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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-28-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts just after Jesus was taken up into heaven. Then we move to the continuing study in First Peter, and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 7, which is Jesus' prayer for Christian unity.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is forty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus had gathered the disciples together and they had just asked Him the question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6c). This was an honest question and indicated what was evidently on all of their minds. Would Jesus now usher in His reign on earth as both a religious King *and* supreme civil ruler as foretold in the Scriptures? They would have been familiar with what the Prophet Micah had predicted regarding His future rulership. "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). Jesus answered their question with something that they probably did not want to hear. He said, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). However, Jesus went on, "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Afterwards, Jesus was taken up into heaven leaving the disciples

waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

With this context in mind read the text and keep in your mind the flurry of events that the disciples had just experienced including seeing a fully alive Man ascend into heaven followed by the appearance of two angels (Acts 1:10).

First Reading:

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. (Acts 1:12-14)

Several points can be drawn from the reading and especially ones that relate to the Gospel lesson later in this study. First, the disciples of the early church were united in continual prayer. The Scriptures call all believers to pray with the example set by Jesus' first believers. Prayer is one of the ways in which the church is united in their purpose. Some years ago in seminary I took a course in prayer. I wondered how anyone could study prayer for an entire semester. One of the things that I was concerned about before I began the course was that the syllabus said that I had to locate a prayer partner and agree to pray with them for one hour each week throughout the term. Soon after the class began I was able to locate a suitable classmate with which to pray each week. As the semester progressed I noticed for the first time in my life the value of joining in prayer with another Christian. Although I am certain that I didn't pray with the same fervor as did Saint Peter, I did obtain strength through persisting in meeting with my prayer partner which has led me to much stronger prayer life since the conclusion of the class.

Second, the unity of the church included women, who were people with very low status in the culture, not much more than property. Women were the first ones to testify of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, even though in this culture the testimony of women in civil court was often disregarded. Jesus turned society morays on its proverbial ear, he turned the world upside down by valuing women equally with men and even affording them a position of prominence by seeing to it that they were the first witnesses of the resurrection!

Third, note that John said "These all with one mind" (v. 14a). When all of the believers in a group have the same mind, they are united not only in their purpose but also work to align their will with the revealed will of God through the mutual understanding of His Word in the Scriptures. One of the practices that I did with my own prayer partner was that when we ran out of things to say we just read the Bible aloud. Having just experienced Jesus' last 40 days of ministry and also being fresh from the Emmaus Road experience the disciples must have studied the Old Testament Scriptures (as we call them) with a renewed fervor and understanding. This unity of thinking and mission would help the early church to persevere during the subsequent persecution that early on descended upon

the Church.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move to the second reading and continue with the teaching in First Peter, keep the theme of unity of all believers in your mind. In this message, Saint Peter taught the early church the importance of rejoicing in spite of persecution, as well as what actions to take during these difficulties.

Second Reading:

13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (1 Peter 4:13-16)

Peter said that if you "are reviled for the name of Christ" (v.14a) you are blessed. How can someone be blessed if they are persecuted for Christ? Peter said we are blessed during persecution because "the Spirit of glory rests on you" (v.14c-ff). Jesus promised that He would not leave us as orphans (John 14:18), that His Spirit would rest upon the believers. One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to help believers to persist in persecution for their faith. Peter called us to "glorify God in this name" and not to be ashamed because of persecution (v. 16). He contrasted this with someone who suffered for breaking a civil law, or even just being a "troublesome meddler," thing which the Spirit will not comfort us and for which we should expect persecution.

One of the common themes that frequently emerges from the testimony of Christians who experienced long periods of persecution for their faith is the comfort of the Holy Spirit that they found through the unity with other believers. We will see the importance of unity as revealed in Jesus' prayer to the Father as we move to the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson for today has to do with Jesus' call for unity in the Church. John opened the Gospel lesson today by saying, "Jesus spoke these things," and then he prayed to the Father. What were "these things" to which John was referring? If we look back to the previous two verses, we see what John was referring to. Jesus said, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be **scattered**, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:32-33, emphasis added). Jesus knew that the disciples, with the exception of John, would scatter during his tribulation and death on the cross. He also knew that they would scatter because of the persecution that would come upon the young church after he went back to heaven.

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Gospel Reading:

1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. 6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 "Now they have come to know that everything You have given Me is from You; 8 for the words which You gave Me I have given to them; and they received them and truly understood that I came forth from You, and they believed that You sent Me. 9 "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours; 10 and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. 11 "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. (John 17:1-11)

Notice how Jesus made a variety of affirmation while He was praying, and then proceeded to present to the Father his petitions. Jesus affirmed that He had authority over the entire world, "all flesh" (v. 1) and that the Father had given the believers eternal life for the purpose of knowing the "one true God and Jesus Christ" (v. 2). He affirmed that He had manifested the Name of the Father to the believers whom the Father had given to Him (v. 6), Next, Jesus prayed that the believers would become "one even as We are one" (v.11). Jesus call to unity with Himself represented the core of the Gospel message, that believers become one with God through faith in Jesus Christ and the living presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

What does all of this mean for our lives? First, Jesus' call for us to be united with Himself and the Father comes about through the things we have seen in the lesson today. We are to be united by gathering together in prayer, by praying continually, even when we are by ourselves. We are called to submit ourselves to the will of the Father, and to learn His will by understanding His revelation through the Scriptures. Second, we can find unity with God by accepting persecution for our faith with the understanding that this glorifies God. When we are led by God to take up countercultural positions on certain moral issues including affirming the rights of all unborn children we can have courage that God will glorify His name through our obedience.

Reflection Questions

1. Throughout the lesson today we have seen how the disciples were unified in their mind to accomplish Jesus' mission for them. One of the ways in which they both expressed and achieved this

unity was through their constant prayer with the group.

I challenge you this week to pray with another believer at least once during the upcoming week. Even if it is before a meal or over the telephone, ask the person if they would be willing to pray together. Be prepared to answer the most common objections such as not having enough time, my faith is a personal thing, this makes me uncomfortable, etc.

2. A few years ago I spent two week in France with a group of college students. The cultural differences took me some getting used to. I rejoiced at the fact that those in France still had a certain reverence for the people of God although they regarded people who claimed to be Christians with a bit of suspicion.

In light of your cultural experiences, how does your faith in Jesus Christ help you in overcoming the cultural differences that you experience in your own life and work? How does what you learned today help to inform you on some of the ways in which to attack these cultural challenges?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-21-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Acts and then move to the second reading where we continue to study in First Peter. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from John 14.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts Chapter 8. In order to understand the context we will back up to the beginning of the chapter. As we read from the section, remember that this picked up after the stoning of Stephen whom we read about last week. Let's first read that very important context before we move onto the text of the reading.

1 Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3 But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. 4 Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (Acts 8:1-4)

The persecution of the church resulted in the believers being spread about the region thereby further spreading the good news of the Gospel. The man named Saul, the one later known as Paul, brought about this unintended consequence. God continued to work in the church in a mighty way in spite of Saul's persecution.

The reading for today skipped verses 9 to 13. We included those verses in order to provide a clearer picture of what was happening after Philip began preaching the Gospel to the half-breed people known as the Samaritans, ones that the Jews considered unclean.

First Reading:

5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds

> *with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.*
> *Omitted Section:]*
> *9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." 11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. 14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:5-17)*

Philip's ministry to the Jews was extremely important because it marked a turning point at which because of persecution on Jerusalem the church began spreading to the Gentile world. This began first with the mixed-breed people known as the Samaritans. This was a group of people that were left over after the exile of the Northern Tribes of Israel during the Assyrian invasion in 722 BC. Even though they had some similar religious beliefs as the Jews, they were excluded from the ministry of the temple in Jerusalem. What happened in the reading was that many from this group of people believed in Jesus. As a result, Peter and John came to Samaria in order to confer on them the Holy Spirit. Second, they commissioned these new believers for service by laying hands on them (v. 17). The big idea is that anyone, either Jew or Gentile, and even a person of the half-breed race of Samaritans can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and have their sins forgiven. The story about Simon the magician provided additional testimony to the fact that anyone cane believe and be saved, even someone that was formerly practicing magic By application, anyone can believe in Jesus today and be saved through belief on the Lord.

Second Reading:

> *15. but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. 17 For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. 18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the*

spirit; (1 Peter 3:15-18)

Peter taught that even when Christians are undergoing persecution they still to be prepared to give testimony for the hope that they have through faith in the Lord Jesus (v. 15b). The way in which believers are to testify is with gentleness and reverence (v. 15c) such that those that are attacking their faith may learn from it such that they too come to faith in Jesus. Peter cautioned that it is better to suffer for doing good than to receive just punishment for doing wrong, such as breaking a civil law. We must remember the example of Jesus Who was put to death for our sins in order to bring us into a right position with God (v. 18).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint John and like last week the context is once again Jesus' parting words to His disciples during the Last Supper.

Gospel Reading:

15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. 16 "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; 17 that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. 18 "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. 19 "After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. 20 "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. 21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." (John 14:15-21)

Several important points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how Jesus opened this section with the conditional phrase, "If you love me" (v. 15a). The word in the original translated "love" is a form of the word "agape" which refers to love that exists between Jesus and God. Jesus said rhetorically that if you love Him then you would follow His commandments. In the Jewish mind, the "commandments" would have referred to the whole of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments. However, later in John Jesus summed up the whole of the Law by the following statement. "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Jesus expressed the greatest love of all by giving His life for our sin. He said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). We are to express our keeping of the law by loving one another with Jesus sacrificial love as our example.
Second, when you examine the reading, you will see that the word "commandments" exists twice, once at the beginning and another time at the end. This "bounding" can be a clue to a central mean that exists between the two mentions of a concept of word. In the case, the central truth that emerged from between the two words is God's revelation of the sending of the Holy Spirit, something that happened fifty days from that first Easter Sunday on the Day of Pentecost. Sandwiched in the middle of this pronouncement is another of Jesus famous "I am" statements that indicated His unity with God the Father. Here we see Jesus testimony that not only is He one

with the Father, but He is also one with the Holy Spirit.

Third, notice what Jesus said about the nonbelieving world. He said about the Holy Spirit that He "is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him" (v. 17). When Jesus did rise from the dead He only revealed Himself to a select group of people. 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 unbelieving world has been blinded to the identity of the Person of the Holy Spirit through their inherent sin (Romans 3:23) along with the work of Satan and his agents.

How does the Gospel lesson today impact our lives? The sending of the Holy Spirit to live within us is God's fulfillment of the promise not to leave us as orphans (v. 18). The Person of the Holy Spirit is one of the ways that God works through us as we strive to strive to as Peter said in the second reading to be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15). This "Spirit of Truth" (John 14:17) works to correct the world's false teachings about the way for people to make it to heaven when they die. He does this through living inside of believers and through the inspiration of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16). The Spirit also helps us to understand the Bible. Jesus said, "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come" (John 16:13).

Reflection Questions

1. Names in the Bible impart significant meaning to the person to whom they are assigned. List the names that Jesus revealed for the Person of the Holy Spirit. What are some qualities that can be ascertained from Jesus' use of these particular names?

2. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is critically important in the lives of believers. Read John 16:7-14. Summarize the ministries of the Holy Spirit disclosed by Jesus to His disciples in that text.

3. In verse 20 Jesus said, "In that day." To what Day what Jesus referring to? Could Jesus have had a dual fulfillment in mind when he used this term? If so, how would the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost have partially fulfilled this prophecy?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-14-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Acts and then return to our study on First Peter. Then we conclude with a Gospel lesson from John 14.

As I wrote this, I was preparing to travel to France with a group of students to experience French culture there for two weeks. From there I was also planning to visit an aunt and uncle in Belgium, the uncle that has spent his life researching the Church and as a professor at the American University of Leuven. Looking back on the trip, I learned a lot about dealing with young college students. During the trip, I made a conscious effort to build relationships with the students and to engage with their culture. I also learned a lot about the French people. I saw how God had reached a precious small group of them to serve Him and how the culture as a whole viewed Christianity as an ancient relic.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts 6. Here we see how God put it into the hearts of the disciples to organize the early church by dividing the duties among serving and preaching.

First Reading:

1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. 7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1-7)

First, note that Stephan, one of the man who was selected to serve was martyred in the very next chapter because of his powerful speech to the unbelieving Jews. A point that can be observed is although believers may have specific, non-ministry roles all of us are called to give testimony for Jesus. Saint Peter said, in the context of enduring suffering Christian testimony, "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15). Second, note that the disciples prayed for God's confirmation and blessing upon their decision (v. 6). Prayer is an essential first step when making decisions of any kind, but especially those dealing with the organization and carrying out of God's ministry. Finally, note that "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith" (v.7). Though many of the Jews rejected Christ, God reached many of the Jewish leaders in order to rapidly build His Church (v. 7, "The word of God kept on spreading"). This conversion led to the priesthood of all believers, a mystery that we will see was revealed in the second reading from today.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Moving onto the second reading, we return to the Book of First Peter. The context of the message is persecution of believers. Here we see the mystery of the priesthood of all believers revealed, through the symbolism of stone building blocks with Jesus as the Chief Cornerstone, the One Whom the builders, aka the Jews, rejected.

Second Reading:

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For this is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone," 8 and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF

OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed. 9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;(1 Peter 2:4-9)

The main idea from this text is that God is building His Church out of precious building blocks of people, the foremost of whom is Jesus Christ, the "living stone which has been rejected by men" (v. 4). This Church is made up of spiritual stones (believers) all of whom are priests in the eyes of God (v. 9), since the Jewish Levitical priesthood has passed away. Jesus is our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), the only mediator between us and God (1 Timothy 2:5, the byline of this ministry). Jesus is of the line of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:17), not the line of Aaron that has passed away. One of the reasons that Stephen was stoned after his appointment in Acts 6 that we read in the first reading was because of his teaching about the passing away of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood. We can celebrate the fact that Jesus' priesthood will never pass away, and that we join with Him as spiritual priests for His service.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The main theme of the Book of First Peter that was have studied over the past several weeks has been the suffering of believers. The Gospel reading today provides some insights into things that believers can look forward to in order to endure suffering in their daily lives. The Gospel lesson this week is from John Chapter 14. This is one of those sections of Scripture about which we say, "if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). This contains some of the richest teaching from Jesus of anywhere in the New Testament. As you read take note of repeated words and phrases which provide indications of the subjects that Jesus emphasized during His message to the disciples in the upper room of the Last Supper just before He went to Calvary.

Gospel Reading:

1 "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. 2 In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 3 If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way where I am going." 5 Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. 7 If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." 8 Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. 11 Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. 12 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in

Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father." (John 14:1-12)

This section is unique in that it contained two sets of repeated words and phrases each of which was repeated three times. First, Jesus emphasized His divinity by using the phrase "I am" three times, a phrase that appeared throughout John's Gospel just before Jesus gave himself to the people to be crucified for the sins of the world. The disciples would have recognized this phrase as a strong statement of divinity. Although their eyes were blinded to the reality of the events that Jesus predicted concerning His death and resurrection, they would later remember this event after he rose from the dead. No one used this phrase about himself unless they were God. Second, Jesus repeated the phrase "believe in Me" three times during his final message to His disciples on that last Passover meal with them. As in any Bible study, repeated words provide an insight into the subject that was being emphasized by the Gospel writer under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). In the case the big idea of the message was that because Jesus is God the world is to believe in Him.

As we said in the introduction, entire collections of books could be written about this section, even about just a single verse. Let's consider a portion of one verse in detail, something that spoke particularly to us as we studied Jesus' message. Verse 3 provided several powerful insights into not only Jesus' mission and how He served us, and a glimpse into our future with Him.

3 If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

Jesus said:

"If." Jesus had the choice to either follow the will of the Father, or to forsake the eventual suffering and just save Himself. Jesus said in Luke, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Jesus chose suffering and death for us. Saint Paul said, "Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

"I go." Nobody else could go to redeem us from our sin, Jesus had to go for us as a substitute, the perfect lamb of God. Saint Peter said, "and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus said in verse six that He was the only to God for us. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."

"to prepare a place." Jesus went to heaven with a mission to prepare a place for us to come to, either when we die or when He comes to gather His church (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Jesus was a carpenter, but the city to which He went to prepare was most likely a heavenly place, the "New Jerusalem" referred to in several places in the Bible including Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 11:10, Hebrews 12:22–24, Hebrews 13:14), but it is most fully described in Revelation 21. John spoke in the Book of Revelation about this glorious place, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" Revelation 21:2)

"for you." Jesus died for us because "all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "The penalty for our sins is death" (Romans 6:23a) but because Jesus gave Himself for us "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b). We can't do anything to earn it. Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

"I will come again." Jesus is going to come again. First, He will come to gather His church, first the saints that have already died, and then those that remain. Second, Jesus will return to pass judgment upon entire earth. Paul said about this first event:

"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 "(1 Thessalonians 4:14-17)

John said about this second event:

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

As believers in the risen Jesus Christ our Lord, we can be comforted by the fact that we are in the first group. We are of those who will be met by Jesus when we die (John 14:3), or are taken by Him (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

As we conclude the study for the Mass this week, let's focus upon something that Jesus said in the Gospel. Our Lord said, "I will come again and receive you to Myself" (John 14:3). The first Person that we see after we die will be Jesus Christ Himself! What a comfort this can be to us as we journey through difficult days "topside," as I like to say.

Have a great week.

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Reflection Questions

1. People around us, even those that go to church, have many different beliefs about how people get to God when they die. Some believe that they must be a good person, follow the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), and be something like at least 51 percent good and no more than 49 percent bad. What did Jesus say was the only true way to come to God? Using what you learned today, write a paragraph about how you would lovingly explain to someone holding a false belief about how to make it to heaven.

2. You read a verse in Revelation 21 about the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:2). That chapter contains many comforting verses to believers in Jesus regarding the place Jesus is preparing for us and the way in which God will comfort us after our trials here on earth. Read that entire chapter of Revelation and answer the following question.

How did the study of Revelation 21 provide you with a blessing as promised by God in Revelation 1:3, "blessed are those who read this Book"?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-7-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Peter's speech on the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to the rapidly growing Church. Then we move to the second reading and continue our study in the Book of First Peter. Finally, we close with the Gospel lesson from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Chapter 2 of the Book of Acts. The context is Peter's speech to a crowd of about 120 followers of Christ (Acts 1:15) on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after that first Easter Sunday. Just before Peter's speech, God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the followers which empowered them to speak in many known languages. Since this was unusual, some in the crowd that were gathered for the feast accused them of being drunk (Acts 2:13). In response to this allegation, Peter addressed the crowd to explain the reason for this unusual occurrence. Today's reading then jumps to verse 36 because these intermediate verses were covered last week. The opening word in verse 36 is the adverb "therefore." Without considering the context of the intermediate verses, a significant amount of information is left out that is relevant to this last section. Since we always need to understand what the "therefore" is there for, we will summarize the important points from the intermediate verses (15 – 35). First, read the opening of Peter's address in verse 14.

14 But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words."

Peter said in other words, "listen up." Next, he immediately corrected some of the people's false assumptions that the followers of Christ were drunk (v. 15). He said that what was happening was the fulfillment of the Prophet Joel's message (v.16) regarding God's pouring out of His Spirit on all mankind in the end times (Joel 2:28 – 32). In retrospect, we understand that what Peter meant was

that this was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. After Peter quoted from this section of Joel, he presented testimony about how the people crucified "Jesus the Nazarene" and God raised Him from the dead (vv. 22 – 24). Next, Peter quoted from the Psalms to show how Jesus also fulfilled those prophetic writings by King David (vv.25 – 28). He noted that David died and his tomb is "with us to this day" (v.29), but Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that Someone would sit on David's throne (vv. 30 – 31). Saint Matthew went to great lengths to show that Jesus was of the line of David (Matthew 1:1-17). Additionally, the Prophet Isaiah stated explicitly that the Messiah would be of the line of David (Isaiah 9:6-7). Next Peter said, "This Jesus, God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (vv. 32-33). Peter closed this section of his address by again quoting from a Psalm, this time one that contained a conversation between God the Father and God the Son. "THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, 'SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET'" (vv. 34a – 35). To summarize, the sending of the Holy Spirit was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that signaled the start of the end times, after the Messiah came. Second, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies that He would be of the line of David. Finally, in the future Jesus the Lord will overcome all of His enemies, and be exalted above all of creation (1 Corinthians 15:27).

Now let's proceed with the reading.

First Reading:

36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ–this Jesus whom you crucified." 37 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:14, 36-41)

To paraphrase, Pete said some something like, "Therefore," take into account the authority of the prophetic Scriptures from which I previously quoted and how Jesus perfectly fulfilled them. God made Jesus both the Supreme Master ("Lord") and Messiah ("Christ," or "Anointed One," meaning Deliverer) (v. 36).

Peter's speech had a profound impact upon the crowd. "Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart" and then asked Peter what they should do (v. 37). Peter told them to repent and be baptized, and then they too would receive the Holy Spirit (v. 38). Why do you think this happened, why were they "pierced to the heart"? Did Peter's speech have a profound impact upon **you** after you read it?

Here are some insights into possible reasons why Peter's speech had such a profound impact upon the Jewish audience who were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost). First, the Jews were "people of the Book." These were the ones to whom God first revealed His plan of salvation. God, through His sovereign plan, had gathered the Jews together in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks to coincide with His outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the group of 120 followers of Jesus. To the Jews, the authority of God was vested in the Holy Books, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Once Peter explained with compelling evidence that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Holy Books, the Jews evidently recognized the overwhelming evidence in support of Jesus as God's Promised Messiah. A second possible reason why Peter's speech had a profound impact upon the Jews gathered for the Feast was the sheer magnanimity of what happened after the Holy Spirit of God had settled upon the group of believers. "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:4, 6). Imagine the scene. Pilgrims from the various language groups all around the Roman Empire were gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks. Next, the pilgrims heard this group of Galileans speaking, but each one of them heard and understood in their own language! This great miracle would have had a profound impact upon the people.

Because of this cascading series of events the pilgrims who heard Peter's message were convicted of their sin, they were "pierced to the heart" (v.37). A total of 3,000 Jews who heard Peter's speech repented and were baptized in one day.

We cannot underestimate the power that God unveiled that day in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit of God is the Person of God that lives inside of us, the One that empowers the Church. He is the Power (Dunamis in Greek, similar to Dynamite in English) spoken of Jesus when He said that "the disciples would receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). He is the One who started the Church that day in Jerusalem. He is God With Us, living in us, the Immanuel of Christ Whom God said "would never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6), the One that Jesus said would be in us (John 14:17).

As we leave the first reading and the events of that magical day in Jerusalem, let us endeavor to focus upon how God the Holy Spirit empowers and emboldens **us** to accomplish God's work in our lives. Let's also recognize how the Holy Spirit worked through Peter as he testified about how Jesus suffered and died for our sins, which will be revealed in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is another portion of Peter's experience of Jesus. Let's see how Peter used the authority of the Old Testament to affirm his argument about how Jesus Christ suffered as a perfect Man for us.

Second Reading:

20 For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. 21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, 22 WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. 25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:20-25)

The people were struggling with various forms of persecution for their faith, as well as finding their identity in Jesus Christ. They may have asked something like, "Why, if I am a Christian, do I have to suffer persecution, when all I have done is to believe the truth of God and follow His commandments?" The answer, according to the Holy Spirit, as recorded by Peter, is that we as believers are called by God to suffer (v.21) with Jesus as our example on how we are to go about it. "[W]hile being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (v.23). Peter said that Jesus died for our sins, "so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (v. 24). It was through Jesus death on the cross that He freed us from the power of sin (Romans 8:2). We suffer for a wide variety of reasons, one of which is to accomplish the purposes of God (v.20d).

Have you developed your own personal "theology of suffering?" Have you rationalized, in light of the Scriptures, why bad things happen to "good" (Romans 3:23) people? These are good things to wrestle with even before hard times fall upon us. One way that suffering benefits us is that it helps us to identify ourselves with Christ Who suffered for us. There is a fellowship or bond that comes from suffering with someone. God invites us into a bond with Christ as we go through hard times and persecution.

I became friends with a man named Ron Christy several years ago just before he was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Ron provided a powerful story about how a Christian can suffer while still providing a strong testimony for the Lord. You can read Ron's testimony online at the following link: https://www.christiansforchrist.org/articles/testimonies/ron-christy-my-walk-of-faith-with-als

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Peter's words about returning to the "Shepherd and Guardian of our souls" sets the perfect stage for the Gospel lesson from John Chapter 10. The context of His message is just after He healed a blind man and afterwards confronted the Pharisees (John 9). This section of Scripture is profound in that throughout the Chapter Jesus uses a metaphor of Himself as the Shepherd and the Door, with us as the sheep. Other characters come into play in the lesson including a gatekeeper, robbers, thieves, and strangers. As you read, think about the contemporary application of these characters as Jesus' illustration unfolds. In the world today, who are the robbers, thieves, and strangers to whom Jesus was pointing?

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Gospel Reading:

1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them. 7 So Jesus said to them again, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. 9 I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:1-10)

Jesus' story alluded to Ezekiel 34, where God condemned the shepherds of Israel, meaning the spiritual leaders (Ezekiel 34:1-10). Ezekiel announced God's strong judgment on the kings, priests, and prophets who ruled before the exile of the Jews to Babylon. God said, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them" (Ezekiel 34:10). It's not coincidental that Jesus' message came just after He told a group of Pharisees that they were spiritually blind (John 9:41). It's evident that Jesus message was pointed squarely at the Pharisees, a group of spiritual "lay ministers" (shepherds) of Israel.

A wealth of rich points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how as the story unfolded that Jesus was the Shepherd (v. 2), then in verse 7 he became the "door of the sheep" which led to the pasture (v. 9d). In the first century, the shepherds sometimes slept in the gate in order to protect their sheep. Anyone or anything that wanted to come into the sheepfold would have to enter through the gate and thereby come past the shepherd. By application, Jesus is saying that the only way to God is through Him. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Faith in Jesus is the only means provided by God for a person to cross into Jesus' fold and be saved (v. 9).

Second, if you have ever visited the areas around Jerusalem you will notice that the shepherds in the region stand at various positions around the sheepfold and summon the animals with their own unique calls. The application of this principle is that Jesus calls His people to God's Kingdom. Jesus went even further than a communal call to His sheep, He said, "he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (v. 3c). Jesus knows each one of us, his precious sheep. Later, beyond the range of today's reading, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me" (John 10:14). This means that Jesus desires a personal relationship with each of us.

Third, notice Jesus' "I am" statement in verse 7, which is the third of this type of statement in John's Gospel (in the English translation, in the Greek text this is the 13'th). This phrase was something

that the First Century Jews would have recognized as a strong statement of divinity. In Jesus' earlier use of this phrase in John's Gospel He said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:35). In today's reading Jesus said, "I am the door" (v. 9a). Jesus is our source of life, our spiritual sustenance. He is the Light of truth from God, the Light that leads us to the single door to obtain eternal life, the only way to God.

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

Some years ago, I completed a study of the Book of Genesis and made an interesting observation about God's gathering of the animals into the ark. The Bible says, "So they went into the ark to Noah, by twos of all flesh in which was the breath of life" (Genesis 7:15). The insight that I had was that many of the people in that region that had either watched, or possibly even been involved in the building of the ark, had to have seen the animals entering two by two into the ark. Perhaps the people on the outside were saying something like, "There they go, two by two into the ark, just like Preacher Noah had said they would." Noah, a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5) must have suffered terribly knowing all the people that he ministered to perished, except for his small family. The story went on, "Those that entered, male and female of all flesh, entered as God had commanded him; and the LORD closed it behind him" (v. 16). In retrospect, it was easy for them to be convinced of Noah's prophecy regarding the Great Flood once the door of the ark was sealed shut by God and the deluge began. Noah would have allowed anyone entrance to the ark, right up until the time the flood began. Instead of just eight people being saved (1 Peter 3:20), the Scripture **could** have read something like this:

"On the very same day Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons with them, entered the ark" (Genesis 7:13).

Then, as just before God sealed the door of the ark shut, a man named John came running up the ramp into the ark (my words added).

"[W]hen the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water" (1 Peter 3:20).

And a man named John (my words added).

The animals are walking two by two into the proverbial ark right now. God is gathering His people through their faith in the Jesus, who was foreshadowed in the ark. In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus gathered and called His people by name into the pen where He protected them and fed them. Jesus is the ark, He is our only means of escaping the flood of judgment that will come upon the unsaved world because of their sin. Someday God will once again seal up the "ark," forbidding anyone else to cross from death into life. In the parable of the ten virgins Jesus said, "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" (Matthew 25:10). John said in Revelation, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Revelation 21:8).

Our first response is to make sure that we have put our trust in Jesus for salvation. Have you resolve this in your own heart, that when you give an account for your life you can honestly say you trusted in Jesus, not your own good works? Our next response is to warn the world of the coming judgment and point them to the only possible means of salvation, repentance of their sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. What does it look like in your life to shine your light in a dark world to those "outside the ark"? What is one concrete step that you could begin praying about and take in the upcoming weeks to reach one person for Jesus?

2. Although we asked you to identify the contemporary roles of the various bad actors in the Gospel lesson the focus wasn't upon the evil actors but upon Jesus as the only means to reach God. In light of what you learned, what, or who, are the evil actors that are influencing your life in terms of walking with God, and how does Jesus protect and deliver you from them?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-30-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, as we did last week, we will open with the Gospel reading. Then we will move onto the first reading from the Book of Acts and then close with the continuing study from First Peter.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Chapter 24 of Saint Luke, which recounts the story of two men who met the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus, a city located seven miles northwest of Jerusalem. The context of the reading is just hours after Mary Magdalene reported the news to the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. A lot happened in the early hours of that first Easter morning. Mark and Matthew tell us that Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9, Matthew 28:9). According to Saint Paul, Jesus appeared to Peter at some point after Mary (1 Corinthians 15:5), and before the meeting with the eleven disciples, the timing of this appearance to Peter isn't known. The next appearance was to the men we will read about in Luke's account below. Not much is known about the exact identity of the two men. One of them is named Cleopas, about whom there is a tradition that he was the brother of Joseph, the husband of Jesus' mother Mary. The other person wasn't named.

Gospel Reading:

13 And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about

seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 And they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. 16 But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. 17 And He said to them, "What are these words that you are exchanging with one another as you are walking?" And they stood still, looking sad. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, answered and said to Him, "Are You the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?" 19 And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "The things about Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people, 20 and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to the sentence of death, and crucified Him. 21 But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. 22 But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning, 23 and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive. 24 Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see." 25 And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" 27 Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. 28 And they approached the village where they were going, and He acted as though He were going farther. 29 But they urged Him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is getting toward evening, and the day is now nearly over." So He went in to stay with them. 30 When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight. 32 They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" 33 And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them, 34 saying, "The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon." 35 They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:13-35)

The men testified that they knew about the report of the empty tomb (v. 24) and they had heard that Jesus was alive (v. 23). Somehow, their eyes were blinded to the reality of Jesus walking with them (v.16). It wasn't until Jesus ate with them that their eyes were opened to the reality of Jesus' identity (v. 31). Next, they immediately returned from Emmaus to Jerusalem in order to tell the disciples about their experience with their risen Lord (v. 33). By the time they made it back to Jerusalem it was Sunday evening. Luke said that the two men found "the eleven" gathered together, but we know that Thomas wasn't present and didn't see the risen Lord Jesus for eight more days (John 20:26). Possibly Thomas stepped away before the two men arrived, or Luke used the term "the eleven" in a general sense. Nevertheless, the two testified that Jesus really had risen from the dead, and confirmed that Peter had also seen Jesus (v.34, 1 Corinthians 15:5). The two men humbly recounted that it wasn't until Jesus broke the bread with them that they recognized Him (v.35).

The big ideas behind the Gospel lesson are first, Jesus is alive, and His resurrection was affirmed not just by his disciples but by others. We can rest in the fact that the biblical account of Jesus' resurrection is true in part because it includes unflattering details about the behavior of people. The

men on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus even though He explained the things concerning Himself to them (v. 27). Second, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning His coming. The Prophets predicted Jesus birth, life, death and resurrection in amazing detail. As a student of the Bible we have to be willing to admit that prophecy is much easier to interpret after the predicted events have occurred. When we read the story of the two men on the road to Emmaus, we know the secret that they didn't understand until later. The Prophets themselves struggled with these same things. Peter said in 1 Peter, just before the section we will be reading later today, "As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow" (1 Peter 1:10-11).

Because of the complexities and nuances of the prophecies, I have oftentimes wanted to hear Jesus' explanation of the biblical prophecies to the two men. I have spent many hours pondering the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus with the significant advantage of hindsight of Jesus' death and resurrection. However, the men on the road to Emmaus didn't have the advantage of hindsight, their minds were buzzing with the events of the past several days (vv. 18-24). Finally, since the prophecies fulfilled concerning of the coming of the Lord Jesus are true, we can trust in the future fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Jesus' return. We can rest assured that Jesus will gather His elect when He comes to claim His Church. Paul said, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1Thessalonians 4:14).

Before we move onto the first reading, let's briefly look at the conclusion to the story of the two men on the road to Emmaus. As amazing as the story was about how the two men didn't recognize Jesus while they walked all the way to Emmaus and began to have dinner with him is what happened next in the two verses beyond the end of today's reading. Luke continued the account of the events that occurred after the men returned to Jerusalem to testify to the disciples:

36 While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst. 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit. 38 And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:35-39)

The closing of this story brings out a fourth theological truth from the lesson. Jesus is alive in the flesh, not just in the Spirit. In the same way, one day we too will be alive in the flesh. Job said prophetically in the oldest Book in the Bible, "As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, Yet from my flesh I shall see God; Whom I myself shall behold, And whom my eyes will see and not another. My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:25-27). We can rejoice in the fact that one day we will receive a glorified body similar to Jesus (1 John 3:2). Beyond that, the whole world will pass away and be restored to a new, beautiful creation (Revelation 21:1).

Introduction to the First Reading:

As we leave the Gospel lesson and move onto the first reading, we return to Acts Chapter Two and the era of the newborn Church. Peter, the uncontested leader of the Faith, set up boldly fulfilling Jesus' commandment to build His Church (Matthew 28:16-20). The context of the passage occurs 40 days after Jesus' resurrection. He was with his disciples, now called "apostles" teaching them about the kingdom of God. At the end of 40 days, Jesus ascended to heaven, leaving them with the charge to wait in Jerusalem for the power of the Holy Spirit. When the apostles were gathered to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came from heaven and gave them the ability to speak in other known languages for the benefit of proclaiming the truth of the Good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. There were many Jews who were in Jerusalem for this festival, and, amazingly enough; they were able to understand the disciples who were speaking in their native language. It was a miracle, a sign from God that he was in their midst. But some mocked and said that the men were drunk. In the confusion of all of this, Peter got up and explained what was happening. As you read, take note of the words with capitalized letters, noting that these reflect quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures. Also remember what you learned from the Gospel lesson in terms of how Jesus fulfilled so many biblical prophecies.

First Reading:

14 But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words.

**See Note Below [Omitted verses: 15 "For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day; 16 but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 17 'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHESY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; 18 EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT And they shall prophesy. 19 'AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. 20 'THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. 21 'AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.']*

22 "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know– 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. 25 For David says of Him, 'I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN. 26 'THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; 27 BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. 28 'YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF

GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.' 29 Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 And so, because he was a prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH AN OATH TO SEAT one OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE, 31 he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY. 32 This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. Acts 2:14-33

*The section that was omitted in the reading dealt with Peter's proclamation that the coming of the Holy Spirit was a *partial* fulfillment of the Prophet Joel's prophecy. Paul also quoted from Joel's prophecy when he said in Romans, "anyone who calls upon the Name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13).

Several points arise from the text. First, note that although Peter did present firsthand testimony about Jesus resurrection (v.32) he based most of his address on Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures. This makes sense, since Peter is addressing a primarily Jewish crowd. He reasoned with them based on their frame of reference for the expectations of the Messiah. Second, Peter compared the biblical patriarch David with Jesus, saying that King David was still buried in the famous tomb, but since Jesus rose from the dead there was no such tomb for this King. To this very day nobody celebrates the burial place of Jesus. Instead, people visit Jerusalem to view a grave that is very much empty! Third, Peter explained that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Davidic promises, the One whom God had exalted to His very right hand. This means that Jesus is exalted by God the Father to a position of the highest possible favor with God, a place of extreme power and sovereignty. Fourth, Peter's address was yet another occurrence of the biblical phenomenon "but God," something which has vast significance, but especially so in regards to God's only means of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Peter used this phrase (v.24a) just before he explained the miraculous events that had happened over the course of the past fifty days. The phrase occurs frequently throughout the Bible. In fact, a search through the Bible reveals that the phrase occurs at least 42 times, here are some highlights:

- "But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark" (Genesis 8:1)
- "But God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him'" (Genesis 17:9)
- "But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, For He will receive me" (Psalm 49:15)
- "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (Luke 5:21c)

Finally, the text from Saint Peter's address in the reading today:

- "But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

Jesus is the Capstone of the "but God" statements in the Bible! But for God's plan of salvation through Jesus' sacrifice once and forever (Hebrews 10:12) all of us would be destined to an eternity apart from God because of the necessity of the payment of our sin debt to our Holy God (Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, Matthew 7:19). Let's pause for a moment and reflect upon some of the "but God" moments that have occurred in our own lives.

For our context, this passage in the book of Acts brings an important implication of the truth of "but God" to our lives. One theological truth is that Jesus' death was not an accident, but was the definite plan of God. If God was able to use this ultimate injustice to bring about our salvation, isn't it possible that He could use unresolved and unjust circumstances in our own lives for his redemptive purposes? We have a hard time trusting that God can work all things together for good, but this is a shining example of God's great ability to turn evil on its head and gain the victory. Let us pray for God to do this in our own confusing circumstances and insert the mentality of "but God" into our perspective.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

We conclude the study notes for today with the reading from 1 Peter. Peter addressed some of the same points that we discussed earlier in his address in the Book of Acts.

Second Reading:

17 If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you 21 who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:17-21)

First, Peter emphasized the great and eternal value of Jesus' blood that He shed for us. He said that we ought to guard our behavior carefully (v. 17) because of the great price that Jesus paid for us through His blood. God paid a ransom for us (v. 17, "redeemed"), and that price was His Son Jesus. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Second, Peter affirmed the eternality and glory of Jesus as the One "foreknown before the foundation of the world" (v. 20a) who made a brief, physical appearance on earth in order to bring us hope through His resurrection from the dead (v. 20). Finally, Peter emphasized the necessity of faith for salvation (v. 21). While the Jews exercised faith through the Old Testament sacrificial system, this verse points out the New Testament understanding of that system: faith is the basis for reconciliation and relationship with God. As we saw in the Gospel reading today with the 2 men on the road to Emmaus, even though glimpses of the

way to God had been provided to the Jews through the prophetic Scriptures, it took Jesus to explain it to them for them to be able to understand. The Jewish sacrificial system prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary. Jesus was the Passover Lamb, the one slain since before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). In the same way that the disciples of Jesus didn't understand salvation through His sacrifice, we too require the explanation found in the New Testament for us to discover the only means of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

What does all of this mean to you as you walk with Jesus throughout your daily lives? First, but for God we would still be in our sins and the way to God would be closed. If we live with the truths of God in mind as we face challenges, we can find delight in them to know that God will work all things together for our good (Romans 8:28). Second, we must remember that even if men that spent several years with Jesus, or the Prophets themselves, didn't immediately understand God's plan of salvation through Jesus we too must not expect to become biblical scholars without study and leaning upon the wisdom of God through the inspired Scriptures. God calls us to study the Bible, for it is "precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, there a little (Isaiah 28:10). It's okay if we don't instantaneously comprehend deep insights and chiastic structures in the Bible! It's not that we lack information, but that we need to rely upon the Holy Spirit for interpretation and application. Jesus said, "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come" (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit was the blessing that flowed out from God at Pentecost, a gift that put us in a privileged position above the Prophets, and even the angels (1 Peter 1:12).

Reflection Questions

1. We noted in the reading from the Book of Acts Peter's use of the phrase "but God" and followed up with a challenge to examine your life to recall some of your "but God" moments. We wish to extend this challenge to you by asking you to pray that God would bring one or two of these circumstances back to your memory. Share this testimony with someone who you sense may need your testimony of how God worked in your life.

2. Spend some time thanking Jesus for being the Lamb of God, redeeming you with His precious blood. What do you think would be a proper personal response to St. Peter's challenge to "conduct yourselves in fear" ("fear" meaning sober reverence for what has been done on your behalf)?

For Further Study

For those that are on Facebook, consider posting a paragraph on the Christians for Christ Facebook page regarding one of your "but God" moments. You can find this site online at:

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-23-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. Since this Sunday marks the first week after the celebration of Easter, the readings for today are focused upon the activities that occurred immediately after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Since the grave could not hold Jesus, if we have faith in Him we can trust that someday we too will rise from the dead with an incorruptible body. This week we are beginning with the Gospel lesson in order to accentuate some of the themes that emerged from the Saint John's message. Then we will move onto the first reading from the Book of Acts and conclude with the second from First Peter, a study that will continue for the next several weeks.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

from the dead.

Gospel Reading:

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

The focus of the reading was Thomas' doubt and then his subsequent faith upon physically experiencing the resurrected Christ. As we saw in the second reading, Jesus proclaimed a blessing upon those that have not seen but yet have believed "v. 27d-e." The key point of the passage though was stated in the last two verses. "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" vv. 30-31).

Several other points can be drawn from the text, First, notice that Jesus entered the room without knocking, without even opening the door; He just walked right through the wall! Talk about a grand entrance, and it's no wonder the disciples were scared. The point is that Jesus had supernatural powers in His new, resurrected and glorified body. Second, although Jesus' resurrection body was different in it's capabilities, there was a one to one correspondence between Jesus' body that was crucified and laid in the grave and His resurrected body. Jesus' appearance to the disciples in His resurrection body served as a foretaste of the body that all believers will receive one day when Jesus returns. Jesus will be forever recognizable by the scars given to Him during His earthly lifetime. Though we will never be God, we will become **like** Him. Saint John said, "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2b). Third, since it was before the sending of the Holy Spirit the disciples were "in fear of the Jews" (v.19c). This contrasted

greatly with what we read about the disciples and first believers in the first reading. Though we may fear those that persecute us, we, like the early Church, have the Holy Spirit of God living in us to give us boldness and hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3). Finally, Jesus was gentle with Thomas even though he expressed doubt among circumstances that we may consider compelling for him to believe. Since Jesus treated Thomas with such concern even though he doubted Him, we can be sure that Jesus walks with us through seasons of our own doubt.

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Chapter 2 of the Book of Acts. This Book was written by Luke, a physician and close companion of Saint Paul, sort of as a continuation of the Gospel by his name. Luke said in the opening chapter of Acts, "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen" (Acts 1:1-2). When Doctor Luke said, "the first account," he was referring to the Gospel of Luke that he addressed to a certain man named Theophilus. Luke's "orderly account" (Luke 1:3) presented in his Gospel record included exact details concerning the birth and life of Jesus and continued all the way to Jesus' ascension to heaven (Luke 24:51). The Book of Acts retraces just a bit back to the point where Jesus promised He would soon send the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). The overall timeframe of the events recorded in Acts was from the beginning of the disciples' apostolic ministry to the world and concluding with Paul's arrest and subsequent journey to Rome for his trial.

A lot had happened by the time we reach the end of chapter 2 where we pick up with today's reading. Jesus had already been taken up to heaven in a cloud (Acts 1:9). Afterwards, Peter addressed a gathering of about 120 believers (Acts 1:15) with the purpose of telling how Judas' betrayal of Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies and then appointing the traitor's replacement. Lots were cast and Matthias was chosen to hold the twelfth seat (v. 26). The Day of Pentecost had come and the promised gift of the person of the Holy Spirit had been sent (2:1-3). This event launched the full-scale ministry of the apostles to the Jews, which later extended to the Gentiles and the whole world. As you read the text try to imagine the whirlwind of events that had just happened.

First Reading:

42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and

signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

The Church at this point was largely communal, and marked by the lavish outworking of God through spiritual gifts and miracles. Though the disciples (except for John) had previously fled from Jesus during his arrest now they ministered with magnificent boldness and power through the Spirit of Jesus that lived inside of them (1 Peter 1:11). First, note that their worship continued in the temple, which was the former site of persecution by the same people that had put Jesus to death on the cross. Peter said that they "had favor with all the people" (v. 47a). Second, the number of believers began to expand exponentially, from just 11 to 3,000 in a very short time. "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (v.47b). Third, the Church began the regular celebration of communion to remember Jesus (v. 46b). Each time we take communion we join into the same celebration held by this first group of Jesus' believers. Finally, there was a special emphasis placed upon the ministries of preaching (prophecy), fellowship, communion, prayer and giving. Peter said, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (v. 42).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we transition to the second reading, review in your mind the ministries that marked the Early Church: Preaching, fellowship, communion, prayer, and giving. Can you see how the Church has incorporated all of these foundational elements into each worship service?

The second reading is from the Epistle of First Peter where Saint Peter addressed groups of believers that were dispersed throughout Asia Minor who were undergoing persecution and losing hope in the promises of Christ. Peter addressed the book to "those who [were] elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (First Peter 1:1). Peter told them, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you" (4:12). Peter told them that they were sharing in the sufferings of Jesus Christ so that when Jesus returned they may "rejoice with exultation" (v. 13).

At the time of this writing, many in the world are suffering for their testimony of Jesus Christ. In fact, many report that there is currently more persecution happening to Christians around the world than has existed at any time since Jesus began the Church. Saint Paul warned, "evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). This reality was being lived out in the church at Asia Minor and is not much different from what is being experienced by Christians all around the world today. This reading marks the beginning of a study of 1 Peter that will continue for the next several weeks.

Second Reading:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, 7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 8 and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, 9 obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Peter said that God had caused believers to be "**born again** to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (v. 3b, emphasis added). The word "again" in the original is a different word than what Jesus used in His discussion with Nicodemus in John 3:3 when He said, "You must be born again (or from above, depending upon your Bible version)." In John's Gospel Jesus' used a different word to create a word play providing a dual meaning of both "again" and "from above." Peter on the other hand used a word that specifically meant "again." Peter said in effect that a believer is born spiritually (a second type of birth) through God's great mercy to "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (v. 3b).

Why all the fuss about the meaning of a particular word? Peter's point was that through the evidence of a person's spiritual birth a person has hope through the reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. By this time (~ mid-60's AD), the Church had reached the point that many were not direct witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Peter said, "though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls" (vv. 8-9). Peter said that although the people whom he addressed weren't eyewitnesses of Jesus, they still had the hope that Jesus' resurrection provided to all believers. Just because they experiencing persecution and weren't of the class of super apostles (see 2 Corinthians 11:5), they weren't inferior Christians (v. 6).

An important contrast exists between the Gospel lesson and the first reading from the Book of Acts. Did you notice that before the Holy Spirit was given that the disciples were fearful, then after the Holy Spirit came (Acts 2) they were ministering with a new sense of fervor? The presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life is what makes the difference between the cowering disciples and the bold disciples. Same people, different power source. Before, all they had was their will power – and as we know, it wasn't enough to keep them faithful to Jesus as He went to Calvary. However, now they had the presence of God's Spirit Himself living inside of them and giving them a new strength that went beyond their own strength.

I experienced something similar in terms of this contrast through an event that happened to me some years ago. Before I had placed my faith in Jesus Christ, I was striving to be a good, moral person. I knew right from wrong and tried hard to live up to the biblical standards that I heard about in Sunday Mass each week. However, I found that I did not have the strength to say no to the world's ways, even when I knew it was wrong. I remember a turning point occurred when God gave me the power to say not in a certain situation when a friend was attempting to use me to participate in some shady dealings. While I technically wasn't doing anything wrong, he was – and wanted me to join in with him. Each time I had joined him in the past I had felt horrible about it, but I didn't have the power to tell him no. That was until I gave my life to Jesus Christ, and God's power came into my life through the Holy Spirit living inside of me. On a particular evening God orchestrated a series of events through which I finally found the power to tell my friend no.

How about you? Meditate for a moment about a time when you felt torn between choosing to do something for God versus something that the world called you to do. How did you deal with the tension? Regardless of what you chose, can you look back on this particular event in your life and see how God could have orchestrated these circumstances in order to reveal His glory to you?

Reflection Questions

1. Mother Teresa, when confronted with the suffering of millions of people in Calcutta expressed doubts during certain seasons of her life. Have you ever experienced a season of doubt during your Christian life? How did you deal with it? In light of what you studied in the Book of Acts, how can you tap into God's power source to deal with such events during the future?

2. We challenge you during the upcoming week to make a commitment to pray. Pray specifically that God would reveal to you one way in which you can testify to or pray for a person whom you sense is experiencing doubts in their faith. Write their name on a card and commit to pray for them at a certain time at least once this week. Second, if you are so bold, reach out to this person and let them know that you have been praying for them.

Mass-Study-Notes-for-Sunday_04-23-2017.pdfDownload

Sunday Mass Study Notes for April 16, 2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Easter Sunday. This week you will hear a story about a death-defying airplane trip that prompted me to ponder ultimate questions of life. This week's readings answer some of the most important questions that humans have ever asked about eternal life. The first reading is a message from Saint Peter that explains the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection that has been provided for all humankind. The second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Colossians provides the implications of what believing in Jesus looks like in the life of the believer. Then we conclude with the glorious story of Jesus' resurrection from the Gospel of Saint John.

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

When I was younger, I didn't really think much about dying. That changed one day when I was flying

with my twin brother into an airport southwest of Indianapolis to make a fuel stop on our way to Houston. This was during a time in my life when I did not sense any sort of close communion with God even though I attended Mass each week. The weather this particular day was challenging and we had delayed our departure from my home airport in Pontiac, Michigan because of thunderstorms. After we left Pontiac, we were in an out of the clouds all the way down to Terre Haute. The stress of determining whether to fly, when to leave, and then flying under instrument flight procedures in the clouds without an autopilot on my first airplane left me feeling very frazzled as I approached the navigational fix at which I would commence the landing procedure. Complicating the matter was that the only instrument approach procedure that made sense that day because of the wind conditions was something known as a "back course" approach, meaning that the indicator needles in the navigation instruments had to be interpreted backwards from their normal readings. In other words, left was right and right was left. (In pilot talk it was a localizer back course approach). As we descended during the approach I was reaching the point of mental exhaustion when my brother suddenly screamed, "We seem to be awfully low Jim!" As I looked up from my instruments I realized that after I crossed the final approach fix I had continued to descend to a level which put us only about a hundred feet above the sequenced flashing landing lights (known as rabbits). I quickly realized my mistake, added power and climbed up to avoid descending further into the lights and terrain below. After this happened it hit me, we could have died! From that day forward, I began to think about dying and what was beyond my time on earth. Would I go to heaven or hell? How good did I have to be to get into heaven? How does a person get to heaven? We will answer those questions later in the study today.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

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First Reading:

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

Peter said quite an earful; his message encapsulated almost the entirety of the Gospel. He told the gentile Cornelius and his family the Good News regarding the forgiveness of sins offered to anyone who believes, Jew or Gentile alike (v. 34), through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 43). Peter, fresh from his vision of the animals coming down in the large sheet, affirmed that God was no respecter of persons; this salvation was available to everyone (vv.34 – 35). Peter provided a high-level narrative to Cornelius of his personal, eyewitness testimony concerning the events about Jesus Christ. He said Jesus was anointed by God with power (v.38), ministered to the people by healing and opposing the devil (v.39), was crucified by the Jews in Jerusalem (v.39b), was raised by God on the third day (v.40), was made visible to select witnesses after His resurrection (v.41), and provided the disciples with specific instructions regarding preaching the truth about Jesus being the divinely appointed Judge of the living and the dead (v.42). Peter confirmed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the testimony given by all of the Old Testament prophets. Finally, Peter announced the best news of all, that **anyone** who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of their sins (v.43).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

With this context in mind, let's read from Saint Paul's Letter, keeping in mind the sufficiency that we as believers have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Second Reading:

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

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

Here is another important insight from the reading. Paul said in verse 4, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory." Notice the repetition of the word "revealed." We spoke about one aspect of Christ's revelation last week in the Palm Sunday readings

when we discussed His triumphal entry to Jerusalem. However, in this reading Paul wasn't referring to Christ's exaltation as King when he road into Jerusalem on a donkey. Rather, he was referring to Jesus' Second Coming at which time He will return in glory to judge the world. As we said last week, Jesus came the first time as a humble, unblemished Lamb (Revelation 13:8). However, Jesus will return the second time as the glorious Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Revelation 5:5). He will return as the Almighty Warrior on a white horse, not a donkey (Revelation 19:11). Jesus **was revealed** as the King of the Jews when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey. He **was revealed** as the King of the universe when he rose from the dead, this is what we are celebrating today. Finally, Jesus will be revealed when He comes again in glory with all of His believers in tow, that is us, His saints (Revelation 19:14, 1 Corinthians 1:2, Acts 9:13, Acts 9:32, Acts 26:10, Romans 16:2).

As we conclude the New Testament reading and discussion, it may be helpful to rephrase the flow of thought before the first few verses (in one very long, grammatically incorrect sentence). After the three verses of the reading, a capstone statement provides my personal summary of the reason why we must set our minds on things above:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

1 Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark,

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

The narrative continued beyond what was covered in the reading:

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

Mary Magdalene believed and was the first person to see the risen Lord alive. She received confirmation that since God raised Jesus from the dead, she would one day be raised herself. We can also have assurance of salvation which leads to eternal life by trusting in what the Scripture says about how a person does make it to heaven when they die. First, God says that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). God says that because of our sin the payment we will receive without some outside intervention is death, meaning eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). In that same verse, God says that the outside intervention has been given as a free gift: Jesus' died on the cross for the payment of our sins. This good news can also be found in the famous verse that is often seen printed on cardboard signs held up at sporting events. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Saint Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). Does this sound like something that is simple to achieve? It is simple, but if it's not necessarily easy. If it were easy then everyone in the world that ever heard the Gospel would become a believer. Peter said in Acts 2:38 that we must repent of (or turn away from) our sins. This means that we have to come to an agreement with God about our sins, and recognize them for what they are, deadly (Romans 6:21). The Bible says that even one single sin would keep us from entering heaven – forever (James 2:10). So repentance of sin, turning away from the destructive forces that once ruled our lives, is an on-going part of exercising faith in Jesus. One preacher said, "If your faith hasn't changed you, it

probably hasn't saved you." This is not to imply that works are necessary for salvation. But it is to say that true faith is manifested in our lives being oriented around the values that Christ had, because He is our life (Colossians 3:4). Jesus' death and resurrection were given as a gift to all, to cover our sin and provide us with the right to be accepted into heaven. As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday, keep in mind the simplicity of this Gospel message that Jesus gave to the world.

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

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

We pray that you have a very happy Easter celebration!

Reflection Questions

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for April 9, 2017

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

Procession of the Palms:

The Gospel reading of the procession of the palms is from Matthew 21. This is Saint Matthew's telling of the preparation and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. As you read, imagine that you were a believing Jew among the crowd and spread your own palm branches on the road for the King.

1 When they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and immediately he will send them." 4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 5 "SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, 'BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE, AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.'" 6 The disciples went and did just as Jesus had instructed them, 7 and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their coats on them; and He sat on the coats. 8 Most of the crowd spread their coats in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in the road. 9 The crowds going ahead of Him, and those who followed, were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" 10 When He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" 11 And the crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus, from

Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11)

The time around Passover was a season of messianic expectancy, and there were many pilgrims in the city for the celebration. Certainly, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead that we read last week would have played into His sudden popularity and for the people's desire to see Him. In messianic form, Jesus directed His disciples with exact precision, and when they followed His orders, everything worked out exactly as Jesus had said. Jesus asserted His authority over Jerusalem by riding into the city on a donkey, not a might stallion as would have been done by kings. Notice how precisely Jesus fulfilled the Prophet Zechariah's prophesy, that called for both a donkey and the colt of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Evidently, according to Saint Matthew's narrative, Jesus rode on the colt and the donkey (it's mother) walked alongside.

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

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

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

This Sunday as we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entrance in Jerusalem at His First Advent, we can celebrate that we are among those that did, in a sense, welcome Jesus to Jerusalem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We can celebrate that we are not among those who missed His first coming. As we hold our palms, we can proudly celebrate our belief that King Jesus will one day return to the

earth he created. In our waving of the palms, we can lift them up as white flags of surrender to the King who deserves our whole lives.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The Old Testament reading at the Mass is from Isaiah 50. We see that God judged Israel's sinfulness, but then also provided a way for salvation in this prediction of the Messiah.

First Reading:

1 Thus says the LORD, "Where is the certificate of divorce By which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, And for your transgressions your mother was sent away. 2 Why was there no man when I came? When I called, why was there none to answer? Is My hand so short that it cannot ransom? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, I dry up the sea with My rebuke, I make the rivers a wilderness; Their fish stink for lack of water And die of thirst. 3 I clothe the heavens with blackness And make sackcloth their covering." 4 The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple. 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them. 10 Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. 11 Behold, all you who kindle a fire, Who encircle yourselves with firebrands, Walk in the light of your fire And among the brands you have set ablaze. This you will have from My hand: you will lie down in torment. (Isaiah 50:1-11)

The first section talks about God's discipline on the northern tribes of Israel (verses1-3). The picture that these verse paint is one of temporarily setting aside this group of God's chosen people until they come to believe in God's sending of the Messiah. The prophecy shifts to the personalization of the Messiah's suffering, which is known as Good Friday (verses 4-9). The proper response is seen in verse 10: "Who is among you that fears the LORD, That obeys the voice of His servant, That walks in darkness and has no light? **Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God**." This is the crux of the matter that all people will have to resolve. In what or in whom do we trust? Our own fires that we ourselves kindle or the fire that God sets in our heart to believe in Jesus the Messiah?

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will read about the fulfillment of the suffering of God's servant (Is. 50:6 "scourged" and "spat upon") in great detail. The predicted suffering from Isaiah is also the backdrop for the New Testament reading, which was probably sung as a hymn in the early Church about the great lengths that Jesus went to in order to fulfill the Father's plan for our salvation.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2:6-11 where we learn about how Jesus came the first time as a humble Servant.

Second Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

14 Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What are you willing to give me to betray Him to you?" And they weighed out thirty pieces of silver to him. 16 From then on he began looking for a good opportunity to betray Jesus. 17 Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?" 18 And He said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, "My time is near; I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples."'" 19 The disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover. 20 Now when evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve disciples. 21 As they were eating, He said, "Truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me." 22 Being deeply grieved, they each one began to say to Him, "Surely not I, Lord?" 23 And He answered, "He who dipped his hand with Me in the bowl is the one who will betray Me. 24 "The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to

that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born." 25 And Judas, who was betraying Him, said, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself." 26 While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." 27 And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; 28 for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. 29 "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." 30 After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.' 32 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." 33 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." 34 Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." 35 Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too. 36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. 38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." 39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will." 40 And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? 41 "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." 42 He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." 43 Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. 44 And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. 45 Then He came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" 47 While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, who came from the chief priests and elders of the people. 48 Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him." 49 Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. 50 And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. 53 "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 "How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?" 55 At that time Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. 56 "But all this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures of the prophets." Then all the disciples left Him and fled. 57 Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. 58 But Peter was following Him at

a distance as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and entered in, and sat down with the officers to see the outcome. 59 Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, so that they might put Him to death. 60 They did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, 61 and said, "This man stated, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'" 62 The high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?" 63 But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN." 65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; 66 what do you think?" They answered, "He deserves death!" 67 Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, 68 and said, "Prophesy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?" 69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." 70 But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about." 71 When he had gone out to the gateway, another servant-girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 And again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man." 73 A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; for even the way you talk gives you away." 74 Then he began to curse and swear, "I do not know the man!" And immediately a rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, "Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. 1 Now when morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus to put Him to death; 2 and they bound Him, and led Him away and delivered Him to Pilate the governor. 3 Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" 5 And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself. 6 The chief priests took the pieces of silver and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the temple treasury, since it is the price of blood." 7 And they conferred together and with the money bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers. 8 For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. 9 Then that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "AND THEY TOOK THE THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER, THE PRICE OF THE ONE WHOSE PRICE HAD BEEN SET by the sons of Israel; 10 AND THEY GAVE THEM FOR THE POTTER'S FIELD, AS THE LORD DIRECTED ME." 11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said to him, "It is as you say." 12 And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He did not answer. 13 Then Pilate said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" 14 And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed. 15 Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the people any one prisoner whom they wanted. 16 At that time they were holding a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. 17 So when the people gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" 18 For he knew

that because of envy they had handed Him over. 19 While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him a message, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." 20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. 21 But the governor said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" 23 And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!" 24 When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see to that yourselves." 25 And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!" 26 Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified. 27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. 28 They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. 29 And after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they knelt down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. 31 After they had mocked Him, they took the scarlet robe off Him and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him. 32 As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Place of a Skull, 34 they gave Him wine to drink mixed with gall; and after tasting it, He was unwilling to drink. 35 And when they had crucified Him, they divided up His garments among themselves by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they began to keep watch over Him there. 37 And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." 38 At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. 39 And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him and saying, 42 "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him. 43 "HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET GOD RESCUE Him now, IF HE DELIGHTS IN HIM; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 The robbers who had been crucified with Him were also insulting Him with the same words. 45 Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. 46 About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?" 47 And some of those who were standing there, when they heard it, began saying, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 Immediately one of them ran, and taking a sponge, he filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink. 49 But the rest of them said, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to save Him." 50 And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very

frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" 55 Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to Him. 56 Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. 57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. 58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. 61 And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. 62 Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, 63 and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' 64 "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." 66 And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (Matthew 26:14 – 27:66)

Let us pray. Dear God, as we move forward to the Holy Week, please pray that many would hear the message of the good news of the Gospel. Please pray that their hearts would be opened for them to be able to receive the gift of Jesus' sacrifice He made for them. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Reflection Questions

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

The question is, will we let Him do this good work in us, or will we reject Him, as the people did before Pilate, not recognizing His rightful place in our lives?

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

3. All of the readings from this week portray a running contrast between Jesus' first coming and His second coming. His first Advent already came, but His second coming is yet to happen. How can

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bowing your knee to King Jesus now prepare you for the Second coming?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for April 2, 2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a vision from the Prophet Ezekiel about the future resurrection of the people of Israel. Then we move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans and then conclude with the chronicle of Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel Chapter 37. Here Ezekiel was given a prophecy concerning the future restoration of the Nation of Israel. This was one of a series of visions that God gave to Ezekiel the night before the messenger came to him with the news that Jerusalem had been destroyed (Ezekiel 21). Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus made a tiny down payment on this promised restoration of Israel through the raising of Lazarus. As we study the text, it's important to be diligent to distinguish between God's promises to Israel versus those made to the people of God as a whole. Saint Paul explains God's future plan for Israel in Romans Chapter 11. It's also important to recognize how portions of the prophecy have already been fulfilled by the time we

are reading this versus what is yet to be fulfilled – through both Israel and the Church. Though the Gentiles have been "ingrafted" into God's kingdom (Romans 11:17), they are distinct from His Chosen People the Jews. Read the text, noting that we included the first eleven verses for context, as our readers note that we are prone to doing!

First Reading:

1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. 2 He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." 4 Again He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' 5 "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. 6 'I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.'" 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life."'" 10 So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. 11 Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' 12 "Therefore prophesy and say to them, '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. 13 "Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. 14 "I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it," declares the LORD.'" (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

God promised to restore the spiritually dead Israel to life through the sending of His Holy Spirit (v.14). We can say that this prophecy was at least partially fulfilled during several different events, but the final fulfillment will not happen until Daniel's fortieth Week during the end times. First, it was partially fulfilled during the times of the Old Testament when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. Second, the prophecy was partially fulfilled when Jesus Himself entered the temple (Mark 11:15). Third, the prophecy was partially fulfilled after Jesus' death and immediate entrance into heaven. We read from the Gospel of Saint Matthew:

51 And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; 53 and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:51-53).

Only Saint Matthew made mention of the miraculous mini-resurrection that occurred immediately after Jesus' death. Imagine the appearance of a group of saints rising from the graves and walking about the City of God (Jerusalem)? These were not like the walking dead from the popular horror movies of our day, these were the "walking living" prophesied by the Prophet Ezekiel!

Continuing on the partial fulfillments of Ezekiel's prophesy, the fourth way in which it was fulfilled was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit of God was poured out onto the people in Acts 2:1-4. This was also the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy regarding the sending of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-29).

Taking into consideration the whole council of Scripture, the verses in Ezekiel and all of the other verses put together indicate that not only will Israel experience a spiritual awakening in the future, they, along with all of the believers in God the Messiah, will also experience a physical resurrection. In regards to the Nation of Israel, Ezekiel indicated that God would complete His divine plan through a future restoration of a national Israel. What form this will take, and whether the current re-gathering that is already happening will mature into final embodiment of what God has predicted is unknown.

As believers, we live with the hope of this resurrection, and this was the hope of which Paul spoke in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 4. There Paul said, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus" (1Thessalonians 4:14). He continued, "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" (vv. 16-17). Like what the saints experienced during their physical resurrection in Jerusalem immediately after Jesus gave His life for them, we too will experience resurrection. Later in the Gospel message we will see another of the types of "first fruits" of resurrection through Jesus raising of Lazarus. Lazarus rising from the dead was different from what is promised to him and all believers because he died a second physical death (Hebrews 9:27).

The importance of the resurrection prophesied in Ezekiel is multidimensional. For one, it shows God's power over death. Humans have devised a lot of ways to defeat common enemies that prematurely take physical life, but we have yet to find a cure for death. Jesus has conquered the grave, which shows that He is powerful enough to handle all the lesser stresses that we face (Eph. 1:18-20). I sometimes joke with people that if your problems require resurrection power or less, God's got you covered. Anything above that, though, and you're out of luck. Second, the bodily resurrection of the saints allows us to live with an eternal perspective. This gives us the impetus for a counter-cultural lifestyle that is able to give ourselves away for higher purposes, because we know that this life is not all there is. Third, if we have said good-bye to loved ones in the Lord, the resurrection of the saints comforts us that death has lost its victory and sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). We will see our loved ones again in the Lord's presence.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Chapter 8 of Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In this section Paul explained how only the spiritual man can please God, "because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (vv. 7-8)." We included the first seven verses in order to provide the context.

Second Reading:

1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8:1-11)

Paul encouraged the Roman believers by telling them that they are not living in the flesh since (and if) the Holy Spirit of Christ lives in them (v.9). He said that those "in the flesh," meaning those on the broad road of destruction (Matthew 7:13), cannot please God; no matter how hard they try. In contrast, since the believer is born from above (John 3:3), the Holy Spirit gives them spiritual life in the present time and in the future will give them eternal, physical life (v.11). Paul said about the latter, "He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (v.11b). This is a powerful hope given to us by God. We have an eternal way of life through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The second reading dovetails very nicely into the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 11 covering the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. As we noted in the first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, Lazarus' physical resurrection is a kind of first glimpse of what will happen to all believers in the literal, physical resurrection which is coming at the end of this age. Saint Paul said the following about this in 1 Corinthians 15:

50 Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will

all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. (1 Corinthians 15:50-54)

The context of the Gospel lesson was during the time of the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22). Jesus had just finished making several bold claims about his identity as God in the flesh. He said, "I and the Father are One" (v.30). Because of this statement the Pharisees once again tried to stone Him, but again he evidently hid Himself from them and "escaped from their hands" (v.39b). Next Jesus travelled to Bethabara (John 10:40, John 1:28) where many came to believe in him (John 10:42). As you read the text try to see it in light of the fact that Jesus knew that He would die at the hands of His own people (John 18:4), an event that occurred just over a week after the time He heard the news about Lazarus.

Gospel Reading:

*1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." 4 But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was. 7 Then after this He *said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples *said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 This He said, and after that He *said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep." 12 The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. 14 So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." 16 Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him." 17 So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. 20 Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. 21 Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 "Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." 23 Jesus *said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha *said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She *said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into*

*the world." 28 When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. 31 Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They *said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?" 38 So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone." Martha, the sister of the deceased, *said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" 41 So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 "I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." 43 When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." 44 The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." 45 Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. (John 11:1-45)*

Did you notice the repeating of certain key phrases throughout the text? Verses 17 – 39 follow a literary structure known as a "chiasm" which the author used in order to focus attention to a central portion of the text. The pattern is one of repeating or contrasting ideas on either side of a central verse that indicates the main focus of the author. Here the pattern picks up in verse 17 and 39. "So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days," (v.17, emphasis added) and "Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, 'Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days'" (v.39, emphasis added). A second phrase repeats in verses 21 and 32. "**Martha** then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died," (v. 21, emphasis added) and "Therefore, when **Mary** came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died'" (v.32, emphasis added). Notice that both Martha and Mary independently confirmed their belief that Jesus had the power to prevent Lazarus from dying from his sickness. The final repeating pattern is in verses 20 and 29 in which first Martha went to meet Jesus (v.21) and then Mary (v.29). The literary structure finally points to the main focus of the verses sandwiched between those containing repeating or contrasting ideas. This is found in verses 25 – 26: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"

The central passages from the chiasm above, taken with Jesus' opening statement in verse 4, illuminate the central truth in the Gospel lesson. "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness

is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, **so that the Son of God may be glorified by it**'" (v.4). And again, "Jesus said to her, '**I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?'"** (vv. 25-26). When Jesus said "I am" He made a powerful claim of divinity. In Chapter 10 Jesus repeated this phrase no less than five times which led to John saying, "There was again division among the Jews because of these words " (John 10:19). The bottom line is this. The purpose of Jesus' healing of Lazarus was for Jesus to glorify Himself as God (I am) because He is the only bearer of eternal life for all who believe.

Now let's look at some other details that emerge from the text. As Jesus approached the tomb, Martha warned Jesus that since Lazarus had been dead for four days there would be a stench. It's highly likely that she had either already smelled a dead body before, or possibly even smelled the odor that was coming out of Lazarus tomb. Regardless of the case, Martha showed concern for Jesus even though she desired for Him to do something about Lazarus. We don't know whether either Mary or Martha believed Jesus could (or would) physically raise Lazarus from the dead. Martha testified that she believed Ezekiel's prophesy regarding the resurrection that we saw in the first reading. She said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (v.25).

Have you ever smelled the horrible stench of death? If you have, you would understand the reason for Martha's concern for Jesus in approaching Lazarus' tomb. I experienced the smell of death many years ago in my hometown, which is something that I have never forgotten. I remember one particular weekend when a car accident resulted in two deaths. Afterwards the fire department came and washed down the scene in an attempt to erase some of the carnage, and then the cars were towed to the local auto garage. Curiosity may have killed the cat but I just had to visit the auto garage parking lot to inspect the carnage. As I approached the crumpled up car and was still a good distance away I noticed a very strange odor. As I got closer, I smelled one of the most horrible odors that I had ever smelled in my life up to that point, and I was born on a farm with three brothers! It was so bad that I asked myself, what was I thinking by coming over here to see the wreckage? Now over 30 years later I can still remember the stench. Martha knew about this as well, that the smell of death was so bad that she needed to warn Jesus. The importance of this point for our daily lives is to remind us of Christ's power over not only the stench of death (which is very real), but also the consequences of death itself. Praise be to God!

The text said that Jesus was **deeply moved** with concern for Lazarus and his sisters. John said so twice in the text (verses 33 and 38). This story contains the shortest verse in the Bible, verse 35, "Jesus wept." Of course, the verse markings were added to the Bible much later than the original writing. However, clearly John's recording of Jesus' response to his friends' Mary, Martha and Lazarus is extremely significant. If Jesus, God in the flesh, Immanuel, meaning "God with us" wept over the death of a single friend, how much more does God grieve over *our* pain, suffering and eventual death?

What happened next probably astounded them beyond words. When Jesus called to Lazarus from the tomb, he emerged alive as a living testimony to God's power over death. Evidently, many other Jews

were watching and because of this miracle they too came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (v.44). What a glorious celebration they must have had. The sisters' terrible suffering turned into immense joy as Lazarus was not only brought back to life but also healed from the condition which resulted in his death in the first place.

Reflection Questions

1. The main point of the story of Lazarus' was to show this central truth that Jesus declared about Himself:

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus still declares this truth about Himself and asks the question to you. Do you believe this? If so, what difference does this make in your life? If not, what is holding you back from believing His resurrection power?

2. The second reading from Romans 8 sets up a sharp contrast between living according to the flesh or living according the Spirit. Turn back to that and **underline** the words/phrases that describe the flesh and **circle** the words/phrases that describe the Spirit. Which of these words/phrases most describe your present condition? Which words/phrases would you like to be descriptive of you? Talk to God about this desire.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-26-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of First Samuel where we will see how God used Samuel to select David as the King of Israel. Then we will move onto Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and finally close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John Chapter 9 where Jesus miraculously heals a blind man. I also share a story about how God "unblinded" my eyes to be able to understand the Bible.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Samuel 16 and records the story of how the Prophet Samuel followed God's instructions in order to select the second King of Israel to replace King Saul whom God had rejected. Immediately after Saul was ordained king he began disobeying very clear and direct orders from God provided to him by Samuel. In Chapter 15 Samuel gave Saul clear prophesy from the LORD which said "Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1Samuel 15:3). Saul gathered his troops together and followed God's command *except* for some rather large details. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (v. 9). Oops. Because of this (and the other times Saul disobeyed) God took the kingdom away from him saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands" (v.11a). The text continued, "And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night" (v.11b). So Samuel began to make his search for the new king by following God's order to go to Jesse who was David's father. Let's read the text along with all of the other verses surrounding the reading (verses 1-13) in order to understand the entire context.

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First Reading:

1 Now the LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons." 2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' 3 You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you." 4 So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, "Do you come in peace?" 5 He said, "In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. 6 When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before Him." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." 9 Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'The LORD has not chosen this one either." 10 Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." 11 And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are these all the children?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." 12 So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:1-13)

It's interesting that Samuel was afraid of King Saul since even the elders of the city were afraid of him (v. 4). However, the text recorded not only the story and circumstantial details of the search for the future king but also Samuel's thoughts (v.2). We know of course that God knows all of the secret thoughts of our hearts (Psalm 44:21) and this became even clearer by what we saw in verse 7. "[F]or God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v.7c-ff). God directed the Prophet not to rely upon the outward appearance of the Sons of Jesse; rather he was to wait for God's confirmation. Regardless of his feelings, Samuel followed God's directions exactly and went to David's hometown of Bethlehem.

First, Samuel surveyed the eldest son; the one whom one may think would be the logical choice from among the large clan of Jesse's sons. Eliab passed before him and Samuel didn't receive any confirmation from God. He proceeded on down the line, next with Abinadab, then with Shammah, and down the line with the brothers. Nevertheless, God did not confirm any of them, so Samuel asked Jesse if there were any more brothers. Jesse then sent for his youngest son David (v. 11). The writer of this Scripture then made an interesting observation. After being cautioned not to look on the sons' outward appearance the writer said immediately upon seeing David, "Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance (v. 12b)! Next, the LORD spoke to Samuel. How

this was done we are not told. He directed Samuel to annoint David as king (v.12c-ff). So Samuel followed God's command and anointed David as the new King of Israel (v.13a).

The New Testament Bible records that King David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). What does it mean to be a person after God's own heart? First, the reading said, "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (v. 13b). God empowers believers through His Holy Spirit Who indwells everyone that has been born from above (John 3:3). Second, we must submit ourselves to the Lord by being obedient to Him (James 4:7). One of the main stumbling stones that we may have in submission to God is pride. Saint Peter said, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5). Finally, we must develop a love for the Word of God. King David said the following about this in the Book of Psalms. "I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalms 119:47-48).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading today is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, insert your name in place of the "you" in the second word of verse 8, and rephrase it like this. "For Jim, who was formerly in darkness . . . .

Second Reading:

8 for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light 9 (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), 10 trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; 12 for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. 13 But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. 14 For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you." (Ephesians 5:8-14)

Paul said that those who were blind are now able to see (v.8). Believers are "children of light" (v.8) as contrasted with children of darkness (or children of the devil) that we will read about in the Gospel lesson. God's children exhibit clear attributes and behaviors that reveal their "light relationship" with their Father God. This is in contrast to the children of darkness who express themselves, many times without even knowing it, as children of the devil. Children of the light express "goodness and righteousness and truth" (v.9), try "to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (v.10), "do not participate in unfruitful deeds of darkness" but instead work to "expose them" (v.11). God, who is the light, exposes everything, for nothing can be hidden from Him (v.13). When we come to a point where we believe and agree with what God says about sin then we have followed God's admonition to awaken from our spiritual darkness so that the light of the Word of God may enable God to launch us on a path of growing in love for and knowledge of Him (4.14).

What if we cannot read the Bible and understand what it means, or if we don't have a desire to even

attempt to study it? This week I was contemplating the subject of understanding and coming to the point of loving God's Word. I remember that for the first 35 years of my life, I had an almost impossible time understanding the Bible, this included the New Testament – the Old Testament was a lost cause for me. In fact, when I decided almost 20 years ago to begin reading the Bible I became angry while reading the Old Testament. I thought that since Jesus was eternal that it would be easy for me to locate Him there in the Old Testament. It just didn't make any sense to me, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate. Something had to happen in order to bring about a change or I felt like I was going to throw it away and just quit. What made the difference for me? It wasn't a magical, one-time event, but the change came as a series of impressions I got while I was praying over the course of about a month long period. I had always prayed to God but at some point while reading in the New Testament, I came to the point where I prayed something like this, again, over a period of several weeks. I told God that I believed that I was a sinner (Romans 3:23) and I deserved punishment for sin (Romans 6:23). I told Him that I believed that Jesus was the only way to heaven (John 14:6) and that I needed His Spirit (John 3:3) to help me to fix the mess that I had made of my life. After a long period of praying to God about this, as well as talking to a few other people about it, I had an eerie encounter with Jesus late one night in my bedroom. In those days, I was living in an upscale condominium in a large city surrounded by the nightlife only a few blocks up Main Street, but I had never felt more alone. I turned off all of the lights and closed the door to my bedroom to pray in silence while laying on my bed. I was frustrated with my inability to live up to my high standards, which included trying to go to church more and party less. After I began praying I felt a tangible presence of Jesus in my dark bedroom that night. In the quiet darkness and with my eyes closed more tightly than I thought possible, I extended my hand to Him over the side of the bed. Although I didn't expect for my hand to be physically grabbed, for I would have freaked out, I sensed the strong presence of Jesus in the room with me during that instant. From that night onwards, I felt a certain presence of God in my heart, something which is hard for me to put into words. However, some days later I noticed that I could read the Bible with understanding and without getting angry, as had happened in the past.

I still have difficulty in reading a variety of books but have come to the point that I find joy in reading the Bible. Last week I downloaded the free version of Saint Augustine's Confession onto my Kindle, thinking that by reading this I would gain some important spiritual insights and become a more godly man. I'm ashamed to say that I couldn't make it through one entire page. The Elizabethan English didn't help, but I'm just not a philosopher. Sometimes we need to understand and accept our limits.

What about you, do you desire to have a deeper understanding of the Bible? I encourage you to fall on your knees in prayer and ask God to grant both the understanding and the desire. Is there something standing between you and God? The Scripture says that if you confess your sins God is faithful and just to forgive your sins and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Scripture also says that we don't have because we don't ask and sometimes when we do ask God doesn't give it to us because we ask with a false motive (James 4:2-3). Everyone, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, must be born from above (John 3:3) in a spiritual sense. If you don't feel that you have the spiritual discernment necessary to read God's Word, just ask Him for it, but ask with the

proper motive. This is a motive of desiring to turn from your sin and to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

To summarize, in the first and second reading we discussed how God "unblinded" the minds of people. First, Samuel was "unblinded" to the identity of the future King of Israel, King David. Second, Paul wrote about how believers are "unblinded" to the reality of sin and even work to expose it. As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will find a story about how Jesus healed a blind man, and this person also received spiritual eyesight through his belief in the Lord Jesus. Jesus did this miracle on the Sabbath, something that set him further at odds with the hypocritical Pharisees.

A very interesting insight regarding the topic of blindness can be found by studying the context of the Gospel lesson immediately prior in Chapter 8. Here Jesus had a very difficult conversation with His nemesis the Pharisees, a conflict that continues into the lesson today in Chapter 9. Jesus pronounced the source of their logic after they began to accuse Him and He read their minds and told them that they wanted to kill Him. When the Pharisees said that Abraham was their father (John 8:39) Jesus said, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Next, they accused Jesus of having a demon. This led to Jesus making one of His famous "I Am" statements. "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am'" (v. 58). This powerful statement was an outright testimony by Jesus to his deity (see also John 10:30). Finally, in the very last verse of Chapter 8 John wrote, "Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus **hid Himself** and went out of the temple" (v. 59, emphasis added). Notice that Jesus "hid himself," which is another way of looking at it was that he blinded the Pharisees.

As you read the lesson today, notice that Jesus' first action was to "unblind" a blind man. Think of it like this: First, he blinded the *proud* Pharisees, then he "unblinded" a *humble* blind man.

Gospel Reading:

1 As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. 2 And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5 "While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." 6 When He had said this, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came back seeing. 8 Therefore the neighbors, and those who previously saw him as a beggar, were saying, "Is not this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Others were saying, "This is he," still others were saying, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the one." 10 So they were saying to him, "How then were your eyes opened?" 11 He answered, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and

*anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight." 12 They said to him, "Where is He?" He *said, "I do not know." 13 They *brought to the Pharisees the man who was formerly blind. 14 Now it was a Sabbath on the day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. 15 Then the Pharisees also were asking him again how he received his sight. And he said to them, "He applied clay to my eyes, and I washed, and I see." 16 Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they *said to the blind man again, "What do you say about Him, since He opened your eyes?" And he said, "He is a prophet." 18 The Jews then did not believe it of him, that he had been blind and had received sight, until they called the parents of the very one who had received his sight, 19 and questioned them, saying, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? Then how does he now see?" 20 His parents answered them and said, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21 but how he now sees, we do not know; or who opened his eyes, we do not know. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." 25 He then answered, "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did He do to you? How did He open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen; why do you want to hear it again? You do not want to become His disciples too, do you?" 28 They reviled him and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29 "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where He is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "Well, here is an amazing thing, that you do not know where He is from, and yet He opened my eyes. 31 "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him. 32 "Since the beginning of time it has never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 "If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." 34 They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" So they put him out. 35 Jesus heard that they had put him out, and finding him, He said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have both seen Him, and He is the one who is talking with you." 38 And he said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped Him. 39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains. (John 9:1-41)*

A variety of key points emerged from the text. First, the disciples believed that the physical condition of the blind man was as a result of the man or his parent's sin. Jesus corrected this false believe and said that God allowed this condition so that he could be healed during this particular event! God is sovereign over every single event in history, and He designed this whole affair to show the glory of God. Second, the healed, formerly blind man became a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus and this further deepened the His opposition to the Pharisees. One has to like what the

formerly blind man said to the Pharisees, it's almost like something we could hear from a smart talking teenager! "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v.25). After the Pharisees had put him out of the temple (most likely permanently, see his parents warning in v. 22), Jesus came and presented Himself to him, telling the man that he was the Messiah (v. 35, "Son of Man"). The blind man believed, and then worshiped Him (v.38). Third, the Pharisees alluded to the fact that they held the same belief as the disciples about sin being the cause of physical infirmity (v. 24). Someone that was born blind clearly was a sinner, and sinners, according to the Pharisees, should have nothing to do with worship in the temple. They went on to say, "We know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is God-fearing and does His will, He hears him" (v. 32).

This powerful story concluded with some of the most intense teaching ever found in the New Testament. Read the conclusion again very carefully.

39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." 40 Those of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these things and said to Him, "We are not blind too, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

One time I was reading a certain spiritual book called *The Complete Green Letters* by Miles J. Stanford (Zondervan 1984). This book contains many very powerful sections that I copiously underlined and highlighted, probably adding a half a pound to the book just for the weight of it all! I found one particular page to be so moving and important that I just wrote a note at the top of the page and highlighted the note in yellow that said, "Consider this entire page highlighted!" The last three verses of the Gospel lesson are like that – consider the whole section highlighted! Jesus' statement is the essence of the Gospel message. Jesus said that He came into the world to reveal the two groups of people, those on the narrow road to life and those on the broad road to eternal separation from God (Matthew 7:13). In a spiritual sense, there are two types of people, children of God the Father and the rest, by default, children of the devil. The children of the light have spiritual vision, but the children of the darkness are spiritually blind. Saint Paul said:

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 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).

Consider this whole quotation highlighted! There is no more crucial distinction between people than whether they have spiritual vision or are spiritually blind. Jesus, through His divine grace, came to show us the difference. He calls us to repent of our sins and to believe that He is the Messiah of the universe. As we approach Easter let's all us pray that we may be God's light to a lost and dying world that badly needs the spiritual vision that can come only through the good news of the Gospel and believe in Jesus Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

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Reflection Questions

1. How have you been "unblinded" to the spiritual truths of the Bible? Consider submitting a brief testimony of to the Christians for Christ web site:
http://www.christiansforchrist.org/personal-testimonies

2. Frequently when someone brings up King David our mind automatically jumps to the story about his indiscretion with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11). In reality this is similar to what the Pharisees did to Jesus by accusing the formerly blind man of being a sinner, and glossing over the great miracle of his healing – though they said that this type of healing had never been seen before.

A. Do you catch yourself being a Pharisee overlooking the heart and focusing upon minor, outward faults in yourself and others?

B. How does knowing that God looks on the heart change how you evaluate what's important in your own life and in relationship with others.

C. Ask God to reveal to you in what areas you are glossing over God's goodness in a certain person and missing His heart for them.

3. How could you reach out to someone who hasn't experienced the miraculous gift of God's spiritual healing?

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