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

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 2-21-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **2-21-2016**. This week we open with a reading from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. Today's study reveals God's gracious plan to make Abraham the progenitor of a physical line of chosen people and the spiritual line of God-followers. The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's favored letters—that is, it's favored by many Bible readers because of the promise of joy and confidence to those who trust God wholeheartedly. The Gospel reading from Luke takes us into a very intimate occasion in the life of Jesus that demonstrated visually and orally His unique character as the very Son of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

So much is packed into this passage of Scripture that it could take several pages of commentary to explain it all clearly. Note that this choice servant of God is known first as Abram ("exalted father"). His name is later changed to Abraham ("father of many nations"; Gen. 17:5). It begins with the reassuring promise of God that He will protect Abram; He will be "a shield" to him. And he promises him a great reward. In what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant, introduced in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in chapters 13, 15, and 17. God had promised Abram that he would be "a great nation" and his "offspring" would be blessed. And that raises a great question in Abram's mind. This passage answers the question and gives us a preview of the history of the nation to be born of Abram.

First Reading:

Note: The reading omitted verses 1-4 and 16 that are included below.

Genesis 15:1-18 NAS95 1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

Abram is perplexed. How could he have offspring, he asks, "since I am childless"? Not knowing the miraculous plan that God had in mind, Abram proposes that God use Abram's servant Eliezer as his heir. But God responds that his heir "will come forth from your own body." Then God gives this faithful follower an object lesson. He instructs him to look at the stars and count them. That's impossible, of course; the stars are innumerable. "So shall your descendants be," God tells him. In response, Abram offers a statement that reveals the depth of his trust in God. It is a statement that is referred to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23): "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is a critical faith statement. It is not on the basis of any action of Abram that he is declared righteous, but it is on the basis of his faith, his trust in God. That same principle of faith remains true today. It is not by our holy deeds that we are considered righteous before God but because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus who paid the sacrifice for our sin.

In confirmation of God's promises to Abram, there follows a demonstration of God's commitment to fulfill His promises to Abram. The ceremony of sacrifice that is pictured is the affirmation of God that He alone will fulfill the covenant He is making with His servant. Not only that, God gives Abram a preview of what is to happen to his progeny, events that we will read about in the later chapters of Genesis and the early portion of Exodus. The 400-year captivity of Israel (the descendant nation from

Abram) in Egypt is clearly foretold. And the promise of their ultimate release is predicted, as well.

The ceremony pictured in these verses included symbols of God's presence (a smoking oven and a flaming torch) which were to give Abram assurance that God Himself is making this covenant with him, and it is certain of fulfillment. It concludes in this passage with the promise that the land from the River of Egypt (the Nile?) to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia will be the homeland of God's chosen people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul rehearses some of the factors of his relationship with the people of the church at Philippi and what he hoped and prayed for them in terms of their spiritual growth and steadfastness. He wanted them to live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (2:27). He also taught some very important spiritual truths that should have encouraged his readers to work together for unity among themselves and to recognize the great personal sacrifice of Jesus for them. They should understand, also, the exalted place that Jesus has been given as a result of His obedience to the Father, even to the point of death.

Second Reading:

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NAS95 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. 1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

In today's reading, the writer offers a significant contrast. He wants his readers to follow his example and that of others who "walk according" to the pattern of his life. And he warns them of the many who walk as "the enemies of the cross of Christ." He is distressed by such conduct; it brings him great sorrow. But the followers of Christ must be warned. These evil-doers are characterized by unwholesome appetites, an unseemly pride in their wrong-doing. Perhaps the danger of their behavior is suggested in the last characteristic, "who set their minds on earthly things." What God has created and given us here on this earth is not inherently bad, but an unhealthy attachment to earthly things is fatal. As John wrote in 1 John 2:16, "For everything in the world—the carvings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." And his conclusion is the key: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." Paul makes it clear that the "end" of them "is destruction." Believers must concentrate on the eternal, not the temporal that distracts us from God and will not last. Rather, the Christian has much more to look for.

Paul goes on to note the contrast between the "enemies" of Christ and the true believers. The

Christian's citizenship is not in this temporary, passing world. It is in heaven, and it's not just something we hope to enter someday; it is the place where we should continually and eagerly be looking "for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," who will descend from our spiritual homeland to come for us. And then the changes that Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15 will occur. He says our current "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory." We surely don't fully understand all that that means, but it will occur, not by anything we can do but by His power. After all, He has the power to subject everything to Himself, and He eventually will do so.

Once again, Paul reveals his deep passion for the Philippian believers. He calls them "beloved brethren," and he again speaks of his longing to see them, who he considers "my joy and crown." In light of the glorious promise for the alien Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, their future and eternal abiding place, Paul gives a final challenge to those he loves so dearly, "Stand firm in the Lord."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels present Jesus in a variety of settings, each writer including those events and sayings that fit best into his argument. The four together give us a complete picture of what God wants us to know about Jesus' life and ministry. After all, according to the writer of Hebrews, God "in these last days has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus provides the very best picture of who God is because He who was and is God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In today's passage, Luke gives us a unique picture of Jesus, different from every other representation of Him in the Bible.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:28-36 NAS95 28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. 33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not realizing what he was saying. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.

In the paragraph just preceding these verses, Jesus had spoken of the cost of being His disciple. The disciple "must deny himself and take up his cross daily"; "whoever wants to save his life will lost it." To follow Jesus is to be willing to serve Him unashamedly and faithfully. Knowing that there will be

some who will faithfully follow, He concludes this teaching by promising that some of His hearers "will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." That was said many years ago, and yet we still have not yet seen God's kingdom established on earth in the fullest sense that He has promised it. So, what could He have meant?

Today's passage may well be the fulfillment of that promise, as we shall see. A little more than a week after that pronouncement Jesus took three of his most intimate disciples—Peter, James, and John—with Him to a mountain to pray, which was a common practice for Him. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus prayed. (Interestingly, the same thing occurs on a later occasion in the Garden of Gethsemane on Jesus' last night before His crucifixion, Luke 22:45.) When they awoke, they say what must have seemed like a dream to them.

They saw Jesus with a different facial expression and clothes that were dazzling white and gleaming. Two men were talking with Him, and somehow the disciples recognized the two as Moses and Elijah, long dead and revered Old Testament prophets. They were "appearing in glory," and the three disciples "saw His glory." It was Moses in Exodus 33 who asked to see God's glory, but God indicated that no one could see His glory and live. There must have been something about the appearance of these three that was supra-natural. It was an appearance beyond anything earthly normal. It's also interesting to note the topic of discussion between Jesus and the two prophets; they "were speaking of His departure." Jesus had told His disciples on more than one occasion that he would be leaving them, and He had indicated the method (His death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven). Peter, in his usual impetuous way, was eager to keep them from leaving, so he suggested building "tabernacles," probably the kind of booths that were associated with the Jewish festival. He was interrupted by a cloud that came upon them, frightening them. Then they heard a voice, the very voice of God.

"This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" As God had spoken at Jesus' baptism, so He speaks once again, confirming that Jesus is the Holy One, the anointed one of God, the one above all others who should be heard and obeyed. It seems abundantly clear that these three close disciples of Jesus had the unique privilege of having just a glimpse, a peek of what the Kingdom of God is like. The qualified king, the representatives of the old covenant, and disciples of the new, all are represented. Glory shone around as it will in that glorious future kingdom. Watch for it! Be prepared!

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the second reading, Saint Paul talked about "stand[ing] firm in the faith" (Philippians 4;1). List at least three specific ways in which you are you living as a citizen of heaven, for eternal values rather than worldly pleasure and standing firm in your faith?

2. In what ways to you recognize Jesus as God Himself as seen by Peter, James, and John, in the great transfiguration scene? God said to listen to Him. In what ways are you doing this in your life? In what ways are you acting upon the information you are receiving from God?

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Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/022116.cfm

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 2-14-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **2-14-2016**. This week we examine the first fruits offering found in Deuteronomy 26. Then we see how Saint Paul described the necessity for a person to receive God's free gift of salvation and examine this matter more closely. We conclude this week's study with the Gospel reading in which we see the temptation of Jesus Christ and how this applies to our lives.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word that means "second law." This Book is a retelling, but with many additional details, of the Exodus from Egypt as well as the Law given to Moses. The context of the reading is provided in the first three verses that were omitted from the reading but are shown below.

Deuteronomy 26:1-3 NAS95 1 Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it, 2 that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you bring in from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to establish His name. 3 You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare this day to the LORD my God that I have entered the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.'

Chapter 26 opens with Moses looking forward to when the Israelites enter the Promised Land. God tells them through Moses the laws about the first fruits offering. Each household was to prepare a gift of the best of the land before they utilized any of the harvests from the place in which they were about to enter. As you read, imagine presenting your "first fruits" offerings to the Old Testament priests after you had entered your new homeland.

First Reading:

Deuteronomy 26:4-10 NAS95 4 "Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. 5 "You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. 6 'And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. 7 'Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; 8 and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; 9 and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 'Now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which You, O LORD have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God;

The reading provides the law of the first fruits offering. The "father" mentioned in verse 5 is Jacob, the father of Israel. After Joseph was appointed a leader in the Egyptian nation, Jacob and his family moved to Egypt because of the drought in the land of Canaan. The future generations then spent four hundred years in Egypt until "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8). At this point, God appointed Moses to lead the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. The first fruits offering was to be made as an offering to God in remembrance of their deliverance from Egyptian captivity. Second, it was to recognize the principle of giving to God first. By assuming this practice once, the people were settled in the Land and they would remember God's miraculous provision to them.

A similar offering first occurs in the Bible in Genesis chapter 4 when Cain and Abel brought their

offerings to God. "So it came about in the course of time that Cain brought an offering to the LORD of the fruit of the ground. Abel, on his part also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions" (Genesis 4:3-4a). The reading continues, which makes an important point about how each man made the offering and therefore how God received them. "And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his countenance fell" (vv. 4b – 5). Although both Cain and Abel made their offerings directly to God, God honored only Abel's offering. Why? The answer is found in the following New Testament verses. "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4). "[W]e should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:11–12). God accepted Abel's offering because it was done with love and faith, whereas Cain's offering came from his evil heart. Likely, Cain's offering wasn't the best of the land, but was rather something rather worthless that he had held back for God while keeping the best for himself.

The offering record in today's reading was during the time known as the theocratic kingdom where the priests were interceding for the people as intermediators with God. This is important to remember because of the great contrast with which we make our offerings in the church today. After Jesus rose from the dead, we see how the priestly class passed away and how Jesus is the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Now each believer comes to God only through Jesus without the priestly intermediaries. Although in the Old Testament the priestly class prefigured the coming High Priest Jesus, they were subject to the human limitations common to people (Hebrews 7:28) and succumbed to this temptation. In contrast, our perfect High Priest Jesus was subject to temptations but was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Therefore, the Old Testament priests never offered a perfect sacrifice to God regardless of their noble intentions while Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice for sin forever (Hebrews 10:14).

In this reading, God provided the law of the first fruits offering. Looking forward to the church age, this offering pointed the way towards how Christians offer their own "first fruits" to God in the things they do. By first taking the best that God has given us off the top, we remember how God provided it for us in the first place. We may find ourselves tempted to hold back in our offerings to God. Later in the Gospel reading, we will see the big idea is the temptation of Christ, the application of which is that we too are subject to temptation. As Christians, God has given us wisdom from His word for successfully resisting temptation. However, this assumes that we are a Christian as defined in Scripture. In the second reading, we will see how becoming a Christian requires a person's heartfelt commitment to Jesus Christ. Although salvation is a free gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9), God word says that there is a transaction that has to occur during the process of accepting this free gift.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. In the reading, we will see how Paul quoted

from the Book of Deuteronomy as well as the Prophet Joel.

Second Reading:

Romans 10:8-13 NAS95 8 But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart" –that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."

The only way to understand this reading is to set it within the context of salvation in general which we will explain first, and then we will return to an analysis of the reading. In these verses, Saint Paul describes how a person must receive the gift of salvation from God. When someone is given something, they must first receive it. The prerequisite to receiving this gift is to first understand that all of us are without excuse before God and in need of a Savior. Paul said earlier in Romans 3, "For all have sinned and fallen short or the glory of God." The penalty for our sin is eternal separation from God as Paul said in Romans, but God has provided a way out of this horrible situation. "For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). God 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). Our "good" works, no matter how we define them or how hard we work at them, will never result in earning our way to heaven. In order to earn our way to heaven we would have to be perfect, and we see from the Scripture that we are not.

Jesus explained to Nicodemus how one must be "born from above," or "born again," as the Greek word used has two meanings. Jesus said, "You must be born from above to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). Nicodemus, a teacher of the Law, didn't understand so Jesus explained it to him. Jesus said:

13 No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:13-18)

Jesus explained to Nicodemus that salvation came through His dying for him and that this comes through faith. Jesus also explained that if someone didn't believe, then by default they have already been judged (v. 18). Saint John further explained salvation in his first Letter, "Whoever believes that

Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him" (1John 5:1). Later he explained, "These things I have written to you **who believe in the name of the Son of God**, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (v. 13, emphasis added). The way in which a person is made right with God is through belief in the finished work of the Son Jesus Christ.

Returning to the reading, Saint Paul described how a person must receive the free gift of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. He 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; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED" (Romans 10:9-11). Paul quoted from Deuteronomy in verse 8, which was part of Moses' message to the Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. He explained to them how the words of the Law were in the midst of them because it had been explained to them in detail. They couldn't deny that they knew it when God punished them for breaking it. Finally, Paul quoted from the Prophet Joel a universal message from God, "Whoever will call upon the name of the LORD will be saved" (v. 13).

Having an understanding of Paul's message of salvation is crucial not only because it is the only way to gain eternal life! Our good works will not, and cannot ever merit salvation for ourselves. As we conclude this week's study we will see how being a Christian helps us to overcome temptations common to everyone. While unbelievers have little chance of resisting, believers have been given the power to achieve victory over temptation through resting in God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Luke 4 in which we see the 40-day period in which God allowed the testing of Jesus in the desert (wilderness) area of Israel.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 4:1-13 NAS95 1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness 2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. 3 And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." 4 And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE.'" 5 And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6 And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. 7 "Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" 9 And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; 10 for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,' 11 and, 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" 12 And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'" 13 When the devil had finished every

temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.

We see in verse one that God allowed the temptation of Jesus, and in verse two that the source of it was Satan. The mystery here is that although Jesus is fully God, He also took on human form that was subject to temptation (Philippians 2:7). We are not told the details of the testing that Satan brought to Jesus during this period, but Scripture says that he "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Not surprisingly after such a long period without food, the devil tempted Jesus by asking Him to turn the stones into bread. Likely this was in an area in which the stones were shaped like loaves. However, Jesus responded to this and all of the temptations of the devil by quoting Scripture. He pointed out that His purpose eclipsed the needs of satisfying His body's needs, which was one purpose of the fast in the first place. The next temptation showed Jesus the truth that the earth was the devil's kingdom, at least for a short time (2 Corinthians 4:4, the "God of this age."). The devil's offer was legitimate, however Jesus answered him by quoting the scriptural truth that worship belongs only to God, the First Commandment (Deuteronomy 10:20, Exodus 20:3). Finally, the devil tempted Jesus by attempting to make Him place the Lord God to the test, something to which Jesus immediately responded from the Law (Deuteronomy 6:16).

What can we learn from how Jesus faced temptation and from other verses in the Bible on this subject? The following is a series of points about the source of temptation and how a believer can choose to resist through power given to them by God.

- James 1:13-14 "13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust."
  God is never the source of temptation, instead the source of it is our own lust.
- 1Pe 4:12 "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;"
  As believers we should expect trials and temptation to come upon us. God allows these things in order for us to grow closer to Him and through our growing learning how to trust in Him regardless of the circumstances.
- 2Co 12:7 "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself!"
  Even the greatest saints such as Paul were subject to terrible trials and temptations. We as saints of God should also expect temptation.
- Lu 13:4-4 "4 Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."
  Temptation that comes upon a person isn't because of their sin (although sin can multiply temptation).
- Jude 9 "But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'"

We are to look to Jesus' example when we are facing temptation by leaning upon the Scripture that we have memorized and placed in our heart. We saw Jesus' example in the Gospel reading today.

- Lu 22:40 "When He arrived at the place, He said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation."
  Jesus warned His disciples on the night He was betrayed to pray **before** temptation came upon them. We are to pray in advance of temptation for God to deliver **from** (prevent it from happening) and **through** it (help us when it does come, which it will).
- 2Pe 2:9 "then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment"
  Since God knows we are to ask Him for help.
- 1Co 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

God has given us tools to resist temptation as we grow in our understanding and reliance upon the Word of God. As you can see from the verses above, resistance to the trials and temptations that we will encounter as Christians needs to begin well in advance of the actual situation. As you contemplate your response to the next temptation comes along, pray quickly to God for the power to resist. After the event, look back and see how holding to God's Word delivered you. If you failed, discuss this with another Christian whom you trust. Pray together with them and develop some practical methods to resist based upon the Scriptures.

One technique that has proven helpful in increasing our awareness about imminent temptation is the acronym H-A-L-T. This reminds us to be on the lookup for temptation when we are: **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely or **T**ired. Perhaps you will find yourself resting in God's Word to HALT temptation before you fall prey to it.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the first reading, we learned about the law of the first fruits offering. Today, giving includes not only our monetary gifts to our church and charities but also the ways in which we serve the Lord. In your life, in what ways do you bring your very best, like Abel, or hold back, like Cain, in your offerings to God?

2. From what you learned today, why is it important to memorize Scripture? Would you establish a plan to memorize the verses on temptation?

Readings for the Week

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

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/021416.cfm

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 2-7-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **2-7-2016**. Once or twice in a lifetime God allows events to occur in the life of a person for reasons that they may not understand at the moment but later see how God used them to reveal their pride and sinfulness and need for salvation through faith in Jesus. Some time ago one of those things happened to me. Back in the day I was an engineer at one of the Big Three automotive companies. I wore a suit and tie to work each day and had a pass to access the test track across the street. I drove a brand new truck and in my mind I guess I kind of saw myself as important in the overall scheme of things in the automotive world. One day as I was getting dressed I examined the pattern of stitching on my underwear and how the tag was placed on the opposite side of the seams and overlapping seams that joined the panels together. As an engineer I thought, isn't that strange how they placed the tag on the wrong side so that it faced out when the seams were faced in? Then it hit me, I had, for my entire life mind you, worn my underwear inside out with the tag facing out and the finished seams facing in (which even today still seems very logical to me!). I thought that I was such an important engineer and yet I had worn my

underwear backwards during my entire career. As my grandma would have said, good thing I didn't have an accident. Pride gets the best of us, but God has His ways of revealing our pride in order to help us to be released to worship Him.

This week we open with a reading from the Prophet Isaiah in which we learn about our need for cleansing from our sin as well as a vision of God on His throne. Then we move to the second reading from the next to last chapter of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where we learn about how he corrected an important misunderstanding regarding the crucially important doctrine of the resurrection. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Luke in which we see how Jesus performed a great miracle among a group of common fishermen in order to gather His own catch of men. We are going to see today how when God places a unique calling upon a person such as a prophet or disciple of Christ he often brings those people to the point of understanding their sinfulness and need for a Savior. A. W. Tozer said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." Such is the case that we will see today when we encounter two men whom God deeply convicted of their sins. As we study you may wish to check the direction in which your underwear is facing.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 6. The context of the reading is just after the pronouncement of woes upon the people of Israel for their sin in the previous chapter. His messages follow the pattern "Woe to those who." "Therefore," Isaiah said, "My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge" (Isaiah 5:13b). Isaiah continued his song of woes saying, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). The prophet's words are eerily reminiscent of Saint Paul's warnings about what was to come upon the world in the last days, a period that began the moment Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. Paul said, "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Isaiah's pronouncement of woes serves as a warning to all generations about the deceitfulness and danger of sin. We shouldn't be surprised by events happening in Isaiah's day as if the Israelites were somehow worse sinners than the people of our own age.

From this context we begin the readings. You'll see a huge contrast between the wickedness of people and the holiness of God.

First Reading:

Isaiah 6:1-8 NAS95 1 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six

wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

The first insight that jumps out of the reading requires some careful insight into the background of King Uzziah mentioned in the first verse. Isaiah provides the date of his vision as "In the year of King Uzziah's death" (v. 1a), meaning sometime after the date of King Uzziah as recorded in 2 Chronicles 26:23. King Uzziah was one of the good kings of Judah, although sometime during the end of his reign pride got the better of him when he attempted to usurp the function of a priest by burning incense to the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:16). Afterwards, because of his pride God inflicted him with leprosy that likely hastened his death. Isaiah is clearly using this mention of Uzziah's death as a warning about the danger of pride because as he continues in the reading he shows how God convicted him of his own pride. Upon seeing some miniscule portion of the glory of the Lord, Isaiah was deeply convicted of his sinful nature and said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips" (v. 5). Pride is something that anyone exposed to direct revelation from God would most likely struggle with. Their vision and special role left them vulnerable to the assumption that they were superior. Add to this the fact that once the prophets began to experience God's message they would have been called to live much holier lives than the surrounding people did. Even Saint Paul wasn't immune from pride because we know that God inflicted him with a "thorn in the flesh." Paul said, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself!" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Isaiah was no different and as we see in the reading he required conviction of his sin and subsequent forgiveness (v. 7). The ministry of forgiveness was delivery by none other than the seraphim, a special type of angel who use two of their wings to cover their face (v. 2). Interestingly, although the angels cover their faces, Isaiah is allowed to see the glory of God. God allows this for the purpose of revealing Isaiah's uncleanness and compelling need for forgiveness. We see through the reading that forgiveness came from the altar of God, as only God can forgive sin.

Sometimes as I'm reading the Bible as I study the text and the related passages I come to an "aha moment." During my study for this reading, I had one of those moments as I remembered how Saint John had said something about Isaiah. When we read the Gospels, we need to take careful notice when either the writers or Jesus Himself quotes from the Bible (what we now call the Old Testament). In this case, Saint John clearly indicated that Jesus was the Person on the throne about whom Isaiah spoke. As proof, first, we know that no one can see God in His fullness and live (Exodus 33:20). However, Scripture says that the prophets saw varying manifestations of God, as Saint John made clear in the following verse:

39 For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 40 "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM." 41 These things Isaiah said **because he saw His glor**y, and he spoke of Him. (John 12:39 -41, emphasis added, note that the capital letters indicate quotations from the Old Testament.)

Had we read past verse 8 in Isaiah where today's reading ended we would have seen these verses:

Isaiah 6:9-10 NAS95 9 He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.' 10 "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed."

Do you see the correlation between John's writing in the Gospel and the verses he quoted from the Old Testament in Isaiah? Aha, what John was saying was that it was **Jesus'** glory that Isaiah was seeing, the glory of God on His throne!

For additional evidence that the One that Isaiah saw high and lifted up on the throne was Jesus, Isaiah used the same language about this Person in today's reading as compared to his writings about the coming Messiah in the Servant Songs later in chapters 52 – 53. Isaiah spoke of the Lord "sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted" (v. 1). Later in the Servant Songs Isaiah said about the coming Servant Messiah Jesus: "Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). What Saint John was explaining by drawing from Isaiah was that Jesus is God spoken of in the Old Testament. Jesus said. "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

We can celebrate the ways in which Jesus revealed His glory to the world in both the Old and New Testaments. We can have confidence that even though Isaiah may not have completely understood his visions and writings he faithfully recorded them in the Scriptures such that some seven hundred years later Jesus could come along and fulfill them. In the same way, we can trust that when we read the prophetic verses in the **New** Testament, they too will be fulfilled in exquisite detail in ways that we cannot totally understand. In spite of the fact that we don't have a perfect understanding of how things will play out, we can trust that God has enlightened our understanding to the extent necessary for us to accomplish the work that He has for us to accomplish.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the next to last chapter of First Corinthians and contains an early creedal statement in the first half dozen verses. Paul had just finished his instruction on the necessity of order in worship, so it's appropriate that this section opens with the statement of one of the earliest creeds of the church.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 NAS95 1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; 8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

One of the problems in the Corinthian church was that some of them didn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is made clear by the verses immediately following today's reading:

1 Corinthians 15:12-19 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

This context is extremely important in understanding Paul's purpose in including such deep creedal statements before he addresses the Corinthian's unbelief. You may have heard how those in the government have taught that the best way to spot a counterfeit bill is not to study the counterfeits, but instead to become intimately familiar first with genuine articles. This is exactly what Paul did by leading with the truth and then addressing the Corinthian's unbelief as a means of providing a bridge to those confused about the resurrection of Christ. Paul taught many deep spiritual truths in the first seven verses including things that we, as believers, take for granted with our more extensive understanding of faith and more extensive creeds such as the one recited each week during Sunday Mass. Paul taught:

- People are saved by receiving, standing and holding fast to the Gospel (v. 1).
- Christ died for our sins, that this was in fulfillment of the Scriptures, and that He was buried and raised on the third day again as predicted by the Bible (v. 3). This provided confirmation of the truthfulness of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus.
- The resurrected Jesus appeared to more than five hundred believers, some of whom were still alive at the time of his writing (v. 6). This was important because as live witnesses they would have been able to challenge these writings about the resurrection of Jesus.

The reading also relates to what we learned about Isaiah in the first reading in terms of the necessity of prophets to have a humble heart. He said that he was the "least of the apostles," one whom had persecuted the church (v. 9), yet labored harder than all the others because the grace of God was with him (v. 10). Yet as an apostle of Christ he had a unique calling in that when he was formerly a persecutor of the church (v. 9) the resurrected Lord appeared to him. Finally, he exclaimed that regardless of who preached the good news, the end result was that the people believed (v. 11). He said something very similar to this in Philippians:

Philippians 1:15-18 NAS95 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,

We see in this reading Saint Paul's heart for ministry. We saw how he provided the Corinthians with both truth and evidence of the truth, an "apologetic." The defense of the truth is very important in our day with a culture that denies the existence of absolute truth, yet does so absolutely. Although there is plenty of room for discussion and even error on various Christian doctrines, the resurrection is one of the central, defining doctrines of our Christian faith. We saw this in Paul's own words. "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we transition to the Gospel lesson we will return to a very similar theme that we saw in the first reading from Isaiah. Here we will see the calling of the disciples of Christ and how the Holy Spirit convicted Peter of his sinfulness and need for a Savior.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 5:1-11 NAS95 1 Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; 2 and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 3 And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. 4 When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets. 6 When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; 7 so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" 9 For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." 11 When they had brought

their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

In the reading we see the occurrence of several miracles. We see the Lord's miracle of gathering the fish into the particular spot in which to be caught (v.4). Next we see how Simon Peter followed Jesus' instruction (vv. 5-6), a miracle in itself. Then we see the miracle of the gigantic catch (v. 6). However, perhaps the greatest miracle of all was how God enlightened Simon Peter's heart to reveal his sinfulness and frail humanity (v. 8). Yet another miracle was how this group of disciples (Peter, James, and John) were willing to forsake their livelihood and instead become "fishers of men" (v. 10). All of these miracles are significant in that they helped bring about the specific calling to a discrete small group of disciples eventually numbering just twelve select people, each with unique skills and gift mix.

One of the significant things in the reading concerns how God requires humility in His servants. Just like we saw how Isaiah responded to seeing the glory of Jesus on His throne, Saint Peter responded in a very similar way when he experienced the miraculous catch of fish. Any sport fisherman who has ever endured a slow fishing season may understand that even a nominal catch is a miracle. However, in the case of the Peter, James and John these were professional fishermen who made their living at fishing. Peter's reaction indicated that there was much more going on than just the miraculous catch, God was working in his heart to convict him of his sinfulness as well as using the miracle to prove that Jesus was able to fulfil His words.

What are some ways that we can apply what we have learned today? In the first reading we saw how God exposed Isaiah's sinfulness and need for cleansing from his sin. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Saint Peter was convicted of his sinfulness and need for a Savior. In our lives we must be aware of our own pride and our need for God's forgiveness, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). God in His grace brings to mind our sinfulness so that we may repent of our sin and be healed (see Acts 3:19). Without God Himself bearing the penalty for **our** sin the ultimate end for us is death (Romans 6:23). He did this for us through His grace while we were hopelessly trapped in our sin with no hope of escape. Paul said, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Our receipt of the free gift of forgiveness comes through our faith in the Lord Jesus and not any of our perceived good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Saint Paul said that we need to receive this gift:

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

God tells us not to take this for granted, but rather to test ourselves. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you–unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). The stakes are very high, each of us should examine

our hearts and see whether we are trusting only in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for us, because in terms of earning our salvation God said through Isaiah, "Our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord" (Proverbs 14:12). Let us take to heart the Gospel message: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). It is not enough to just know the Gospel, we must respond to message and live in light of this good news.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the second reading Saint Paul provide several proofs regarding the resurrection. A. How do these proofs provide you with comfort today?

2. Why is the resurrection of **our** bodies important to you and how can this doctrine help you in light of the things with which you are suffering?

3. What areas of pride has God revealed to you? How has He used these times of "breaking" to usher you into new places of trust and intimacy with Him?

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/020716.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 1-31-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **1-31-2016**. This week we open with two passages from the prophecy of Jeremiah, who served during the time of Judah's spiritual downfall, preparing her for captivity and removal from the land. The second reading is from the familiar but remarkable chapter on love in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church. The final reading is from Luke's Gospel and relates the story of Jesus' encounter in a Jewish synagogue where His teaching so enraged the people that they tried to kill Him.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Because of his great sorrow over the sin of the people and impending judgment to come upon them, Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the "weeping prophet." He was not just a melancholy neurotic, however; his was a soul of deep spirituality and great sensibility. One writer describes Jeremiah as "the most Christ-like character in the Old Testament." The prophet saw the beginning of the nation's Babylonian captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem. In spite of his preaching, he had no converts. He was rejected by his own people, hated, beaten, imprisoned, called a traitor, and forced to flee. Nonetheless, he was faithful to deliver God's message to the people, knowing it would fall on deaf ears.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 1:4-5 NAS95 4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Jeremiah 1:17-19 NAS95 17 "Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them. 18 "Now behold, I

have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. 19 "They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD.

How reassuring it must have been for Jeremiah to have God speak to him directly and assure him that he was created by God and known by Him before his birth. God had chosen, "consecrated" (that is, set him apart), and "appointed" him to be his prophet to Judah, the remaining southern portion of the former kingdom of Israel.

Jeremiah began his ministry during the reign of Josiah (1:2) and lived through the reformation that Josiah brought about after the discovery of the Book of the Law in the Temple (see 2 Kings 22-23). To see the nation's departure from the faith and their refusal to repent was no doubt the cause for the prophet's great sorrow. His commission from the Lord must have been a great challenge from the very beginning. Although God told him he would make him like a "fortified city" and "a pillar of iron" with "walls of bronze," He also warned him that the people "will fight against you." It would be difficult for anyone to accept such a challenge with enthusiasm and hopeful prospects. The reader might be reminded of Isaiah who, also, was told that his message would be heard but not understood; the people would see but not perceive; their hearts would be "calloused," their "ears dull," and their eyes "closed" (Isaiah 6:9-10). But God did not leave Jeremiah without hope at all. He assured him that the people would not overcome him and, best of all, He said, "I am with you to deliver you."

Success for Jeremiah was not to see Judah protected from captivity or delivered from the enemy. Nor was it to have the nation respond to his message with repentance, a change of heart and mind, and a return to God in faith and obedience. Success was to be faithful in preaching the message God gave him, to persist in spite of opposition, and to trust God for the outcome. Thus, Jeremiah is a worthy model for us to emulate.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's ministry in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18 toward the end of his second missionary journey. Corinth was a Roman colony, an influential city in its province. In spite of difficulties and opposition in Corinth, Paul remained there "many days," perhaps 18 months. In his first letter to the Corinthians, a few years after his initial visit, the apostle deals with a number of problems, disagreements, and even divisions in the church body. His purpose is to correct the errors and encourage the people to spiritual growth and unity. Sanctification might well be considered the theme, that is, the encouragement to follow Jesus in obedience and life transformation that would set them apart as disciples of Christ.

Today's reading is in the middle of a very detailed discussion of spiritual gifts, which begins in 12:1 and continues in chapters 14 & 15.Perhaps Paul understood that the subject in hand was so controversial and divisive that he needed to introduce a topic of essential importance if there was to

be harmony among the believers. Chapter 13 is known far-and-wide as the great chapter on love, and it must be clearly understood if it is to become the standard by which Christ-followers are to be known. (See John 13:34-45).

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13 NAS95 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way. 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Paul makes it clear in chapter 12 that spiritual gifts are supernaturally given to the church for the benefit of the body, not for individual pleasure. As he writes in v. 31, believers "should earnestly desire the **greater** gifts, and he proceeds to show a "more excellent way," the way of love. To read chapter 13 is to understand something about the essential element for unity in the body and fruitful ministry. "Love conquers all," as they say.

Verses 1-3 highlight the preeminence of love. No matter how effective we might be in getting our message out, no matter how gifted we may be, no matter how great our faith in God is—without love, our efforts will be fruitless, and our work will be for nothing. We should keep in mind that there are several words for love in the language that Paul used. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul chose to use the word agapé, which is a word of action more than emotion. It means acting toward another person in the best interest of that person. It is unselfish, other-directed, and self-sacrificing. Paul is saying that love is preferred over eloquence, prophecy, mysteries, knowledge, faith—all of which he himself demonstrated in abundance.

The words that describe love in verses 4-7 are indicative of the qualities that the Christian should possess and demonstrate. Many are included in the list of the Spirit's "fruit," in Galatians 5:22-23. We would do well to ask ourselves, "How many of these godly traits do I show to others in my daily life?" Patience, kindness, generosity, humility, goodness, graciousness, confidence, assurance, endurance: are they easily seen in our lives? One of the most convicting truths about love is that it

doesn't keep track of wrongs. How difficult it is for many of us to lovingly overlook the wrongs done against us.

The concluding verses of the chapter (8-13) emphasize the permanence of love. Everything else may pass away from our lives and experience, but love will endure. Paul uses a very helpful metaphor to explain how life should reflect our growing maturity. We used to "speak," "think," and "reason like a child," but when we grew up, we "did away with childish things." He goes on to teach us that we have not yet arrived, we see things now only "dimly," but one day it will be "face to face," and then we'll understand fully all that God has planned for us. The concluding sentence (v. 13) is well known, but perhaps not fully appreciated. Faith and hope are essential, of course, and they will continue to be important, but the greatest attribute of the Christian life is the continual demonstration of love. Jesus said that we are to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-38).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Luke's Gospel is the result of the careful study of Dr. Luke, a companion of the apostle Paul, who wanted to present an accurate review of the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke focuses on Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. He makes it clear that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He seeks to confirm what Christians already believed was true and trustworthy. Today's reading details the appearance of Jesus in a synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown. Apparently he attended there regularly. On this occasion he stood up to read from the sacred scrolls. In this passage we read about the conflict between Jesus and the crowd who earlier "were speaking well of him," but changed in their attitude after His reading.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 4:21-30 NAS95 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" 23 And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" 24 And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. 25 "But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; 26 and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. 27 "And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." 28 And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; 29 and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. 30 But passing through their midst, He went His way.

Jesus read a portion of chapter 61 of Isaiah's prophecy, and indicated that it had "been fulfilled in your hearing." At that point everyone responded well to His comment and wondered what it all meant. They identified Jesus with Joseph, Mary's husband, and the presumed father of Jesus. Jesus knows that the people had heard of the wonderful things he had done at Capernaum and knew that the people wondered why he didn't do such things here in Nazareth. Jesus answers with what has become a common expression today, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country."

Jesus then relates two stories that were, no doubt, familiar to his audience. The prophet Elijah had helped a poor widow who was suffering in the midst of a famine of three-and-a-half years. His successor, Elisha, brought healing to the Syrian general, Naaman, a leper. The point of these illustrations from history is that even the greatest of God's prophets did not serve everyone; not every leper was healed; not every widow was cared for. Likewise, although Jesus may have performed miracles in other places, He did not do so everywhere and for everyone. The crowd seemed incensed that He did not do these works in His hometown.

Why was the crowd so upset to the degree that they "drove Him out of the city"? They were so enraged that they had intended to throw Him off a cliff. Only by God's miraculous deliverance was Jesus able to escape "passing through their midst." There are several probable major reasons. First, Jesus related two Old Testament stories of the prophets ministering to Gentiles during a time of Israel's unbelief and disobedience. Remember, that one of Luke's purposes in writing his Gospel was to reveal God's great plan to include Gentiles in His redemptive plan. That was an irritant to the Jews.

Second, Jesus seemed to equate Himself with the revered Old Testament prophets. Furthermore, He was making an unambiguous claim that He was the Messiah who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that He had read. It was because of the total impact of these claims that we read, "They were filled with rage" and sought to kill Him.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Ask yourself, "Could I, like Jeremiah, remain faithful to teaching God's Word in the midst of strong opposition, endangering my life?" In what ways are you facing opposition to your Christian beliefs and way of life? How has God empowered you to take a stand for Him?

2. I worked for many years with several people who I found out many years later were Christians. I was surprised that they had never approached me to discuss their beliefs, and their bashfulness made me ponder their motives in not doing so. Yet even if they did not speak up I knew that there was something different about them. In what ways is your life characterized by love so anyone who knows you would recognize that you belong to Jesus?

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/013116.cfm

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 1-24-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **1-24-2016**. This week we open with a reading from the Book of Nehemiah in which we learn about rebuilding of the people of God through their learning from the Word of God. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul in which we learn about spiritual gifts distributed among members of the church. Finally, we close with a reading from Luke in which we see Jesus quoting from the Prophet Isaiah in fulfillment of this Old Testament prophet's writings about Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Nehemiah that concerns itself with the rebuilding of the temple

and the restoration of the people following their exile to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. During their 70 year exile from the land there was a change of world powers from Babylon to Medo/Persia under the reign of King Cyrus. The return to Jerusalem happened in three waves beginning with Zerubbabel as chronicled in Ezra chapters 1 – 6. The second wave was led by Ezra as described in Ezra 7 – 10. The third and final wave was led by Nehemiah as described in Nehemiah chapters 1 – 3. Nehemiah was concerned primarily with the rapid rebuilding of the wall of the city that he accomplished against the greatest of odds in just 52 days. We have to remember that in the ancient near east the city wall formed an extremely important physical barrier in the city but also an import cultural and psychological foundation. The city gate was where information was passed to the people, judgments were held, and various goods moved in and out of the city. This city gates were the choke points through which every important thing passed into the city, whether food, information, or important (or not) people.

There are three topics to keep in mind while reading the chronicles of Nehemiah (and Ezra). First is the city of God, meaning Jerusalem. Second is the people of God, the Jews. Third is the Word of God. Today's reading is concerning that last topic, as the context of the reading is the restoration of the Scriptures to the people after the restoration of wall of Jerusalem. At this early stage of the restoration of the people to the city, the spiritual lives of the people were in shambles after an entire generation had passed since their captivity in Babylon. As the next generation prepared to resume their lives in the Promised Land, they found the homeland physically broken and spiritually void. Nehemiah, the man of God, after successfully directing the people in the rebuilding the city walls, gathered the people together to hear Ezra cast a vision for the spiritual rebuilding of the people (Nehemiah 7:5). Ezra was a priest who returned with Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 12:1).

First Reading:

Nehemiah 8:1-10 NAS95 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. 4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. 8 They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. 9 Then

Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

After the rebuilding of the wall around the city of God, Nehemiah gathered the people of God to learn from the reading of the Word of God. During their seventy-year captivity, the reading of the Word was scarce. As Ezra began the reading of the Word, the people instinctively responded in unison by worshiping the LORD "with their faces to the ground" (v. 6). As the Levites (priests of God) read the Word they also explained it to the people (v. 8). The people began weeping during the preaching of the Word of God (v. 9) to which the leaders responded by declaring the day as a celebration and one on which they were not to be grieved for "the joy of the LORD is [their] strength" (v. 10).

The people experienced conviction brought about by the Word of God as the priests and Levites explained it to them. This was a very good sign that after their long stay in Babylon that the Word still had this effect upon their hearts. The Book of Ecclesiastes tell us that there is time for everything, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven– A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted" and on it goes (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). There was indeed a time for mourning as God convicted the people of their sin, and it was a good sign that this indeed happened during the reading and explanation of the Word. However, as the day progressed the leaders realized that the time for mourning had ended and instead called the people to celebrate the victory that God had given them.

In the introduction, we mentioned how there were three themes in the Ezra / Nehemiah chronicles including the City of God, the people of God, and the Word of God. As Christians, our identity isn't tied to the City of God (Jerusalem) as was (and is) the Jews. Instead, our identity as the people of God is closely tied to our relationship with the incarnate Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus told us that He went aware to "prepare a place for us" (John 14:3). The Book of Revelation describes this place as the New Jerusalem, a heavenly city built by God that will one day descend from heaven and be presented to the people of God. John said, "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). This eternal city, with gates that will never be destroyed is what Jesus is preparing for us now. At the closing of the age of the people of God will inherit the City of God prepared by the Word of God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul opened this chapter with a clear explanation of his purpose by saying, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware" (1 Corinthians 12:1). First Paul explained there the variety of spiritual gifts that God distributed among the people, next he moved in today's reading to explain their **purpose**.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 NAS95 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

The big idea in the reading is that God distributes spiritual gifts among the members of the church, the body of Christ, in diverse ways in order to accomplish His purposes. Each of members of the church are to use their diverse gifts for the building up of the church, the body of Christ. Christians are not to boast about their particular gifts but rather are to cooperate with each other in the body of Christ much in the way that the parts of the body work together. Since each person's abilities are gifts given by God, they are not to boast about the gift that was given to them as if it were somehow superior to the gifting of another church member. For example, the gift of helps is in no way inferior to someone having the gift of hospitality.

The second concept in the reading beginning in verse 28 is the organization of the church by God in order to take maximum advantage of the "gift mix" in the church. God has ordained specific gifts within the organization of the local church such a way as to make the church most effective. When Paul describes the gift of tongues in the church this was most likely what we call a "sign gift" operational in the early church in which certain people were given divine, prophetic utterance which could only be understood by someone with the corresponding gift of interpretation. "Prophecy" in the early church included both foretelling (telling the future) as well as forth telling (exclaiming

existing prophecy or Scripture), although the former seems to have gradually ceased in the ages since the beginning of the church age. Some possibly had both the gift of tongues and of interpretation. Additionally, we know that during Pentecost in Acts 2:6 we know that when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the first group of church members they spoke in tongues that the surrounding people heard in their own languages. Regardless of the nature of the gift being described by Paul here in First Corinthians, the gift was one that enriched the churched and helped it to accomplish God's specific purposes in the particular era. It's should not be surprising to us to find giving modern believers different gift mixes in order to accomplish His purposes in our era.

A proper understanding of today's reading is paramount to a proper functioning church today. Although God distributes spiritual gifts as He sees fit, each person is to utilize their gifts to the maximum advantage **of the church**. They are not to boast about the superiority of their gift either vocally or in their hearts as to think of themselves as superior. As Paul closed the reading in verse 31 he mentioned "*And I show you a still more excellent way*" just before he launches into his teaching of the superiority of love over all of the gifts. He said, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). If we maintain the bond of love at the center of having hearts of service for the Lord, we will automatically use our spiritual gifts for the maximum advantage of the church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the Book of Luke. It opens with a statement of Luke's purpose and then moves to chapter four in which we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue in His home village of Nazareth north of Jerusalem not far from the Sea of Galilee.

When Isaiah wrote his Book, all of the events concerning Jesus were yet future. Yet in this section in Saint Luke Jesus quoted from Isaiah and said that a portion of it was being fulfilled at that very instant. However, Jesus stopped his quote exactly at that point at which the prophetic timetable turned to events concerning His Second Coming.

The context of the reading today from Luke Chapter 4 is that Jesus is just beginning His ministry and He had returned to His home town of Nazareth. This reading is just after Jesus' baptism. Read the text from Saint Luke and carefully note Jesus' quotation from Isaiah that is marked in all CAPITAL LETTERS.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 1:1-4 NAS95 1 In as much as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

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Luke 4:15-21 NAS95 15 And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. 16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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

What's the importance of the Gospel reading for your life as a believer in Jesus Christ? First, we can trust the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus' First Coming because we can read about the facts of their fulfillment in the New Testament. Second, since we can trust the prophecies about Jesus' First Advent we can trust those about His Second Coming. Jesus' Second coming is when the believing world will realize the wonderful promises from God including restoration of the world to its pre-fallen, sinless condition. The Prophet Isaiah said, "And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, And the leopard will lie down with the kid, And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little boy will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). We have hope that Jesus' Millennial Kingdom will be a world of universal peace. This promise should motivate us to reach out to those in our community who don't know Jesus Christ personally.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the second reading, Paul provided a list of spiritual gifts distributed among the body of Christ. Read the following two verses from the reading.

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

Do you find any of the unique abilities that God has given you listed among this list? In what ways do you serve the body of Christ with your gift? If your spiritual gift is not on the list, what is it? In what ways do you serve the church (meaning all believers, not just the local church) through the use of your gift?

2. In what ways do you feel yourself inclined to see your spiritual gifts as superior to the gifts of another person? How does having a proper understanding of the reading from Corinthians help you to reevaluate this belief?

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/012416.cfm

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **1-17-2016**. This week we open with an Old Testament reading from the prophecy of Isaiah, speaking about the future restoration of Israel. Then we move to Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. In this portion he writes about the variety of spiritual gifts that God has given the people of the church. We conclude with a reading from the fourth Gospel, John, and the story of Jesus' first recorded miracle, turning water to wine. These passages should give the Christian great confidence in the blessed provision that God has made for those who trust and follow Him.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The prophet Isaiah lived and ministered for 40 years in the last half of the eighth century BC. In that day Israel was rampant with sin, and she pretty much ignored God's Word. Interspersed with the prophet's preaching against sin and declaring God's holiness and justice is an emphasis on the salvation God offers His people. In fact, the word salvation appears in Isaiah more than any other book of the Bible except the Psalms. Thus, he writes and speaks of the love of God and the salvation to come with Messiah. It is of special note, perhaps, that Isaiah's name means "the salvation of Jehovah." As you read the assigned passage, note the expression "the mouth of the LORD" which appears throughout the book but is unique to Isaiah.

First Reading:

Isaiah 62:1-5 NAS95 1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, And for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, Until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, And her salvation like a torch that is burning. 2 The nations will see your righteousness, And all kings your glory; And you will be called by a new name Which the mouth of the LORD will designate. 3 You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, And a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 4 It will no longer be said to you,

"Forsaken," Nor to your land will it any longer be said, "Desolate"; But you will be called, "My delight is in her," And your land, "Married"; For the LORD delights in you, And to Him your land will be married. 5 For as a young man marries a virgin, So your sons will marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So your God will rejoice over you.

The subject of chapter 62 of Isaiah is the restoration of Israel. In spite of her sinfulness and disobedience, God has a wonderful plan for His people, and Isaiah writes these words of encouragement. Zion is another name for Israel's capital, Jerusalem, the city of David. When she is restored, her righteousness and salvation will be a bright light ("a torch that is burning") so that all the nations of the world will recognize her as God's holy people. Israel will be seen as "a crown of beauty" and "a royal diadem" in God's hand.

Israel will have a new name; "Forsaken" and "Desolate" will be replaced by "My delight is in her" and "Married." It might put us in mind of the New Testament teaching regarding the Church as the Bride of Christ. Later in the chapter (verse 12), Israel is described as "The Holy People," "The Redeemed of the LORD," and "Sought Out." God's chosen people will have a universal reputation and other nations will seek her out, recognizing her unique relationship with God.

Verse 5 uses poetic imagery to illustrate that the inhabitants of Jerusalem will delight in their dwelling place. The picture, as one writer has said, "leaves an overwhelming impression of joy delight, righteousness, beauty, safety, and peace." Moreover, God is said to "rejoice over you," like a groom delights in his bride. God's wonderful plan of redemption not only delivers His people from sin and depravity but, more than that, restores them to a place of righteousness, exalting them above all other nations, and making them a blessing to the nations.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians deals with a number of problems, disagreements, and even divisions in the church body. Paul writes to answer questions, to correct misunderstandings, and to give clear instructions. Chapters 12-14 deal with spiritual gifts, a topic of great importance, because these gifts are given by God to His people for the express purpose of enabling them to do His work in building up the church and evangelizing a lost world. Chapter 12's emphasis is on the giving of the gifts and what they are essentially. Paul begins the chapter by pointing out that no one is a true Christian (one who says, "Jesus is Lord") unless the Holy Spirit has done His miraculous work of grace in bringing him to faith. Then the writer launches his significant teaching regarding spiritual gifts.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 NAS95 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word

of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

First, note that while Paul acknowledges the variety of God's endowments, he uses significantly different terms to describe them: "gifts," "ministries," effects." He also attributes the giving of these endowments to the Trinity: "the same Spirit," the same Lord," and "the same God." It is abundantly clear that whatever the gifts are and however they are to be used, they are the gifts of an almighty, all-knowing God who does all things right. We must understand how Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, uses these terms.

"Gifts" given by the Spirit, v. 4, suggests abilities, equipping, endowments, an actual skill or capability to do something. "Ministries" given by the Lord, v. 5, have to do with opportunities, appointments, assignments, the particular tasks that the gifted one is to pursue. "Effects" given by God, v. 6, represent the work, the results, or accomplishments. Several important conclusions should be noted right away. First, spiritual gifts are not self-created; they are given by God. Second, the place or task given the individual Christian is not of his own choosing; it is assigned in God's wisdom. Third, the results are because of God's working through the gifted believer; He is the one "who works all things in all persons."

One of the most important factors to understand regarding gifts is that they are not given primarily for the benefit of the gifted person. Paul makes it clear that they are given "for the common good," v. 8. The gifted Christian, then, has no basis for pride in his gift. It isn't for his own gain (although he undoubtedly does benefit when he obediently exercises his gift as God directs him); it is for the spiritual growth of the body of Christ, the church.

Paul lists a number of spiritual gifts in this passage, but the list is neither restricted nor exhaustive. There are other passages that mention gifts (e.g. Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11), and it is likely that the sum of them all is only representative of the enabling, opportunities, and results that God alone can give. It is important to remember that it is all of God, both to the distribution of the gifts and their results. It is the "one and the same Spirit [who] works all these things."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

John's Gospel is different from the other three, often called "the synoptic Gospels," meaning that they are written from a similar viewpoint. John's is unique; for example, he doesn't include anything about the birth, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, or the ascension of Jesus. He includes only ten miracles (while the others have 18-20) and one parable (the others have from 5-20). But there are many important issues that only John includes. His purpose is expressed in chapter 20, verse 31: *These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

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Gospel Reading:

*John 2:1-11 NAS95 1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; 2 and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus *said to Him, "They have no wine." 4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." 6 Now there were six stone waterpots set there for the Jewish custom of purification, containing twenty or thirty gallons each. 7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the waterpots with water." So they filled them up to the brim. 8 And He said to them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it to him. 9 When the headwaiter tasted the water which had become wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom, 10 and said to him, "Every man serves the good wine first, and when the people have drunk freely, then he serves the poorer wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." 11 This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.*

We don't know who the bride and groom were at this wedding, but John tells us about some of the noted guests: Jesus, His disciples, and most notably, "the mother of Jesus." The story is familiar to most Bible readers: they ran out of wine at the wedding reception. Mary reports the need to Jesus as if to ask Him to do something about it. What was she really asking of Him? After all, she knew who He really was and had pondered the events of His life (Luke 2:38, 51). She had seen His remarkable demonstration in the Jerusalem Temple with the scholars (Luke 2:51). She no doubt longed to be relieved of the stigma attached to His birth (cf. John 8:41). And she probably thought that this occasion would be an ideal opportunity for Him to declare His origin and identity. Jesus' answer sounds rather harsh to us, but what he said to her probably was intended to inform her that what He would do would not achieve what she had in mind. It wasn't yet time for a full disclosure of His purposes.

Nonetheless, Jesus did perform the first of His public miracles, and the headwaiter was amazed at the better quality of this new wine compared to what had been served earlier. When Jesus exercises His power, it always produces the very best results! Verse 11 indicates that this miracle clearly demonstrated His glory and, as a result, His disciples "believed Him." The wonders that Jesus performed from this point on confirmed to His followers that He was more than a mere mortal. He was God in the flesh, as John clearly taught in chapter 1. The writer makes a most significant statement when he identifies this miracle as the "beginning of His signs." John includes seven signs in his Gospel, which are performed as verification of His identity as Messiah, the promised anointed one.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. List two ways in which you are anticipating with joyful expectation the fulfillment of God's promise to restore His people?

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2. List two or three of the special gifts God has given you. In what ways are you using it to serve God's church?

3. Discuss your understanding of how Jesus is the living "Word of God." How is a living person also the "word"?

Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/011716.cfm

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 1-10-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **1-10-2016**. This week we will again look at Isaiah and

a prophecy concerning Jesus. Then we will move onto a study of Jesus' baptism and discuss Jesus' nature as both God and Man along with his radical obedience to the Father's plan for His life. Because of the concepts covered in the readings we are going to change the order of the analysis such that we cover the first reading, Gospel reading, and finally the second reading in that order.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 42, the alternate is from chapter 40 and won't be covered today. This is the first of what is known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs." This first song continues past the end of today's reading in verse 7 onward to verse 10. The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long awaited Messiah. The overall preceding context is the preparation of Judah's return from captivity at Babylon, something we know happened during the times of Nehemiah. As you read, take careful note of the characteristic of the Servant.

First Reading:

Isaiah 42:1-7 NAS95 1 "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. 2 "He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street. 3 "A bruised reed He will not break And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice. 4 "He will not be disheartened or crushed Until He has established justice in the earth; And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law." 5 Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it And spirit to those who walk in it, 6 "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations, 7 To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon And those who dwell in darkness from the prison.

Isaiah said in verse six that God's Servant would be a light to the nations, which means to the Gentiles. Last week we discussed the revealing of this marvelous mystery, that the Messiah would bring salvation not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. Here God reaffirms that message, and stated that the Messiah would be appointed "as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations (Gentiles), To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the dungeon, And those who dwell in darkness from the prison" (vv. 6e-7). God compared the spiritual darkness of the Gentiles with blind people (7a), and with those in prison living in darkness (v. 7b-ff). Note that the only person in that society that would have had the authority to free an entire people group from prison was the King. Also, remember that in those days the prisons were gruesome dark places. Isaiah said that the future Servant, whom we know as Jesus, would act with kingly authority to free the prisoners from darkness. Saint Paul confirms this by saying, "For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col 1:13).

You may wonder what Isaiah meant in verse 3 when he said, "A bruised reed He will not break, And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish." A lack of social justice was one of the primary themes

of Isaiah, with widows and orphans especially oppressed (Isaiah 1:17). The reed referred to the weak people in the world, those wounded souls that truly need and seek the Messiah to save them. The "dimly burning wick" was symbolic of something which would have to be nurtured to keep going, a tiny flame which required kindling in order to make enough of a fire for a person to use. The Messiah won't stamp out the flame, He will enliven it! In fact, Jesus quoted the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) version of this text to prove that His coming was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus said, "A BATTERED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK OFF, AND A SMOLDERING WICK HE WILL NOT PUT OUT, UNTIL HE LEADS JUSTICE TO VICTORY" (Matthew 12:20).

What does this Servant Song mean for us today? First we can be sure that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy and came as the servant Messiah. The delight of the Father was on Him and the Spirit of the Lord was in Him. This same Messiah, the Righteous One, is the One in whom we put our trust to bring us salvation. He is worthy of our worship, our faith and our surrender. Second, as we surrender, we can trust that He will not take advantage of our weakened condition. In fact, on the contrary, He will nurture us and bring us to a place of fuller relationship with the Father. He will enliven what little faith we have as we open our hearts up to Him to do His good work in us. Lastly, the message of salvation is not just a theoretical freedom from the strangle-hold of sin, but an experiential reality that Jesus wants us to grow up into. He has set us free from the tyranny of sin and we no longer need to live in the dark prison that Satan had us in. Unfortunately, many of us do not know of this freedom and continue to live in the dungeon of guilt, worry and fear. "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the second reading and the Gospel message, I would like to share some background of the key figures in Church history to provide you with a better understanding of the occasion of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. One of my hobbies has been the study of Church history and especially some of the main characters who played a role in shaping the doctrines held by Christian believers in what would be future times for them. In some cases, these characters postulated theological theories that, with adequate biblical support, became accepted by the early Church. Yet others proposed heretical ideas that during the process of being opposed by the Church led to the unexpected result of calcifying the *true* beliefs of the Church. In essence what happened was that when theological incorrect ideas came along, the church was forced to examine their presuppositions and beliefs more closely in order to state more clearly what they believed. For example, Marcion of Sinope, who was the son of an early bishop and in the early Second Century, proposed an early and incorrect canon of the Bible that ultimately led to the Church responding with one which was accepted by the early Church leaders. Another in this latter category was Nestorius Archbishop of Constantinople who, although later denied the teaching for which he was accused, proposed that the human Jesus and the divine Christ were two different persons. He was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. This brings us to a fellow named Eutyches whose teachings are important for us in understanding the Gospel message for today.

Eutyches was a presbyter at Constantinople and opposed Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus. He founded the teaching known as Monophysitism which said that Jesus had only one nature, rather than maintaining His divine nature and adding a human nature after his birth through Blessed Mary (Luke 1:48). Eutyches said that Jesus' human and divine natures were combined into the single nature of Christ "without any alteration, absorption or confusion: that of the incarnate Word." While some may maintain that this is theological hair splitting similar to asking "How many angels can fit on the head of a pin" it is extremely important that we understand the nature of Jesus. If Jesus wasn't fully man then how could he have fulfilled the Law. He also wouldn't have understood what it was like to live in our fallen world. If Jesus wasn't fully divine He couldn't have atoned for the sin of the entire world. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish them, but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). And the author of Hebrews said, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Somehow, Jesus was both fully man and fully God. The response of the Church to Eutyches was to formulate doctrine along the lines that Jesus was a unified whole being Who consisted fully of both human and divine nature without defining some magical quotient of the degree of mixing of the two. Jesus was 100% human and 100% divine! To say anything less would be a violation of the clear teaching of Scripture.

Jesus emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes during His earthly ministry. We see this in Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

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 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Let's step back and summarize since we are juggling a lot of balls in the study today. We spoke about Isaiah's prophecy that Jesus would be God's Righteous Servant, acting as light to Gentiles and all people, and One whom would free the poor and oppressed people from spiritual darkness. In our overview of some important historical figures of Church history, we discussed the controversy over the nature of Jesus brought about by Eutyches, which led the Church to formulate theology about Jesus' nature consisting of both human and divine as a unified whole Being without a formula to the degree of mixing between the two natures. As we move to the Gospel reading we will see that since Jesus was 100% human (and 100% divine, how can that be?), as God's Righteous Servant He would have to submit Himself to the full measure of the Law. This meant living in submission to the plan of salvation predicated by His Father, which included the program of John the Baptist as the forerunner in the spirit of Elijah. As we will see, Jesus submitted to John's baptism of repentance to demonstrate his full compliance with the divine plan of the Father.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:15-22 NAS95 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all,

"As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. 19 But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, 20 Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison. 21 Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

Jesus had to fulfill all righteousness, and part of this was to submit to John's baptism of repentance. The Jews of that era were used to *repeated* ceremonial washings. However, John's baptism represented a person's *one-time* public confession of repentance, a willingness to turn from their sin and to the plan of God for their lives. Even though Jesus was sinless in His essence as God, He had to live a perfect, sinless life as a man, and this meant submitting to the Father's will through the ministry of John the Baptist. Otherwise, when King Herod came to kill all of the infants, as we saw last week, Jesus' death would have atoned for the sin of the world and that would have been the end of His ministry. "But God" had other ideas, and Jesus submitted to the Father's wishes. "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). We can celebrate that Jesus was willing to submit to the Father's plan.

As we make the sign of the cross, we can remember Jesus' baptism and how it demonstrated the reality of the Holy Trinity. We saw during the baptism that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus the Son like a dove (v.16e), and the Father announced, " This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased (v.17b). God said through Isaiah in the first reading, "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him" (Isaiah 42:1). God is delighted in His Righteous Servant, and He delights in us as servants of the Lord Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading is from Acts 10, the alternate reading from Titus 2 won't be covered. As we finish with the second reading, take note of what we said earlier about Isaiah's prophecy regarding freedom for the Gentiles living in darkness, as well as how Jesus was obedient to God as a Servant, even submitting to baptism by John the Baptist.

Second Reading:

Acts 10:34-38 NAS95 34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) — 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea,

starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

Peter said that God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus was available to everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike. He said that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power (38b). Read verse one from the first reading in Isaiah again. "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42:1). Do you see how precisely the prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus? This is the One in whom we trust.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. When Jesus went to John to be baptized he made a public statement about his willingness to submit to the Father's plan through whatever form it would take. Though the Scriptures didn't seem to foretell the event of Jesus' baptism, there was plenty of prophecy regarding the obedient nature that God's Servant Messiah would take. Reflect upon the following verses from Isaiah regarding our Suffering Servant the Lord Jesus.

1 Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, And like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon Him, Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. 3 He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth; Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, So He did not open His mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered That He was cut off out of the land of the living, For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? 9 His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death, Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth. 10 But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. (Isaiah 53:1-11)

How does understanding the radical obedience of Jesus empower you to answer the calling that God has placed upon your life?

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2. In what ways have you made a public profession of your faith? As the New Year dawns, what are some ways in which you could accomplish this during the upcoming year?

Readings for the Week

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/011016.cfm

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 1-3-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **1-3-2016.** The gift-giving season of Christmas has just passed from our radar screens. However, the tradition of gift giving is found in each of the readings of the mass this week. In the Old Testament reading, we see that people will give gifts to Jesus, the King, who will reign on earth during His second advent. The New Testament reading shows us how

St. Paul was God's gift to the Gentiles. In addition, the Gospel reading recounts the story of the Wise Men who came from the East to give gifts to Jesus during His first advent.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted (Romans 11:17) into the people of God through the Church. It is important to understand, at least from a high level, Paul's background while we discuss this mystery which was revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who from all accounts would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strictly Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest

imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v.2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v.3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for November 2, 2013. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I

have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

Note the types of gifts that the future Gentile leaders will bring to King Jesus. "They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6d). Throughout history, gold has been the most valuable of all metals. It's a rare and valuable treasure, and the perfect commodity that never degrades – making it an excellent gift to bring to Jesus, who is reigning as LORD. Frankincense is something very familiar to any Catholic, as this material produces a most pleasant aroma when burned and has the smell of perfume in its native form. I was an altar boy for most of my younger years and was frequently in close proximity to the priest burning this sweet swelling material. The burning of incense is symbolic of the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven (Revelation 5:8). The future world leaders will present their gifts of gold and incense directly to the Source of their salvation, the Lord Himself! What a joyous occasion this will be!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

The context of this section is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, probably less than two years old as we

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

The Jewish priests and scribes told the Magi the prophecy from the Prophet Micah, which they evidently weren't aware of, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This must be the case or they would have gone directly to Bethlehem in the first place and avoided King Herod. Verse 9 said, "And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they **had seen** in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was" (emphasis added). Then, the star reappeared! So what did they do? Did they stop and ask for further directions? No, followed it and went to Bethlehem! Now they had both the prophetic prophesy from the Jews, and the star to guide them. Therefore, they kept going on the journey, but had to BELIEVE God's revelation and follow it.

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. Think about the message that you send implicitly when you send someone a gift. A child gives his

father a pair of gloves for Christmas. Another child gives his mother a box of candy. In light of the New Year and the idea of making resolutions for the next twelve months, what single gift could you present to Jesus this year?

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

Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/010316.cfm

Source(s):

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-27-2015

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **12-27-2015**. This week we open with 1 Samuel 1 where God gives a barren woman a son, whom she dedicates back to the Lord and His service. Then we move to Colossians 3 where we are told to live out the virtues of Christ in response to all He has done in and for us. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel of St. Luke 2 where Jesus begins to reveal His deity and many around him are amazed.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Gender reveal parties have become a popular way for expecting couples to reveal the gender of their baby to family and friends. It is a fun excuse for a party but the truth is, in our society, most people are thrilled and thankful no matter what the gender is.

If the technology had been available, a gender reveal party would have made more sense in Old Testament times. It was important among the Hebrew people to have children. Barrenness was seen as a curse and children as a blessing from the Lord. It was an even greater blessing to have a boy because the family name, inheritance, and headship were passed down through the son.

Elkanah, a man who lived during the time of the Old Testament judges, had two wives—Peninnah and Hannah. There was a rivalry between the two, and Peninnah, who had several sons and daughters, would regularly provoke Hannah because she was barren. This caused Hannah great sorrow.

Yearly, Elkanah would go up to the temple in Shiloh to worship the Lord there. On one of these trips, Hannah poured out her sorrow in the form of a prayer and vow to God. She promised that if God would give her a son, she would in turn give him back to the Lord to serve Him all the days of his life. God heard her prayer and gave her a son whom she named Samuel.

In the First Reading, we see Hannah fulfilling her vow to God. How hard it must have been for her to relinquish her only son to the Lord. Once the child was weaned, she took him to Eli, the priest at Shiloh, and presented him for service to God. What a great demonstration of faith this was.

Sometime later, but while Samuel was still a young boy, God called him to be a prophet in Israel and used him in a powerful way to reveal God's direction and will to God's people. Samuel faithfully spoke the word of the Lord concerning Israel all the days of his life. At God's direction, he anointed David to rule as king over Israel. Eventually another king would come from the house and line of David who would save His people from their sins and reign in righteousness. This king is Jesus.

First Reading:

1 Samuel 1:20-28 NAS95 20 It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD." 21 Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. 22 But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever." 23 Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only may the LORD confirm His word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. 24 Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. 25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. 26 She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. 27 "For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. 28 "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

Like Samuel, our children are a gift from God. We don't have to turn them over to full-time service in the church in order to dedicate them to Him. Teach them to serve God whole-heartedly no matter what profession they choose, knowing that God can do much with a man or woman whose heart is fully devoted to Him.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In many of the Apostle Paul's letters, he presents a tragic picture of us in our sinful, fallen state and contrasts us with Christ in his holiness and perfection. In addition, he recounts what God has done for us in His grace, when we deserved only wrath. Once we understand the depth of our sin and the riches of His grace toward us, only then does he ask us to live a life that properly honors God and reflects His glory.

In the book of Colossians, St. Paul tells us that we were enemies of God, alienated from Him and

living in spiritual and moral darkness (Col.1:13,21). Jesus on the other hand, is the perfect image of the invisible God and supreme over all creation (1: 15-18). By His death He rescued us from the dominion of darkness and reconciled us to God, presenting us free from blemish and accusation (1:13, 22). Because of this, St. Paul says we are to live a life displaying His virtues and being thankful.

Second Reading:

Colossians 3:12-21 NAS95 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.

To display these virtues, we must cooperate with God's work of transformation. If you read all of Ch. 3, you will notice how this passage is interspersed with action verbs that indicate there is something God wants us to do. Col. 3: 2 tells us to *set* our mind on things above—that is, to think about what we possess in the spiritual realm—salvation from our sin, peace with God, and eternal life, to name a few. Verse 5 tells us to *consider* ourselves dead to evil desires. Verse 9 tells us we are to *put aside* the old self and *put on* the new self. That means to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with our old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of our new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit.

In the Second Reading, we are told to *put on* the virtues of compassion, forgiveness, peace, and love. We are to *let* the Word of Christ dwell in our hearts, living its wisdom and teaching its precepts to others. Wives are to *submit* to husbands, husbands are to *love t*heir wives, and children are to *obey* parents. God is transforming us into Christ's likeness and calling us to intentionally live out those virtues for the benefit of others and the glory of God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The first 20 verses of the second chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke are some of the most well known of the whole New Testament. This is the story of Jesus' birth in a humble stable and the angels' glorious announcement to the shepherds that a Savior has been born.

This Savior was God the Son who took on human flesh and was born as a baby—fully God and fully man. And just like other human babies, Jesus grew from an infant to a boy to a man, increasing in

physical stature but also in wisdom and favor with God and men (Luke 2:40,52).

While much of his growth was typical, Jesus also developed in ways that astounded those around Him. This Gospel Reading recounts an occasion when Jesus, as a twelve-year-old boy, amazed the seasoned teachers in the temple with the depth of His understanding of the things of God.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem in a caravan with his parents to celebrate the Feast of the Passover. A day into the return trip, Mary and Joseph discovered their son was not with them. They quickly returned to Jerusalem, and after an anxious three-day search, found Jesus in the temple, interacting with the Jewish teachers.

Mothers everywhere can identify with Mary's response which was likely a mixture of relief and consternation: *"Why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you."* Jesus' response must have sounded impudent to those who didn't fully understand who He was. He asked, *"Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know I had to be in My Father's house?*

No, Mary didn't know. It seems neither she nor Joseph fully understood the implications of the statement their son had made to them. They didn't understand that Jesus was under the authority of another Father, a Heavenly One, and Jesus would soon follow that Father's will all the way to the cross. All would be revealed in the fullness of time. Until then, Jesus continued to live in subjection to His earthly parents, and Mary treasured all these things in her heart.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 2:41-52 NAS95 41 Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; 43 and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, 44 but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. 45 When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him. 46 Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. 48 When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You." 49 And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. 51 And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Mary tried to make sense out of the events as they unfolded. We, on the other hand, have the whole written record of Jesus in the Bible. We know the rest of His story: He entered into ministry, performed miracles, claimed to be Son of God, and proclaimed that He was (and is) the way, the

truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Him (Gospel of St John 14:6). He purchased our salvation through His death and resurrection, and someday He is coming again to rule and reign in righteousness. This Christmas season we can celebrate our Savior's birth and share the rest of this glorious story with all who come to celebrate with us.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. What can you do this week to actively put aside old habits and patterns of living associated with your old, sinful self and actively live out the virtues of your new life in Christ by the power of God's Spirit?

2. On Christmas a Savior was born. What can you do to help others around you know Jesus as their Savior?

Readings for the Week

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

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/122715.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-20-2015

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **12-20-2015**. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Micah where we learn about a prediction God gave concerning the Messiah. Then we learn about Jesus' high priestly ministry in the second reading from the Book of Hebrews. We close this week's study with the Gospel reading from Luke in which Mary visits Elizabeth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

As a Christian, it's important to be patient and wait upon God, even when we see great injustices going on around us. Impatience was one of the issues that got into the way of the Jews properly interpreting the passages concerning the coming Messiah. One may think that if the First Century Jews had a good grasp on the Scriptures so many of them wouldn't have missed the First Coming of Jesus. The Jews had endured centuries of persecution from the various world powers including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. From all appearances the Prophet Micah made it very clear what would happen, even if this forerunner didn't explain the exact timing of the events.

Today's reading opens with a summary of the former sieges possibly under the direction of either King Sennacherib (of the Syrian Empire) or Nebuchadnezzar (of Babylon), then provides an astounding prophecy about the coming ruler Jesus. Micah wrote during the reign of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah (Micah 1:1), some eight centuries before the birth of Jesus.

First Reading:

Micah 5:1-4 NAS95 1 "Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; They have laid siege against us; With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek. 2 "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." 3 Therefore He will give them up until the time When she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel. 4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock In the strength of the LORD, In the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth.

Micah said that their enemies would so disparage them that even their own king would be humiliated, or "With a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek" (v. 1c). Throughout their history Israel has frequently been the subject of attacks and invasions, and in this case Micah was likely referring either to an attack by the Assyrians or the Babylonians. While this prophecy came true in Micah's day they also pointed to the Messiah. Jesus was struck in the face in the time leading up to His crucifixion (John 18:22, Matthew 26:67). From there the prophet moved on to reveal more about the coming Messiah we now know as Jesus. He said, "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (v. 2). Micah named the exact town in which the Messiah would be born. Though there were two towns named Bethlehem in Israel, he differentiated between the one in the north and the one near Jerusalem in which the new King would be born. One would assume that a powerful leader would come from the capital city, Jerusalem. However, Micah's prophecy revealed that this would not be case, instead the ruler would come from the tiny insignificant town of Bethlehem. (We sing the song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," as a reminder of God's unusual way of exalting the lowliest of cities for His purposes). From this insignificant city God would bring forth a ruler who usher in spiritual deliverance from the ultimate enemy Satan. Micah brought forth the idea that the Messiah was from eternity (v. 2). This corresponds to what the Prophet Daniel said about the Messiah being the "Ancient of Days" (Daniel 7:22). He is not a created being, rather He existed in eternity past as part of the Godhead (John 1:1-2). It is difficult to understand what the prophet meant when he said, "He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child" (v. 3). It is safe to say that the Israelites were subject to a 400-year period of prophetic silence where they might have felt abandoned by God and wondered if He would ever bring forth the promised Messiah. The prophet goes on to foretell the in-grafting of the Gentiles into the family of God by saying, "Then the remainder of His brethren Will return to the sons of Israel" (v. 3, see Romans 11:17). Like the other prophets, Micah also telescoped near and far term events today when he saw the kingdom of Jesus. During Jesus' First Advent, He came as a shepherd leader where He declared Himself to be the Good Shepherd (verse 4, John 10:11). His true leadership is yet to be realized after He returns at the end of the age "Because at that time He will be great To the ends of the earth" (v. 4).

It's amazing when you compare Micah's prophecy to the life of Jesus and recognize the precision of the fulfillment by Jesus. As we move towards Christmas may we be reminded of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem and His coming rulership over all the earth when He comes again so that our lives reflect this reality.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Jesus fulfilled other prophecies besides what we just read in Micah. Our New Testament reading in Hebrews points out another important way that Jesus completed the requirements of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Through His perfect sacrifice, Jesus ushered in a new era of relating to God the Father. This passage helps us to see why it is necessary for us to place our faith in Jesus Who perfectly executed the will of the Father on our behalf.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 10:5-10 NAS95 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME; 6 IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE. 7 "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.'" 8 After saying above, "SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS AND WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, NOR HAVE YOU TAKEN PLEASURE in them" (which are offered according to the Law), 9 then He said, "BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." He takes away the first in order to establish the second. 10 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The author of Hebrews quoted from several Old Testament passages to show how Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Law and brought an end to the need for the sacrificial system. The first Old Testament passage is from Psalm 40:6 that explains how God was fed up with their dead religion which involved ritualistic sacrifice. The Psalmist explains how the One that will come to fulfil these prophecies will perfectly obey the will of God, "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:8). Because Jesus perfectly fulfilled the will of God, we can be counted righteous based upon His merit (2 Corinthians 5:21). The reading closes with an important point about how Jesus took away the first covenant of the Law and brought in the second one of grace. The author said, "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (v. 10). We are sanctified or made holy through a one-time sacrifice that can never be repeated.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading this week tells the story of Mary the mother of Jesus' visit to Elizabeth who was to be the mother of John the Baptist. The context of the reading is that Mary had just been visited by the Angel Gabriel and told how she would be the mother of God's Son Jesus, the Messiah. This reading is very important for Mary because she had just been told this incredible news about how God was going to bring the Messiah into the world through a supernatural, virgin birth. You can imagine that Mary's heart was both elated and confused. Her visit to Elizabeth would have been a comforting and confirming experience to establish her faith in God's unusual method of bringing the Messiah into the world.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 1:39-45 NAS95 39 Now at this time Mary arose and went in a hurry to the hill country, to a city

of Judah, 40 and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 And she cried out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord would come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped in my womb for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

When Mary arrived at her relatives' home, Elizabeth was six months pregnant even though she was advanced in age and barren up until that point (Luke 1:36). Elizabeth's greeting would have been confirmation to Mary that God was up to something and her appearance by the Angel Gabriel was not a figment of her imagination. We see a contrast in this passage regarding the response to the Angel Gabriel's messages. Zacharias had not believed Gabriel but instead had asked for a sign (Luke 1:18). Elizabeth said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Mary had immediately believed, "And blessed is she who believed" (v. 45a). She was able to encourage Mary's tender heart of belief that God could do the impossible, especially in light of the fact that she herself was pregnant with her own miracle child.

Elizabeth used this opportunity through the power of the Holy Spirit, to pronounce blessing upon Mary. She said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (v. 42). She also blessed her for believing what God had spoken to her through Gabriel. You can imagine that these pronouncements of blessing would have been important to Mary as she endured much opposition and suspicion over her unusual pregnancy. Mary may have even questioned whether this was a blessing or a curse when she was almost divorced by Joseph and when they had to travel to Bethlehem when she was great with child. The Christmas story is full of difficulties but this passage reminds us that being in the center of God's will is to be blessed. Circumstances do not determine our favor from the Lord.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. As Christmas is very near take a moment to conduct an inventory of thankfulness. Write down five things for which you are thankful this Christmas holiday.

2. List two major challenges that came your way during the past year. How has God helped you through your challenges this year? What Scripture verses helped you during these difficult times?

Readings for the Week

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