption of the sacrifices. During the first three and half years of the peace treaty that the AntiChrist makes with national Israel, the Jews will resume their sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem while large scale persecution of Christians accelerates around the world. As time moves to the midpoint of this treaty, the AntiChrist will set an image of himself up in the temple and command his worship as God (2 Thessalonians 2:4). This "abomination of desolation" (Matthew 24:15) will greatly provoke the Jews to rebel against the AntiChrist to such an extent that without God's divine protection all of them would be consumed by this evil end time ruler. It is only through this horrific series of events that unfold upon the earth that the collective group of the Jews will finally recognize Jesus Whom they pierced (Zechariah 12:10) as their Messiah.

As the reading continues, beginning in verse 9 John changed his focus from events happening on

earth to things occurring in heaven. This is one of the frequent parentheses that occurs throughout the Book. John saw a second group of people, a "great multitude which no one could count," (v. 9) who are believing people martyred up until that point during the great tribulation. John didn't understand who these people were at first, but the angel answered his question about them by describing how they "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v. 14). It's not often when someone can wash their robes in blood and make them white, but that is exactly what Jesus offers to anyone who trusts in Him. Although the believers in heaven were not delivered **from** the tribulation and persecution on earth, they were delivered **through** it to be with Jesus in heaven.

What does this mean for us today? We as Christians must expect that as God's prophets we will increasingly face persecution. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Later in the Gospel reading we will see how Jesus likened the persecution of believers to the persecution of the prophets that came before them (Matthew 5:12). There Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile against you and persecute you." As God's persecuted prophets we can look for our fulfillment not in the things of the world but look heavenward towards our ultimate purpose in serving God. Finally, as we continue to march onwards towards the last days described in Revelation, we can expect to see a growing distinction between the true people of God and the rest of the world. The Prophet Malachi said about these days, "Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve Him" (Malachi 3:18). Although we may not be saved from tribulation, we can be assured that God will deliver us through it.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from First John. The context is Saint John's teaching on the characteristics of true believers, something that we will encounter later in the Gospel lesson.

Second Reading:

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

John said that God has so loved love those that believe in Him that He calls them His children (v. 1). Nonbelievers do not understand believers because they cannot know God and didn't know His Son Jesus (v. 1d-ff). During our mortal lives as believers, we do not yet understand what we will become when we either get to heaven or meet Jesus when he returns to regather His church as we talked about in the first reading (v. 2). When we do finally meet Jesus, our eyes will be opened, and we will see Him for what He truly is without the veil of sin covering our minds. Finally, we have hope that God will bring these things about. While living with an eternal focus as true believers we strive to become more and more like Jesus by leaning upon God's power that He has placed within us. As we become more pure by maturing in our walk with Jesus, we become more like the true believers described by John in the reading. This provides an excellent lead-in to the Gospel lesson in which Jesus lists some of the qualities of people whose lives have been transformed by God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew in the section known as the Sermon on the Mount because of the location from which Jesus addressed the crowd in Galilee. The context is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry just after His temptation in the desert for forty days and the calling of the first disciples including Peter, Andrew, James and John. Jesus was beginning to draw large crowds and was telling the people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). This is the beginning of a much longer discourse that spans Matthew Chapters 5 through 7.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 5:1-12 NAS95 1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

In this reading, Jesus announced a total of nine blessings, each opening with "Blessed are." Jesus is fulfilling the role of Prophet by providing a series of blessings, a word which means "happy." This contrasts with the usual words given by the Old Testament prophets who announced a series of curses and woes against those who refused to follow God. Jesus came to announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and this is what the kingdom looks like. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of new things that people have to do in order to be right with God, but rather it is a list of defining qualities of people who have been transformed by God.

Jesus is redefining the blessed life. Think about how these traits contrast how the world defines blessing. Someone living the blessed life:

1. Is poor in spirit, meaning humble which leads a person to recognize their spiritual need for God.
2. Mourns, meaning they recognize that this world is not their home and looks to God for comfort.
3. Exhibits gentleness, meaning they don't have to be aggressive to get things done because their heart is established in Christ's power.
4. Hungers and thirsts for righteousness meaning they prioritize eternal things over finite satisfaction in the world.
5. Shows mercy, because they were offered mercy themselves through the forgiveness given them by God and can extend it to others.
6. Is pure in heart, meaning they are not entangled with the evil ways of the world including lying, deceiving and manipulating people in order to get their own way.
7. Is a peacemaker, not just someone who tries to keep the peace at all costs. They actively seek peaceful solutions even in difficult situations which forces them to rely upon God more deeply.
8. Endures persecution with a vision toward eternity knowing that it is better to suffer than to succumb to temptation to compromise.
9. Endures insult because of their proclamation of truth (Word of God) just like happened to the prophets.

In summary, Jesus raised the bar of understanding to show the people that righteousness was not a bunch of behaviors that came by trying harder, but rather were qualities of the heart that were only possible through God's transforming power. These nine traits are the result of being born from above (John 3:3). Instead of being depressed that we can never be this good, Jesus delivered this sermon in order to invite us into a new way of life. This new way of life recognizes that our self-righteousness is as filthy rags before the LORD (Isaiah 64:6). We must come to the place where we receive Christ's righteousness into our hearts as a substitute for our former way of life (Romans 3:21-22).

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Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How do you respond internally when you read the Sermon on the Mount? Does it feel like another list of impossible feats that you must accomplish in order to win God's favor? Or, have you responded to Jesus' invitation to life in the kingdom (where He is the King of your heart), and the Sermon on the Mount is a reflection of the work that He is doing in your life? If your response is more the former, that this is another list of impossible feats, you can turn to God in prayer and ask Him to give you His life from above and so be born anew.

2. In the first reading we read about how God appointed an angel to "seal" a group of Jews during the end times in order to protect them from the events that were going to unfold as described in the seven seals of Revelation. In what ways are you already "sealed" by God through your faith in Jesus Christ?

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Jim Speaking at Decatur First Reformed Church

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This is Jim Hill speaking at Decatur First Reformed Church on February 8, 2004.

This is what I looked like way back then- how things have changed!



Jim Hill in his office in Southfield, Michigan, in the year 2002.

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To play the audio file just click the button below. The audio is 50 minutes long.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-25-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Moses' Book of Exodus in which we see God's concern for widows, orphans, and the poor. Then we move to the second reading, which is a continuation of the study we began last week from 1 Thessalonians. We conclude with another of Jesus' discussions with the Jewish leaders from the Gospel of Saint Matthew, this time with the infamous Pharisees.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Chapter 22 of the Book of Exodus. This is one of the first five Books of the Bible known as the Pentateuch and was written by Moses. The Book is an account of God's sovereign rising of Moses as a leader to shepherd the Israelites out of their captivity in Israel. The Book also contains the chronicle of the giving of the Law to Moses including the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Anytime that the biblical texts use the term "Law" they mean the whole canon of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments and the other several hundred laws contained in the last four books of the Pentateuch: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Chapter 20 contains the Ten Commandments and opens as follows. "Then God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:1-2). God, who calls Himself "I am" in verse one, meaning the "self-existent One," led the Israelites out of their bondage under the oppressive rule of the Pharaoh of Egypt through His ordained leader Moses. God gradually revealed the entire Canon of the Law to Moses during his wanderings in the desert.

Understanding today's reading requires some considerable insights into the cultural and religious milieu of Jews in the ancient near east. Foreigners were not the only downtrodden class of people to whom God afforded special protection in the Law. In those days there were three classes of people that were as low in the socioeconomic strata as foreigners were. These were widows, orphans, and the poor, although the first two certainly shared the characteristic of being poor. These groups of people had almost no rights in the secular kingdoms that surrounded Israel. However, we find throughout the Law God's special protection provided for these groups of people. The fact that God provides protection for the lower classes of people through the Law is an insight into God's very nature. We see in the Book of Psalms God's care for the poor. God says that He is "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (Psalms 68:5). The Psalmist said, "I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted And justice for the poor" (Ps 140:12). "The LORD performs righteous deeds And judgments for all who are oppressed," the Psalmist said (Ps 103:6). God made special provisions for the protection of these classes of people throughout the Law. In Lev. 19:9–10 God provided special protection for strangers and the poor in providing for them through the gleanings in the corners of the fields. In Deut. 14:28–29 God provided special Laws for strangers, the fatherless, and widows. The Prophet Isaiah gave God's call to the Israelites to repent of their sin in the opening of his Book. God said, "Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17). This admonition appears multiple times throughout the Old Testament, and is in fact what James in the New Testament called "basic religion." He said, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

As you read the text of the first reading, try to imagine what it would be like to have absolutely

nothing along with no social standing in the ancient world. *Note: Verse 27 was included for the context.*

First Reading:

Ezekiel 22:20-26 NAS95 20 'As they gather silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into the furnace to blow fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in My anger and in My wrath and I will lay you there and melt you. 21 'I will gather you and blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and you will be melted in the midst of it. 22 'As silver is melted in the furnace, so you will be melted in the midst of it; and you will know that I, the LORD, have poured out My wrath on you.'" 23 And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 24 "Son of man, say to her, 'You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.' 25 "There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her. 26 "Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.

The reading opens in verse 20, we find the often-repeated warning about idolatry. "He who sacrifices to any god, other than to the LORD alone, shall be utterly destroyed" (Exodus 20:20). In the next verse, God introduces new teaching on proper treatment of aliens. God said, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 20:21). This time God gave a reason for treating foreigners properly, because the Israelites were once foreigners under the rule of the Pharaoh.

In the reading we see God's concern for widows (v. 22), orphans (v. 22), and the poor (v. 25). God said that He would hear the cries of the widows and the orphans and answer with judgment by allowing the people to be killed by their enemies with the sword (v. 24). This is something that was repeated over and over again throughout the Old Testament, especially in the era of the Judges. When times were good the people would begin to oppress the lower classes, then God would allow an alien nation to overtake the people. Then they would repent, God would raise up a deliver (for example a judge like Gideon in Judges 6), the people would again return to prosperity and the cycle would repeat. God's instruction about not oppressing the poor continued in verses 26-27 as neighbor took his neighbor's cloak as collateral for a loan. This person was so poor that the only thing that they had to pledge was their clothing. God knew that this was a dire situation and provided a clear principle that such essential items were not to be taken as collateral in loans among fellow

Israelites. The principle is that when the poor neighbor is taken advantage of by being forced to pledge his essentials in order to survive that God will raise up a deliverer against the more prosperous man to bring judgment upon him for his unrighteous action. Instead, God said in Leviticus something that we shall study later in the Gospel lesson, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Loving your neighbor in the case of what God said about not taking your neighbor's cloak as a pledge instead meant sharing in your abundance and that of the community.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading, ask yourself what it means to act in full conviction of the Holy Spirit in response to the biblical precepts about serving Jesus and others? The Jews knew the Laws about not oppressing aliens, orphans and the poor, yet they didn't practice what was preached. You may have heard the cute acronym "J-O-Y" which means to consider our lives in light of the hierarchy of Jesus, others, and you. We should, as the teaching goes, consider Jesus first, then others, and finally ourselves. See what you can uncover from Saint Paul as your read his admonition on this subject of literally taking the Word to heart.

Second Reading:

5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9 For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, 10 and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1 Thessalonians 1:5-10)

Paul told the Thessalonians how impressed he was with them because they didn't just do as he had told them to do ("word only," v. 5), but that they also carried out those things that he had directed them to do through the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only that, but they became examples to others

(v. 7). The Thessalonians turned from the worship of idols as was the custom of their culture to the worship of the One True God (v. 9). Finally, Paul commended them for holding hope in the resurrection of the dead. When he said that Jesus "rescues us from the wrath to come" (v. 10) he was referring to the eternal punishment that was promised to the unbelievers in hell, not some sort of temporal deliverance or rapture (catching up) from their present circumstances. Later in the Book Paul did discuss how believers who were alive at the time when Jesus did return would be united with him in the clouds (1 Thessalonians 4:17), which is the context of the books and movie entitled *Left Behind* (we will cover that in a future lesson). The key point that Paul was making to the Thessalonians was his commendation for them for living out their Christian lives in word **and** in action, something that the Sadducees and Pharisees in the Gospel narrative hadn't learned.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

We saw in the second reading Saint Paul's admonition to take the Word to heart and his commendation to the Thessalonians for doing so. In the Gospel lesson today, we will see how Jesus summarized the Law into two key points that revealed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees hearts who didn't take the Word to heart. This lesson is another of Jesus' interactions with the Jewish ruling authorities during His inevitable journey to death at Calvary, this time with one of the Pharisees' best legal experts.

Gospel Reading:

34 But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. 35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" 37 And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' 40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:34-40)

First, a bit about the context. When Matthew said, "But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees," he was referring to the story that happened just previously. Here the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, had come to ask Jesus a theoretical expansion of the Levitical Law known as Levirate Marriage. They asked Jesus about the relationship in the resurrection between a certain woman and her chain of husbands afforded to her under the

Levirate Law. Remember that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection, but they were just trying to trap Jesus. When they asked Jesus whose husband the woman would be in the resurrection after being married to seven different brothers Jesus answered them as follows: *29 But Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31 But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." 33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. (Matthew 22:29-33)*

The short-term silencing of the Sadducees provided the Pharisees with the opportunity to test Jesus for themselves. They asked Him, "which is the great commandment in the Law" (v. 36), again addressing Him with the honorable title of Rabbi (teacher). When the Pharisees use the term "Law" they are referring to the whole of the Old Testament. During that era, a frequent debate among the rabbis was which elements of the Law held the most weight and which ones could be given less weight or even discounted. Jesus' answer summarized the whole Canon of both the Law **and** the Prophetic writings. He answered them by quoting from the Levitical Law, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (vv. 38-40). Here, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 or the "Shema," a phrase that religious Jews stated twice a day. He also quoted from Leviticus 19:18 that we mentioned in the discussion of the first reading.

What Jesus is saying is that a true follower of God is a unique whole being, one with a heart that is united in purpose (heart, soul, and mind) rather than compartmentalized into theoretical knowledge that does not lead to action. Loving God naturally leads us to keeping the commandments of God. Jesus said in John 14:23, "If anyone love Me, he will obey my teaching . . . ." Saint John continued Jesus' connection between love and action when He said, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with action and in truth" (1 John 3:18). And again, "We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21).

This was the heart of the indictment against the Pharisees. They were a group about which it could be said, "do as I say, but not as I do" as the expression goes. Love demands concrete action, not just correct information about God. This means to give help your neighbor when he needs help, not offer him a loan by taking his cloak as collateral as we saw in the first reading. Loving your neighbor as

yourself also means loving yourself as one that was created in the image of God. This means caring for our bodies both spiritually and physically as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. As your journey through the week, what does it look like for you to have a heart united in love and action for God? In our global society, what "neighbor" is God placing on your heart to help with a gift that doesn't require a loan and payment of collateral?

2. Spiritually, we are all as helpless as the orphans and widows of the ancient society. How do you respond to God's heart for you in your own spiritual poverty? What spiritual resources (see below) have you appropriated in your life? Which ones do you need to continue internalizing?

Spiritual Resources in Christ:

- I have been washed (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been sanctified (set apart for special use) (1 Corinthians 6:11).
- I have been justified (pronounced "not guilty") (1 Corinthians 6:11)
- I have been forgiven of my sins (1 John 1:9)
- When I sin, I have an Advocate – Jesus Christ, who speaks to the Father in my defense (1 John 2:1)
- I am a new creation, the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17)
- I have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3)
- I belong, I have been adopted, I have a spiritual family (Ephesians 1:5)
- I have resurrection power (Ephesians 1:19-20)
- I have God's grace that teaches me to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live a self-controlled, upright and godly life (Titus 2:11-12, 1 Corinthians 10:13)

3. Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-14. Unpack the meaning of verse 13 in light of the context of the surrounding verses. How does this spiritual truth help you to live your life as a Christian in light of temptation?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-18-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Isaiah where we see a prophecy about a future world leader that was fulfilled some 150 years later. Then we move to the second reading from Paul's Letter to Thessalonians and include a general introduction to that Book. Finally, we conclude with another of Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees from the Gospel of Matthew.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is a prophecy from the Book of Isaiah, which is a book filled with an amazing series of prophecies especially regarding the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. His prophecies include many

detailed predictions about the Messiah including that He would be born of a virgin and even that He would be named Immanuel meaning God with us (Isaiah 7:14). The reading today also contains a prophecy about a world leader who like Jesus was not born yet and the prophecy also includes his future name although he wouldn't be born until a century and a half later. A lead-in to the message for today was given one verse before the beginning of today's reading. God said through Isaiah:

"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" (Isaiah 44:28).

Cyrus was the King of Persia (in present day Iran) who reigned over that country from around 559 BC to 530 BC. God used King Cyrus as his shepherd to "regather" the Jewish people (Ezra 1:1-4) after their deportation to Babylon in three waves in the years 605, 597, and 586 BC (2 Kings 24-25). King Cyrus gave the order in 538 BC to rebuild the Jerusalem temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The rebuilding of the temple under the direction of Nehemiah marked the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy above. As we move onto the text of today's reading, we will learn more details about Isaiah's predictions regarding Cyrus who was named even though he hadn't yet been born. *Note: Verses 2-3 were included for context.*

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, Whom I have taken by the right hand, To subdue nations before him And to loose the loins of kings; To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:

Omitted verses (2-3):

2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.

4 For the sake of Jacob My servant, And Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor Though you have not known Me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no

other; Besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; 6 That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other," (Isaiah 45:1-6)

God called Cyrus His "anointed" in English or transliterated from Hebrew as "mashiyach" that means "the anointed one or Messiah." This is the same word used for the "Messiah the Prince" Jesus in Daniel 9:25. This language makes it clear that God meant Cyrus to prefigure the later Messiah, Jesus Christ, who was God's true and final Shepherd of His people (Isaiah 44:28, above). God said in verse 1 that although Cyrus would not be a believer in God (v. 4d "Though you have not known me") He would be used as God's "right hand" to "subdue nations before him" and subdue and kill kings ("loose the loins"). This prophecy was fulfilled after Darius the Mede, who was Cyrus' maternal uncle, overthrew the Babylon Empire as recorded in Daniel 7:30-31. Cyrus proclaimed himself King of Babylon in 540 BC after the great battle in that city. The biblical record of these events is backed up and further details are given by secular accounts including the famous "Babylonian Chronicle," a clay tablet that was found showing details of Babylonian history during the period.

You may ask why God would prefigure the Messiah through an unbelieving, civil king like King Cyrus. God provided some insights into this in the verses that were omitted from the reading:

2 "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places, So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. " (Isaiah 45:2-3)

Cyrus was a king that God set apart by His divine providence to use for His purposes. The power that Cyrus had to "shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars" (v. 2) was given by God Himself. God said that it was He who would give Cyrus "the treasures of darkness And hidden wealth of secret places **So that you may know that it is I, The LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name**" (v. 3, emphasis added). God promised Cyrus these victories for the purpose of revealing His divine power. God used nonbelieving people throughout the Old Testament for this purpose, including men like the Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus. God not only uses men but even animals such as Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:21-39).

Contemplate how God may be using unbelieving rulers even in the present time. Even though you may disagree with the actions of the rulers, consider whether it is possible that God is working out

His larger plan even through these ungodly leaders. Although Cyrus was an ungodly type of Christ, we can rest in the fact that God used even this ungodly leader to accomplish His purposes. When you consider these things, you can find comfort that since God was able to predict with exact precision who the ruler would be that would "regather" the Israelites after their deportation to Babylon He will superintend all of human events in order to accomplish His purposes. You can also praise God for raising up godly spiritual leaders such as Saint Paul who we are going to be reading about in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. This Book is one of the earliest Letters written by Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:1), penned sometime around the year 51 as confirmed by an inscription found in the temple of Apollos at Delphi (near the town of Corinth). Paul's two Letters to the Thessalonians are sometimes called the "eschatological epistles" because of the wealth of content in them regarding the end times but were primarily Letters dealing with people in the local church in Thessalonica. Paul's occasion for writing was to show his concern for the believers there after he had visited them on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1). He had a variety of purposes in writing to them including instructing them in holy living, commending them for their significant progress made in implementing the biblical truths he had given them, and correcting a misunderstanding that they had about the return or the Lord Jesus.

Read the text and ask yourself, what key points jump out at you?

Second Reading:

1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, 4 knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; 5 for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)

They key point that jumped out when I read this passage was Paul's overwhelming thankfulness to God for how the Thessalonians had embraced and lived out the Gospel truths. First, Paul thanked God for their "work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (v. 3). Second, Paul was thankful that they didn't just mentally embrace the truths of the Gospel, but they also lived them out "in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (v. 5). Finally, Paul was thankful for how they had emulated him (v. 5). The example of the Thessalonians faith provided comfort to him as he endured troubles from the Jews and Gentiles as he traveled on his missionary journeys. Paul said in Chapter 3, "we were comforted about you through your faith" (1 Thessalonians 3:7b).

A final observation of the reading is how Paul honored all three Persons of the Godhead in the very opening verses of this Letter. Paul commended God the Father and God the Son in verse 1, and God the Holy Spirit in verse 5. Paul indicated to the Thessalonians that the source of their power was God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (v. 5). The word translated "power" in the English is the Greek word "dunamis" from which we also get the word "dynamite." The Holy Spirit provided the dynamite to the Thessalonians but they had to set and light the fuse. Paul rejoiced because the Thessalonians took advantage of God's power. As we move to the Gospel lesson, we will see how the religious Pharisees **didn't** take advantage of God's power but instead took the Scriptures for their literal "word only" (v. 5).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is another of the interactions that Jesus had with the Pharisees. Last week we studied Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast that is found just before today's reading. In this previous study, we saw how Jesus told the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders how the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to the Gentiles. In the reading this week a new group is introduced called the "Herodians." The Herodians were a group of secular, non-religious Jews that held the political power in alliance with King Herod Antipas (reigned 4 BC to 39 AD). Their alliance with King Herod and secular worldview set them at odds with the ultra-religious Pharisees. As you read today's Gospel lesson you will discover a new alliance that emerged to fight a common threat.

Gospel Reading:

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted together how they might trap Him in what He said. 16 And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodian's, saying, "Teacher, we know that You are

truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. 17 Tell us then, what do You think? Is it lawful to give a poll-tax to Caesar, or not?" 18 But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the coin used for the poll-tax." And they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" 21 They said to Him, "Caesar's." Then He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:15-21)

The Herodians and the Pharisees allied themselves to fight their common threat, Jesus Christ (v. 15). Their plot was to trap Jesus by asking Him some question (v. 15) that would reveal Jesus' opposition to the ruling Roman authorities and therefore make it easy for them to bring an indictment against Him. They began their attack by patronizing Jesus by calling Him by the title "Teacher," a word meaning Rabbi (v. 16). Their plan backfired. When they asked Jesus about the lawfulness of paying taxes to the Roman government, Jesus amazed them with His answer. Matthew said in the next verse after the end of today's reading, "And hearing this, **they were amazed**, and leaving Him, they went away" (Matthew 22:22, emphasis added). Jesus told them in effect that He had not come yet as a military leader. Jesus not only spoiled their plan to entrap Him with their question, but He also validated the legitimacy of the Roman government in collecting taxes, something to which the Pharisees would have been deeply opposed. The irony of it all was that the Pharisees took the lead in collaborating with their former enemies for the purpose of defeating Jesus. But what ended up happening was that Jesus defeated their beliefs about the illegitimacy of the Roman taxation system. In yet another irony the whole account was recorded by none other than Saint Matthew, the former tax collector!

Sometimes the easiest way for us to learn is when a teacher provides us with a clear contrast between two conflicting positions. The message that God gave us in the Gospel lesson today illustrated two opposing forces that came together for the purpose of defeating the Messiah Jesus. During our study, we saw that these forces weren't really in opposition at all. Instead they were both aligned with false religion. The Pharisees strived to obtain a righteousness through the Law, and the Herodians found their faith in aligning themselves with the right group with the necessary influence in the Roman government.

What does this mean for us today? First, we can trust that although Jesus didn't come the first time as a military leader, He will do so the second time He returns, as chronicled in the Book of Revelation. John said in that Book, "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" (Revelation 19:11). Second, Jesus' answer revealed that during the intermediate period between his first and second comings we will have obligations to obey civil governments. Paul said, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those

which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). Finally, we must recognize that God owns everything, and even though we may have to give to Caesar that which bears the resemblance of Caesar, we are to give to God the things that are God's (v. 21). This means that unlike the Pharisees who only gave lip service to doing God's work, as we saw in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians, we are to emulate God by giving back to Him what is His own. This includes the stewardship of our time, talents and treasures far beyond what is required by our civil government. Paul praised the Thessalonians for emulating his character, and Paul strived to emulate Jesus Christ. Paul said:

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, (Philippians 3:8-9)

May we find our righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ and not in our political power, like the Herodians, or through our good works in obedience to an elevated and false interpretation of religious laws, like the Pharisees.

Reflection Questions

1. Since humans are made in the image of God, what did Jesus mean when He said to give to God what God's?

2. How do you live this truth out in your own life each week?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-11-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah 25 in which we see a song of praise and a promise of redemption of the fallen earth and its people in a future age. Then we move to the second reading that is a continuation of the study from Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Finally, we conclude with a parable of Jesus in The Gospel of Matthew addressed to the Jewish leaders that is very similar to what we studied last week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah who wrote of God's judgment and blessings. The context is just after God spoke about warnings of wrath in Chapter 24 that began with, "Behold, the LORD lays the earth waste, devastates it, distorts its surface and scatters its inhabitants" (Isaiah 24:1). This theme continued throughout that chapter with promises of wrath for those who dealt treacherously (v. 16) as well as promises of judgment on the angels who rebelled against God. God said, "So it will happen in that day, That the LORD will punish the host of heaven on high, And the kings of the earth on earth" (Isaiah 24:21). Chapter 25 then opens with a song of praise reminiscent of the Book of Psalms as follows, which will provide a backdrop for the first reading later in this

study.

1 O LORD, You are my God; I will exalt You, I will give thanks to Your name; For You have worked wonders, Plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness. 2 For You have made a city into a heap, A fortified city into a ruin; A palace of strangers is a city no more, It will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore a strong people will glorify You; Cities of ruthless nations will revere You. 4 For You have been a defense for the helpless, A defense for the needy in his distress, A refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; For the breath of the ruthless Is like a rain storm against a wall. 5 Like heat in drought, You subdue the uproar of aliens; Like heat by the shadow of a cloud, the song of the ruthless is silenced. (Isaiah 25:1-5)

These verses apply both in Isaiah's near-term context as well as in the eschatological (end times) future, which is a frequent occurrence in Isaiah. The city in verse two is symbolic of any city that sets itself against God, rather than some particular place. In the Old Testament, this was pictured by cities including Moab, Edom and Babylon. The Babylonian Empire was destroyed some two hundred years after Isaiah wrote about the capital city of Babylon, marking one of the near-term fulfillments of verse 2. However, in a future time, a city also called Babylon will also set itself against God and ultimately be overthrown as we read in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:8, 18:2). In the verses that follow, God promises to be an advocate for the weak (v. 4) and to silence all of His oppressors (v. 5d). An understanding of this context helps to understand the banquet described in the subsequent text of today's reading because God will prepare this feast for His believers after he vanquishes the enemies of His people. As you read the text of the first reading, note how God will at some future time prepare a banquet for His people.

First Reading:

6 The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine. 7 And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken. 9 And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation." 10 For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain, And Moab will be trodden down in his place As straw is trodden down in the water of a manure pile. (Isaiah 25:6-10)

God promises us that at some future time He will prepare a banquet for His people, either during Christ's one-thousand-year reign on the earth as described in Revelation Chapter 20 or some other time. God says that this banquet will be held "on this mountain" (v. 7a) most likely meaning the location from which the rulership will be centered, meaning Jerusalem, the center of the earth (Ezekiel 5:5, Revelation 11:2, Daniel 8:14). Next, God says that He will remove the veil that is over the nations (v. 7b) and eliminate death forever. Saint Paul spoke about the spiritual veil that exists in the heart of every nonbeliever. He said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). Before this bountiful feast, once the earth has been purified during the time described by Jeremiah as "Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7), the people that remain will enter into God's eternal reign. Any nation that ever exalted itself against God, typified by "Moab" in verse 10, will be put down into the "manure pile" (v. 10b).

This passage in Isaiah is reminiscent of what John wrote about in the Book of Revelation. The way biblical revelation works is that God has gradually unfolded information about His divine plan, first through the Old Testament writings by Moses and the Prophets, and finally through Jesus and the New Testament. Jesus' disciples understood more than the Old Testament saints did, and John understood more than did the readers of Isaiah as God gradually unfolded more of the scroll of revelation. Perhaps this is why the events in the Book of Revelation are the unrolling of a scroll (Revelation 5:1). Notice the similarity in Revelation Chapter 21 to what we read from Isaiah:

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, 4 and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." 5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." (Revelation 21:3-5).

We can rest in the promises of God, because as we have seen how He faithfully accomplished His past promises He will also accomplish His future promises. God is faithful in doing what He says He will do, and generous in what He both gives us and promises us in the future. These truths are true regardless of how we feel about them, although as believers the veil has already been lifted from our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:16). As we move onto the second reading, we will see a continuation of the themes of faithfulness and generosity as God calls His people to model both traits.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians. The context is Paul's teaching that we studied last week on the antidote for worry. Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions in order to combat anxiety. He said that instead of worrying we should pray (Philippians 4:6). Second, we should focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise (v. 8). As you read today's reading, note that we have included verses 15-18 in order to understand the full context.

Second Reading:

12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. 14 Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.

15 You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; 16 for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. 17 Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. 18 But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God.

19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 Now to our God and Father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Philippians 4:12-20)

Paul said that he understood how to "get along with humble means" (v. 12), meaning just the necessities of life such as food, water, and clothing. He said that he had learned "the secret" (v. 12) of being satisfied whether he had an abundance or a lack of the things he needed. Paul revealed the secret of his success in verse 13 for dealing with a lack of provision. He said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." The verb that Paul used for being able to do all things means to "be strong," or to have strength. The word he used for "strengthens me" means to "put power in." What Paul was saying was that he could be strong when he was lacking because God infuses him

with the necessary power until He provided the necessary provision. In the closing verse, Paul said that God would supply all of our needs "according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19). This means that God will supply our needs in proportion to His **infinite** resources.

In trying to understand the application of Paul's message, it is important to understand the context given in verses 15-18. The Philippians had given generously to Paul, and they were the **only** ones to do so. This provides us with a strong insight into the application of Paul's message. As believers we are to be generous in our giving because this is how God supplies other people's needs. We are to hold our possessions that God has given us with an open hand and let God take from them and add more as He sees fit. A principle is that the more generous we are, the more that He will place into our hands for the stewardship of giving to others. This is far from the "name it and claim it" theology often seen on many of the TV "preachers." Rather, this is how God ordains us to give to others by entrusting us to be good stewards or what He has given to us.

How many of us can understand what it means to live with nearly nothing? I remember a story about a friend of mine from Liberia who immigrated to America and is now a pastor. During the oppression by the various military forces in the country, he was forced to live without any food for a period of two weeks. He said that looking back on it he was able to endure it through his faith that God would provide for his needs. It was his faith in God that got him through this and kept him safe during his harrowing journey out of the country. He told me something like, "It wasn't bad, you would be surprised how easy it was to go without food for two weeks when you are on the run and you know that God is on your side." Saint Paul said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Matthew and is like what we studied last week with Jesus addressing the Jewish religious leaders. This time the story is about a king that planned a wedding feast for his son. Notice how Jesus opened the story with "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to" (v. 1) which provides an insight into the meaning that Jesus intended the chief priests and Pharisees (Matthew 21:45) to understand.

Gospel Reading:

1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. 3 And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. 4 Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast.' 5 But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, 6 and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. 7 But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. 8 Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. 11 But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, 12 and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:1-14)

In the story, we see how the king, who by application is God, sent the good news (aka the Gospel) of the marriage feast for his son, who by application is Jesus. The invited guests were by application the Jews to whom the kingdom was initially given, except they rejected the message from the king and instead went about their worldly business (vv. 3-6). Some even went so far as to kill the king's servants, who are by application the prophets that we discussed last week. The fact that the invitation came directly from the king made the rejection of the invitation that much more of a serious matter. By application, the Jews rejected the offer of salvation provided by God through his Son Jesus Christ. As a result, they will bear the rage of the king (v. 7). When the invited guests failed to attend the wedding, the king sent his servants to find other guests, by application the Gentile world. The Gospel message went out to the Gentile world and many came to the church but not everyone who came was clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ (v. 11). The person that the king discovered without the wedding clothes (v. 11) was guilty of a great sin because God was the One who provided the attire in the first place. The application is that of a person who goes through the motions of Christianity but was never "born from above" (John 3:3). The penalty for committing the only unpardonable sin of not putting on the righteousness of Christ (Romans 13:14) is assignment of the soul to a literal place known as hell, where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12, 13:42). Jesus taught about this in His Sermon on the Mount:

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU

WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

God provides everything that a person needs to be properly clothed at the upcoming feast that we read about in the first reading from Isaiah. People obtain the necessary "wedding attire" by repenting of their sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross. Any good works that believers do flow out of their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9) as a result of the new heart that was given to them the moment that they believed (2 Corinthians 5:17). They are justified in the eyes of God, meaning that it was just as if they had never sinned. Although the Scripture is clear that the sins of a believer are not held against them, as we saw in the second reading they are accountable for the stewardship of what God has given to them. As believers, we are accountable to God for the use of our time, our talents and our treasures. We will give account of ourselves to God for our stewardship (Romans 14:12) resulting in various degrees of reward in heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. God will lovingly hold us accountable for the use of our spiritual gifts, so it's very important to understand that which we have been given. Sometimes the best way to understand your gifts is to ask others. A second insight about understanding our spiritual gifts is that we can ask ourselves what we like doing. What gifts, meaning time, talents, and treasures, have you been given by God? Write down a list of two or three gifts that you feel or others have told you that you possess.

2. How are you using each of the gifts that you have been given. Pray that God would enlighten your heart to show you ways in which you may expand your ministry. Perhaps you will receive an insight similar to this, "I have the sense that I want to volunteer in a nursing home one night a week" (gift of helps or hospitality). Alternatively, "Many people have always told me how positive I am" (gift of encouragement), "I will be more intentional about encouraging those whom I come in contact with each week."

For Further Study:

If you desire a more comprehensive method of determining your spiritual gifts there are some innovative spiritual gift tests available online. Here is a link to one such resource:

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http://tinyurl.com/spiritualgifts

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_10-11-2020Download

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-04-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we reverse the normal order begin with the second reading where we examine Paul's Letter to the Philippians. Then we look at the first reading from Isaiah and close with the Gospel lesson from Matthew.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the New Testament reading we find how obedient believers can have a clear conscience and live without worry. This reading is a continuation of the study from the Book of Philippians that we have been reading for the last several weeks. As a reminder, Paul was in prison for his faithfulness to God in preaching the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. In the previous verses, Paul admonishes two specific women in the church to resolve some certain unmentioned conflict. You can imagine that hearing of this conflict while he was in prison would have been discouraging to Paul. In the verse leading up to today's reading Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). Before you read the text ask yourself, what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord especially given Paul's unpleasant conditions and his admonition to resolve interpersonal conflict?

Second Reading:

6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:6-9)

In the reading, Paul made a commanding call to prayer, correct thinking, and right actions; which he said would result in peace in the heart of a believer. As we saw in the context leading up to the reading, Paul said first to rejoice in the Lord. This means that as believers we can rest in the finished work of the Lord Jesus in securing our salvation and rejoice that regardless of our circumstances we can never be taken away from our relationship with the Lord (John 10:28-29). Paul said in the reading that we do not have to suffer anxiety if we turn our anxiety into a prayer request (v. 6). The word "supplication" is an even stronger word, for it connotes a sense of urgency, desperation and humility. This is the attitude with which we can approach the throne of grace.

This is the same message that the Lord Jesus gave to his disciples in His great Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told them," And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:7-9). In Jesus' model prayer He instructed His disciples to first begin with adoration of God and thanksgiving. Jesus continued, "Your kingdom

come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matthew 6:10-12). After adoring God and thanking Him for His provisions we should remember to confess our sins to Him before we move onto asking Him for the matter about which we need help. One of the things we can confess (which literally means "to say the same thing" which implies we agree with God) is our limited perspective, which is causing our anxiety in the first place. We can approach God with confidence (Hebrews 4:16), which should produce thankfulness in our hearts, no matter the circumstances we face. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7).

Finally, Paul made a call to the believers in Philippi not only to prayer when tempted with worry but to think about the right things as a second means of combatting worry. Paul told the believers to think about those things that were pure, lovely, of good repute, things of excellence and worthy of praise (v. 8) as well as the Scriptures that they had received from Paul (v. 9). Not only were they to concentrate their thoughts on the correct things but they were also to practice the things which they had learned from Paul (v. 9). Many people have discovered that one way of forgetting their own troubles is to help others with their troubles. After they had done all of these things **then** the peace of God would be with them (v. 9c).

To summarize, Paul said that instead of worrying, we should pray, being thankful that God hears us and that we are not alone in our trials. He also directed believers to focus our thoughts upon the correct things including a list of good things that are worthy of praise. In addition, we should practice the things that Paul taught which would entail walking by faith in the truth of Scripture and not by sight (or our feelings). Finally, we can only expect and look forward to experiencing the peace of God after we have done these things that are connected to living in the truth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Old Testament reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. He was a prophet to Judah during the reigns of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Isaiah 1:1). His prophetic view frequently extended far beyond the immediate circumstances of Judah who was facing a threat from Babylon. Isaiah prophesied about a distant day when the Lord's temple and holy city of Jerusalem would be exalted and the world would be at peace. The following biblical text provides a backdrop of hopefulness in the midst of Judah's impending exile.

The events about which Isaiah spoke were often "telescoped" together in such a way that distant events were seen as happening with near-term events. This is sometimes called the "mountain peaks of prophecy" or "prophetic foreshortening." The "last days" about which Isaiah spoke in verse two above is the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7) that is chronicled by John in Revelation. It is at this time that the Lord Jesus will return to the earth to usher in His kingdom reign over the world and finally bring an era of peace (Revelation 19:11-16).

But before peace could come, Judah must face the consequences for her disregard for the relational covenant that God had made with her. Judah repeatedly rejected God's overtures of loving provision, and His desire for relational loyalty was continually met with spiritual adultery. As you read, listen to God's heart as He faced the disappointment of unmet relational expectations with His chosen people.

First Reading:

1 Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. 2 He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it and also hewed out a wine vat in it; Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. 3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones? 5 So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled ground. 6 I will lay it waste; It will not be pruned or hoed, But briars and thorns will come up. I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it." 7 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress. (Isaiah 5:1-7)

In today's reading, Isaiah is singing a song about God, who is Isaiah's beloved. God had a vineyard that was planted with a choice vine. Isaiah explained the metaphor of the vineyard being the house of Israel (v. 7). This metaphor of Israel as the vine occurs throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. After tending it and building a tower to protect it, the vineyard produced "worthless" grapes (connoting wild or sour grapes). God had no other choice but to remove the hedge of protection that He placed around Jerusalem and Judah and allow it to become a wasteland because of their rejection of the covenant relationship with God (v. 5). This prophecy of physical destruction was fulfilled through the invasion of the Babylonian forces in successive waves with the

last one in 586 BC resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (2 Kings 25:1-10). The final destruction of Jerusalem will occur in the future, when God allows a person called the AntiChrist to establish his kingdom rule in Jerusalem (Revelation 13). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see that a second part of the destruction of Jerusalem was the spiritual element that came when the Messiah, Jesus, whom God sent, was rejected by the Jews.

This passage teaches about God's heart and the fallen human condition. God provided everything for his chosen people to thrive and be fruitful. The passage shows God's great amount of care in establishing and tending His vineyard, the house of Israel (v. 7). "He dug it, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine" (v. 2). This parallels the creation account of what He did for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was part of the original design for humans to be image bearers of God and to be fruitful here on Earth (Genesis 1:27-28).

The consistent nature of human beings, as seen in Adam and Eve and in His people Israel, has been to break God's heart and to not live up to their noble identity as image-bearers. "Then I expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones" (v. 4). Isaiah repeats God's unmet expectation: "Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold a cry of distress" (v. 7). These verses reveal the systemic human condition of fallenness (or depravity). Even with the best of conditions, humans show their propensity toward rejecting God and choosing a life of self-reliance.

Therefore, God's response toward these choices of autonomy and independence are not justified and necessary. It's almost as if God is saying, "What else can I do? They have rejected Me, so I will honor their choice." But their choice to live in autonomy from God has dire consequences. "I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed . . ." (v. 5). Israel was free to live outside the covenant relationship set up by God, but she would also forfeit the benefits of this loving and protective relationship. They would reap the natural consequences of life apart from God. Rejecting God had dire consequences for the nation of Judah, as it continues to have for us today.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues the theme of God's vineyard as Jesus teaches using a parable. The context is extremely important this week in order to understand Jesus' intended meaning. It is clear that Jesus' message was addressed directly to the Jewish religious authorities. This group had just witnessed Jesus riding into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Matthew 21:7), something that would be

done by a king in that culture. As Jesus rode past the crowds they cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (v. 9b). Immediately afterwards Jesus escalated the tense situation even more as Matthew recorded that Jesus "entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves" (v. 12). Next, while still in the temple He healed the blind and lame (v. 14). All of this inflamed the Jewish leaders and further exposed their hatred of Jesus. Matthew recorded what happened next. "But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that He had done, and the children who were shouting in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they became indignant and said to Him, 'Do You hear what these children are saying?'" (vv. 15-16a). Jesus responded, "Yes; have you never read, 'OUT OF THE MOUTH OF INFANTS AND NURSING BABIES YOU HAVE PREPARED PRAISE FOR YOURSELF'" (v. 16b). The next day, Jesus returned to the temple (v. 23) after staying overnight in Bethany (v. 17). After cursing the fig tree in front of His disciples (v. 20), He was confronted by the chief priests and elders in the temple who questioned His authority (v. 23). Finally, in the verses leading up to today's reading He told the authorities in the temple the parable of the Sons in the Vineyard that we studied previously. That particular lesson, directed squarely at the hearts of the Jewish leaders, revealed that even though a person may outwardly act in a religious manner they could be spiritually dead on the inside (Matthew 7:13). Jesus had taught the crowds earlier about this as recorded in Matthew:

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

The religious leaders were not pleased with what Jesus told them. Later in the chapter Matthew recorded, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet" (Matthew 21:45-46). How insightful of them, they were afraid to seize him, at least at that point, because the people considered Him to be a prophet!

Now that we understand the context of the Gospel lesson, as you read the Gospel text take particular note of the identity of each of the characters in the story. *Note: Verse 44 was included for context.*

Gospel Reading:

33 Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who PLANTED A VINEYARD AND PUT A WALL AROUND IT AND DUG A WINE PRESS IN IT, AND BUILT A TOWER, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 "The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' 38 But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' 39 They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers? 41 They said to Him, "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons." 42 Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures, 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES'? 43 Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it.

44 And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." (Matthew 21:33-46)

This parable shows the goodness of God and the reasonable expectation that His peoples would respond to His goodness by being obedient workers on God's behalf and producing fruit in His vineyard.

The story starts with a landowner who planted a vineyard. The text in all capitals in verse 33 is a reference to Isaiah 5:1 that we read in the first reading. It is also very similar to the wording that God said about Israel being a "choice vine" in Jeremiah 2:21. The vinegrowers rejected their role as laborers on behalf of the landowner by abusing and killing the landowner's servants who came to collect the produce (v. 35). The escalation continued to the point that the vinegrowers killed the landowner's son (vv. 37-39). In light of the context, it is clear at this point that Jesus is referring to Himself. Jesus then let the Jewish leaders dig their own graves, so to speak, by asking them what they would do in such a situation. They said, "He [would] bring those wretches to a wretched end, and [would] rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who [would] pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons" (v. 42). In other words, the landowner would entrust the vineyard to other people who **would** be trustworthy. Jesus then seized the opportunity to teach them from their own Holy Scriptures by quoting a verse from Psalm 118 with which they would have been familiar. What Jesus was telling the Jewish leaders was that **He** was the stone who they (the builders) were about to reject. But their rejection of Him as Messiah did not deter God's plan, for Jesus would become the cornerstone of real faith for past and future generations.

Below is a summary of the characters and subjects along with their meaning in the story:

1. The landowner represents God the Father. The landowner made a huge investment in the vineyard and then entrusted it to the vinegrowers. In the same way, God invests in people and then entrusts His ministry to them for the purposes of bearing fruit.

2. The vineyard represents Israel. It contained a tower and walls which were protective measures taken by the landowner to preserve his valuable investment in the vineyard.

3. The vinegrowers represent the Jewish religious leaders.

4. The slaves are the prophets that God sent to the Old Testament Jews to remind them of their covenantal relationship with God.

4. The landowner's son represents God's Son, Jesus Christ.

5. The "other tenants" are the future church that would consist primarily of the Gentiles in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies.

Some insights about the parable are as follows. First, this parable provided a key insight into the hearts of the religious leaders. The priests and elders claimed to belong to God's kingdom but were not obedient to God the Father. Instead they were obedient to a different father, their father the devil (John 8:44).

Second, the implication of this parable is that the disobedience of the Jewish people throughout history up until that time was actually a **conspiracy** against God. In verse 38 Jesus said, "they said among themselves," meaning they conspired to kill the landowner's son. Conspiracy has always been regarded as a greater crime than manslaughter in the legal system. In modern times each of the vinegrowers would have been charged with both murder **and** conspiracy to commit murder. Jesus knew that the Jewish leaders had murder in their hearts. We see later on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus

lamented over Jerusalem who killed the prophets (Matthew 23:23), the greatest of whom was John the Baptist (Matthew 11:11) who had just been killed by King Herod (Matthew 14:10). This meant that a rejection of God's prophet John was a rejection of God Himself. In general the prophets were frequently persecuted by their own people. Some were stoned (2 Chronicles 24:21), and some like Jeremiah were persecuted and killed in other ways (Jeremiah 26:7-11, 38:1-28).

Finally, the parable is a prophecy that Jesus would be rejected by the leaders of the Jewish community. Jesus is the stone that the builders rejected, but after His exaltation, He became the Chief Cornerstone of the church (v. 42). Jesus told them very clearly about the penalty for their rejection, which was the loss of their kingdom. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it." In the end, the kingdom of God was given to the universal church made up primarily of Gentiles. This mystery of God's grace wasn't revealed or understood until after it had happened, though in hindsight clues such as this were provided by God.

God, in His grace provided one final warning to the Jewish leaders in verse 44. "And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust." Jesus is saying that rejection of Him is fatal. Falling or stumbling upon the Rock will break those who reject the Messiah, for the 2nd advent of the Messiah will be that of Judge who will pronounce everlasting judgment. Anyone that has ever dropped a dish onto a ceramic floor knows the peril of a hard surface. Jesus is the Rock over which the Jewish leaders stumbled. By application, we can see that anyone's rejection of Jesus is a fatal mistake that cannot be forgiven. Rejection of God's provision for the forgiveness of sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the only unforgivable sin (Matthew 12:22-32).

Reflection Questions

1. What is your response to God's claim of ownership on your life? Would you describe yourself like the vinegrowers who rejected the Son who came to seek payment or would you describe yourself as one who has surrendered to God's rightful ownership of your life? How would others describe you, based on your words, your attitudes, your values and your lifestyle?

2. In the last two readings, we saw God's reasonable expectation that His people bear fruit for Him. We also saw Paul modeling the fulfillment of this, for though he was in very unpleasant

circumstances, he pointed the way to have peace in God through connecting to God in prayer. In what ways is God calling you to be His image-bearer in the world, despite your less than ideal circumstances? How can depending on God through prayer be a life-line for you to fulfill your God-given purpose?

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