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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 01-19-2020



This week we will open with another of Isaiah's "Servant Songs. Then we will look at the introduction to Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians abd close with the Gospel lesson in which we will see the event when John the Baptist announced the promised Messiah.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

> *to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:3-6)*

The first purpose of the servants was to restore the Jews to God. The LORD said to His Servant Son that He "formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him" (v.5b-ff). Though Israel was the God's servant (v.3, "My Servant Israel,") this Servant Son was born with the express purpose of restoring the people of God to true communion with Him. Jesus said in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37).

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

from the Servant Song in Isaiah.

Second Reading:

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

Here is some background about Sosthenes mentioned in verse 1. This man, whose name means "safe in strength" and pronounced "sose then ace" was likely the amanuensis who wrote the Book for Paul, meaning the one to whom Paul dictated it through the inspiration of Holy Spirit. It's likely that this scholar was a man of high standing in the church, and also the converted synagogue ruler who is mentioned in Acts 18:17. If this is the same man then he is the one who likely replaced the former ruler Crispus (Acts 18:8) who also became a believer in the Lord Jesus. Though Sosthenes probably wrote down the Letter, Paul added a greeting "in his own hand" at the end (! Corinthians 16:21).

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

The second purpose of the servant Paul was to affirm the holiness (or sainthood) of all true believers (v.2c). Paul affirmed this in the Letter to the Romans when he said, "to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints" (Romans 1:7). The idea behind the usage of this particular word translated as "saint" from the original is holiness, meaning to be set apart. This means that one should be morally pure or blameless, unique from the ordinary culture that does not view human beings as much different than animals. Some Bible versions have used the word "holy" instead of "saint." Either way, the people of God are both called to *be* holy and are affirmed *as being* holy in Paul's

opening statement. This "already, not yet" call to holy living is echoed throughout the Epistles. Through belief in Jesus the righteousness of God *has been* imparted to a believer (Romans 3:21-22). However, God calls believers to live righteously on an ongoing basis. Paul said in Romans, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, **acceptable to God**, which is your spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1, emphasis added). So we may remark that someone is a "saint" when they display unusual patience or kindness, but truly each child of God is a saint. Let's live up to this glorious calling in our moment by moment choices, attitudes and lives.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

> *upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29-34)*

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

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

A second purpose of John was that he affirmed his personal humility and faith in God's announcement concerning the Messiah. He said, "And I did not recognize Him" (v.33a). Does this means that the even the greatest man that ever lived didn't immediately recognize the Messiah? He certainly knew Jesus as a person, but not as the Messiah, until it was revealed to him explicitly by God through the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the way in which the Holy Spirit would come upon the Promised One. Imagine the life of John the Baptist. From the day he was born, he was told by his parents and then through divine messages from God in the form of the Old Testament Scriptures that he was to be the one that announced the long awaited Messiah. Then when Jesus actually arrived on the scene to begin his public ministry he stated that he didn't recognize Him as the Messiah until God granted him a divine revelation that this was indeed the One whom he was expecting.

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

spot. When he saw Jesus he didn't recognize Him right away as the Messiah. But, when God spoke the matter was confirmed once and forever.

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

Reflection Questions

1. What about us, what has God raised us up to be watching for? What are the purposes that God has placed upon *our* hearts as servants of the Lord? Consider taking the following action. Pray right now for God to reveal one or two things, write them down, and reflect upon them this week.
2. If all true Christians are "saints" how does that change your view of your life's purpose and meaning? How can you live into the identity of being set apart for special use?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 01-12-2020

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Today's first reading is from Isaiah where we see the concept of Messianic typology. In the second reading, Saint Peter expounds on how anyone, Jew or Gentile, is saved (spared from God's justifiable wrath) through faith in Jesus Christ. Then we move to a brief Gospel lesson from Saint Mark in which we see John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus' baptism in which all three Persons of the Holy Trinity are represented.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied during the time from 739 – 681 BC to the Jewish people who had walked away from God in their hearts and instead observed rote repetitive religious practices which were meaningless to them. Additionally, though they were rich in physical blessings, Isaiah warned them about their harsh treatment of the poor (Isaiah 3:15). Isaiah frequently uses a technique called "prophetic foreshortening" in which significant yet distant events are displayed as happening in the near term, such that their fulfillment is "telescoped" or "foreshortened" together with near term events. He also uses a significant amount of Messianic typology such as the display of Jesus as the Suffering Servant in Chapter 53. A theological type is something that prefigures its ultimate explanation, such as the Prophet Jonah being three days in the belly of the fish which prefigured Jesus being in the grave for three days (see Matthew 12:40). Another of the types that he displayed was King Cyrus who was the King of Persia under whom the later Babylonian captivity of Judah (the southern kingdom) ended. Isaiah named Cyrus as God's chosen instrument under whom the 70-year Jewish captivity would be broken hundreds of years before he was even born (Isaiah 44:28).

In today's reading In Chapter 42, it seems that Isaiah is once again speaking of Cyrus as a type of the coming Messiah (Jesus). As you read the opening verses of Chapter 42, you should recognize the typological representation of King Cyrus whose identity is soon lost in the revelation of the Person of the Messiah. As we read the text from Isaiah, we likely don't immediately see the person of Cyrus but rather Jesus because we are so familiar with how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. For us, the distant event in Isaiah's day of the coming of Jesus Christ completely overshadowed anything about the immediate circumstances being encountered by the Jewish people during Isaiah's time. *Note: The reading omitted verse 5 that has been included in the text below.*

First Reading:

> *(Isaiah 42:1-7) 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.*

The opening verse reads almost exactly like God's pronouncement made at the baptism of Jesus Who said, "This is my Son in Whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17, from today's Gospel reading). The baptism of Jesus displayed the Holy Trinity of God much like we see in this reading. At the baptism the Spirit of God descended on Him as a dove (Matthew 3:16) along with the Father's pronouncement as we just noted. In Isaiah's text we see the Father pronouncing His pleasure in the Son along with the proclamation that God has put His Spirit upon Him (v. 1), something that certainly looks far beyond King Cyrus. As Isaiah continues he explains the nature of Jesus and His ministry, he will be quiet and meek (vv. 2 – 3), not boldly proclaiming as had his predecessor John the Baptist, but quiet and not even breaking a brittle reed or extinguishing a smoldering lamp wick (v. 3). Verse 4 says that Jesus will "not be disheartened until He has established justice in the earth." In verse five Isaiah provides God's profound stamp of creative authority, He is the One "Who spread out the earth and its offspring . . . ." He is also the One who called the people in righteousness to worship Him alone and reminded the Jews of His covenant with them (v. 6). He reminded them that one of their purposes was to be a light to the nations (v.6) to open the spiritually blind eyes of the

people (v. 7). When the Messiah comes, He would also be a light to the nations, as Luke said in Luke 2:32 regarding Jesus. The Messiah will open the blind eyes of the people held in bondage, both to their sin as well as to the captivity they would experience under various civil kings such as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. Saint Peter referred to this when he mentioned freeing the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19).

As believers, we can proclaim that although we have not seen Jesus, we believe that He has freed us from the darkness of our own spiritual prisons where we were held by the evil one in darkness (2 Corinthians 4:3-4, also see the Reflection Questions).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is Peter's speech to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1), a god-fearing Gentile who respected the Jews by giving them alms (Acts 10:2). Cornelius had seen an angel of God telling him to send a delegation to bring Peter to Joppa so he could speak with him.

Second Reading:

> *(Acts 10:34-38) 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 explained how as we saw in Isaiah 42:6 that God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ wasn't limited just to the Jews but extended to anyone who believed. Peter's speech came after he had seen a vision of a great sheet descending from the sky and filled with animals that were ceremonially unclean to the Jews (Acts 10:9-16). In this vision, God commanded Peter to "kill and eat," and said that these animals were not to be regarded as clean because they had been cleansed by God (v. 15). In order to further emphasize the importance of this vision God repeated it three times. Therefore, when Peter met with Cornelius and heard about the miraculous events that had happened with him too seeing a vision from God (in the form of an angel) Peter understood that the plan of salvation had been extended to the Gentiles. In the New Testament era the church has stepped in where Peter left off, proclaiming the message of salvation to everyone, not just to the

Jews as was Peter's (the Rock) primary ministry.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Matthew where he recorded Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist. One could think that Jesus wouldn't need to be baptized by anyone, rather that He would be the One doing the baptizing. However, we find out something quite different in the reading. *Note: The * indicates the translation of a Greek word in the historical present tense.*

Gospel Reading:

> *Matthew 3:13-17 NAS95 13 Then Jesus *arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. 14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" 15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he *permitted Him. 16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, 17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom 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 the infants two years old and younger, as was recorded in the Gospel of Luke, 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.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading (Isaiah 42) we saw how the Messiah would be a light to all the nations to open their spiritually blind eyes and hearts. Saint Paul spoke about the agent responsible for this spiritual blinding: "*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

To whom is Paul referring to as the "god of this age"? A clue can be found in the last verse of the second reading from Acts.

2. How does the fact that Jesus submitted to His Father's will regarding seemingly small things like being baptized help us to identify with Jesus' humanity? What are a few ways in which you have recently submitted to God the Father's will for you?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 01-05-2020

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week we are first going to examine the second reading from Saint Paul because the first reading from Isaiah and Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew must be studied together in light of the insights from Paul. The second reading is Ephesians Chapter Three where Paul unveiled a mystery that had been hidden throughout the ages until after Jesus' First Advent, what we just celebrated at Christmas. As you read this section of Ephesians try to select the single verse that Saint Paul provided which summarized this mystery.

Note: Verse 1 which was omitted from the reading is included below.

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.

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Reflection Questions

1. Think about the message that you send implicitly when you send someone a gift. A child gives his father a pair of gloves for Christmas. Another child gives his mother a box of candy. In light of the New Year and the idea of making resolutions for the next twelve months, what single gift could you present to Jesus this year?
2. It is easy to criticize the Pharisees for judging the Gentiles and for considering them "unworthy" of being saved. The definition of grace is that no one is worthy of it. It is God's unmerited favor. Think about your own attitude towards those who seem unlikely to become Christians. Is there someone who you can identify as unlikely to be a fellow heir, a fellow member of the body and a fellow partaker in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel? Commit to pray for this person and look for ways to be like St. Paul by loving them and speaking the truth of the Gospel to them.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-29-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we see how God protected the holy family of

Jesus and how this reveals God's love and concern for us in our own Christian lives.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

1SIR 3:2-6, 12-14

God sets a father in honor over his children;

a mother's authority he confirms over her sons.

Whoever honors his father atones for sins,

and preserves himself from them.

When he prays, he is heard;

he stores up riches who reveres his mother.

Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children,

and, when he prays, is heard.

Whoever reveres his father will live a long life;

he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother.

My son, take care of your father when he is old;

grieve him not as long as he lives.

Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him;

revile him not all the days of his life;

kindness to a father will not be forgotten,

firmly planted against the debt of your sins

—a house raised in justice to you.

Sirach was written during the timeframe of around 200 BC. This was a time during which the Jewish people had experience terrible hardship following the destruction of the temple in 586BC, but before the persecution and desecration of the restored temple during the reign of the anti-christ figure Antiochus IV Epiphanes which ultimately led up to the Maccabean revolt. In the reading the writer emphases the biblical theme of respect of children for their parents, both their mother and father. This is reflected in the Exodus 20:12, "honor thy father and mother." The writer admonishes the readers to go further and take care of their parents in their old age. It is interesting that the Ten Commandments included a promise for those who honored their parents. "Honor your father and your mother, so that **you may live long** in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12, NASB, emphasis added). This admonition is also noted by Saint Paul in Ephesians 6:2. The bottom line is that God calls us to honor or mother and father and God will reward us for doing so.

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 this 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:

Chapter 2 of Saint Matthew opens just after the birth of Jesus with the arrival of the magi, the mystical priestly type people from the east (Matthew 2:1). These visitors were likely influence by the Prophet Daniel such that they possessed prophetic information regarding the promise of the coming Jewish Messiah. Verses 1 – 12 record the events of the magi's visit where we take up with today's reading in verse 13.

Note: In this verse the asterisk (*) character marks the use of the a "historical present" tense verb, but which was translated with an English past tense. This made the most sense to the translators to extend the most correct meaning to the English translation.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mt 2:13 Now when they had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord *appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." 14 So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. 15 He remained there until*

> *the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."*
>
> *Omitted Verses (16-18):*
>
> *16 Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. 17 Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 18 "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."*
>
> *19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord *appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, 20 "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." 21 So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, 23 and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."*

Today's reading showed how God directed Joseph to protect the baby Jesus from King Herod by directing him to flee to Egypt. Keep in mind that Matthew did not record the time that elapsed between the birth of Jesus, the visit of the magi, the flight of Joseph and Mary with Jesus to Egypt, the return of the holy family to Israel. We know from Luke that the holy family returned at some point to Bethlehem when Jesus was about two years old, such that Herod's decree was to murder all children two years old and younger. Regardless of the details and timing, we see how God divinely superintended the protection of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. The consequences of Herod's wickedness are shown in verses 16 – 18, which were omitted from the Lectionary in today's reading. In order to be sure that the newborn king Jesus was killed, Herod directed that all the children be killed in the region in which Jesus was born during the particular timeframe (v. 16, "two years old and younger."). God, through the angel of the Lord, then directed Joseph to return (with Mary and Jesus) once King Herod had died (v. 20). Joseph fulfilled the Scripture (likely unknowingly) by settling in the town of Nazareth.

The big ideas in the reading is how God sovereignly protected Jesus, how He used his angelic beings to guide and direct Jesus' earthly parents, and the extent to which the evil rulers of the age attempted to exterminate Messiah Jesus. No plans of God could be foiled in bringing about Jesus as

the supreme sacrifice for the people sin. Joseph and Mary obediently followed the directions given to them by God through angels and dreams. Finally, ever last bit of prophecy written about Jesus in the Old Testament was fulfilled.

There are two applications of today's Gospel reading. First, In the same way that we look back at how God's sovereign hand both guided and protected Jesus and His parents, we too can be sure that as believers in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9-11) God is divinely watching over our lives and directing us and even His angelic being to help us. Hebrews says about the angels, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14).

Second, in the same way that the prophecy concerning Jesus concerning Jesus was fulfilled, biblical prophecy concerning all believers will be fulfilled down to the smallest detail. Knowing the promises of God is required if we as believers are to understand how God can fulfil them. No plans of the enemy will prosper against God's promises, although at times we may not always understand how things will play out. Joseph and Mary likely never anticipated that they would have to flee to Egypt after Jesus' birth. However, as the story played out, we can see how God both guided and protected the holy family to accomplish His divine purposes. We can rest in the fact that God will work out all things for those who love Him and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). For, "If God is for us, who is against us?" (Romans 8:31b).

An employee of mine (Dave) once told me a story about a time that he was driving one dark, very foggy night in Jackson, Michigan with a friend in the car with him. As this person was driving, someone in the car suddenly screamed, "watch out for that person walking!" The driver then swerved and narrowly missed a person dressed in dark clothing walking in the road. Once he recovered from his fright, he told the passenger, "Good thing you screamed and told me about that person walking or I would have hit him for sure!" The passenger then told him, "I didn't scream." He then asked him what he meant; didn't he hear anyone scream warning about the person in the road? The passenger told him that not only didn't he scream, but he never heard anyone else scream either. Dave immediately recognized this as a miracle. God works out all things for Dave, and the person dressed in black walking on the road, in the fog, in the dark, and wearing black clothes.

Reflection Questions

1. In the Gospel reading we saw how God divinely protected Jesus and his parents. God works in all believers lives to protect them. When was a time that you can remember how God divinely protected you or a family member / friend? How does remembering this help you to face your current and future challenges?
2. Will you commit to telling someone your story about God protected you or someone else?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 12-08-2019



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

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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move onto the second reading from Romans 15:4-9 (plus the skipped verses 10-12), again we find a writing from Isaiah, one of the most frequently quoted of the prophets. The text opens with an important admonition about the value of the Old Testament Scriptures. As you read, note the importance of this admonition as well as the connection to the first reading from Isaiah 11.

Second Reading:

> *4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; 6 that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles*

> *to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO THEE AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO THY NAME." 10 And again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." 11 And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." 12 And again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." (Romans 15:4-12)*

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

> *16 And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. 17 And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, 18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND*

> *RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWNTRODDEN, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)*

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

> *And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:1-12)*

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

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

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Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-17-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The Bible teaches throughout both the Old and New Testaments the importance or recognizing the immanency of the coming of the Lord Jesus and His eventual return. Later in this lesson we will look at readings from the Old Testament Book of Malachi and in the New Testament the Gospel of Luke that address these topics. In spite of these frequent teachings it's easy to get caught up in our daily lives and overlook the possibility of meeting the Lord ourselves at any given instant. I write about that in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's notes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

I will draw near to you for judgment" (v.5a). God says that He will be near to the people of Israel but it's for the purpose of judgment. This verse is helpful because it should remind us that as God judges His people He is still near to them, and His judgment is ultimately for their good. Let's read the text from the first reading in Chapter 4 but continue until the end of the chapter.

First Reading:

> *1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.*
>
> *Omitted Verses:*
>
> *3 You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." Malachi 4:1-6 NASB (Malachi 3:19-24 in the Lectionary).*

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

What is the relevance of Malachi's teaching for us in the Church today? As we discussed in those previous lessons, we find in the teachings of Saint Paul that God has granted an escape to all believers alive at His second coming. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). Malachi's call was for the people to repent of their sin and turn the Lord. This is precisely the call for everyone alive on the earth today, from every tribe and nation. Malachi's message serves as both a warning for people to heed the call to turn to the One True God but also to let believers know that God hasn't forsaken His people Israel. God will work actively to redeem His people and show them the need to turn their hearts to Him, even if it means subjecting them to terrible judgment. He will leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is missing (Luke 15:4). If God loves his people Israel so much to go to this length to save them, how much more does He desire that everyone alive today turn to him through faith in Jesus? Saint Paul said, "But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart' –that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" Romans 10:8-10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

> *2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 NASB (plus skipped verse 6)*
>
> *6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.*

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." 7 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" 8 And He said, "See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is near'. Do not go after them. 9 When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." 10 Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, 11 and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great*

> *signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. 16 But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, 17 and you will be hated by all because of My name. 18 Yet not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:5-19*

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

What's the importance of Saint Luke's teaching for us as we live our lives as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? First, we should expect to see the types of events that Jesus spoke of as happening during this period. We should be surprised to be persecuted for our faith. Second, we must not be surprised to hear about false messiahs such as cult leaders who claim to be Jesus or start whole religious movements through new ways of interpreting the Bible. Many false religious movements have arisen such as the interpretation of secret "Bible codes." Jesus said not to be surprised by these events. Third, we should expect to see terrible natural disasters on an unprecedented scale. As I'm writing this the news is coming in about the awful destruction brought about by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you almost faced the Lord? Were you a believer in the Lord Jesus when this happened? If you were, did the event lead you to a closer walk with Jesus? In what ways was it possible that this event was a means of God's judgment in such a way as to draw you closer to Him?
2. In our modern age we have often compartmentalized our lives thinking that worship belongs to Sunday while work is a Monday to Friday kind of thing. Have you ever considered your work as a form of worship? As we saw in the second reading, Saint Paul calls us to emulate his godly behavior in working without being a burden on others while continuing to serve without an expectation of reward. In what ways can you reconsider your work life as worship? How would taking on this new mindset help you to A. Relate to others at your workplace, B. Have a more accurate view of your service to God even if you are not engaged in full time ministry?

Going Deeper

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

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I made a turn on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board which sent it flying one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile that same large wave crashed on top of me with my sail! I

let loose of the sail and soon realized that I was drowning. I quickly noticed that I was unable to float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves and soon got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air in between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray. As I continued fighting I had a strange realization and began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real, and is difficult to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me. Yet I continued to fight and pray.

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

My story ended well. Somehow, I came to realize that if I pulled on my wet suit, I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. Against all odds I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot long mast with a flag attached. Between the huge waves I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and eventually someone riding a jet ski spotted me and came over and yanked me out of the water. As I walked back up the beach, I praised God, and someone offered me a ride in their truck so I could hurry back to tell my brother the amazing story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition. Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario I had my first meal as a truly "born from above" man.

Although I am much more careful while windsurfing, I recognize that I don't have the choice to know when I will meet the Lord Jesus. It's up to Him and could happen at any time. We must be prepared for we never know the day or the hour.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-10-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about how believers can be comforted through hard times as well as some insights into God's eternal kingdom he has prepared for us. We see that in the first reading from the Apocryphal book of Second Maccabees, then again in 2 Thessalonians.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Maccabees. This book provides much very important information about the happenings during the 400-year silent period before the birth of Christ, during which time no prophets of God spoke (1 Macc 9:27). The purpose of this book was to provide comfort to the Jews who were enduring intense persecution.

First Reading:

> *It happened that seven brothers with their mother were arrested*

and tortured with whips and scourges by the king,

to force them to eat pork in violation of God's law.

One of the brothers, speaking for the others, said:

"What do you expect to achieve by questioning us?

We are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors."

At the point of death he said:

"You accursed fiend, you are depriving us of this present life,

but the King of the world will raise us up to live again forever.

It is for his laws that we are dying."

After him the third suffered their cruel sport.

He put out his tongue at once when told to do so,

and bravely held out his hands, as he spoke these noble words:

"It was from Heaven that I received these;

for the sake of his laws I disdain them;

from him I hope to receive them again."

Even the king and his attendants marveled at the young man's courage,

because he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

After he had died,

they tortured and maltreated the fourth brother in the same way.

When he was near death, he said,

"It is my choice to die at the hands of men

with the hope God gives of being raised up by him;

but for you, there will be no resurrection to life."

2 MC 7:1-2, 9-14

Today's reading from Second Maccabees was written during a period of intense persecution of God's people the Jews. The Nation of Israel was under terrible oppression leading up to the time when the tumult against the evil pagan king Antiochus IV Epiphanes climaxed resulting in the downfall of the beastly, antichrist figure by the Jewish hero Judas Maccabeus. The reading provides one tiny glimpse into the horrors the Nation experienced under Antiochus Epiphanes. The closing verses reveal the hope that the dying brother had in the One True God, and his hope that justice would prevail against his tormenters. One can only imagine the horrors that the Jews experienced during this time, times which were eerily repeated under another antichrist type ruler, Adolph Hitler. The Bible describes how in the end times before the return of the Lord Jesus, how another ruler will emerge whom the Lord Jesus will crush. "*Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming*" (2Th 2:8).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

In today's reading, we see that Paul experienced suffering and prayed for the Thessalonian believers to be comforted in their affliction. I t is important to note that a biblical perspective never assumes that Christians will not suffer. The difference is that we have hope beyond this world, as Paul says, "eternal comfort" (v.16). It is God's love that provides comfort, hope and strength to keep walking in the good works that He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Instead of being sidetracked by suffering and opposition, Paul asked his fellow believers to pray for them that God would cause His Word to spread and be honored among the people who have not yet heard. Paul recognized the reality of suffering but did not see the situation as hopeless. He turned to God for help and hope.

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Second, The Sadducees were an interesting bunch of legalistic Jewish believers who held the majority power in the religious court authority called the Sanhedrin in First Century Israel. They

held different beliefs than the other group called the Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in the afterlife, and only held the first five Books of the Bible to be authoritative. This last thing led them to hold some unusual beliefs since they didn't have the benefit of the vast array of historical or prophetic Books in the Old Testament Bible through which to properly interpret the Jewish Law. With this background in mind let's take a deeper look at the Gospel text.

The Sadducees approached Jesus with false motives. They were not truly seeking truth from Jesus, but instead were trying to stump him. They wanted to trip Him up in this theological chess game. Looking back to the previous section Luke said about the scribes and Pharisees, "So they watched Him, and sent spies who pretended to be righteous, in order that they might catch Him in some statement, so that they could deliver Him to the rule and the authority of the governor" (Luke 20:20). This previous verse was directed at the other group known as the Pharisees, ones who *did* believe in the resurrection. In the Gospel text today Jesus addressed the particular beliefs of the other group, the Sadducees. Jesus, seeing the Sadducees motives and the faultiness of their presuppositions, treated them with dignity and grace. Yet they set up an impossible scenario for Jesus to answer based upon their belief system. Jesus explained where they were off base in their reasoning, and His points were as follows.

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

from the Sadducees own Holy Scriptures that there is life after death on earth. Checkmate, game over!

Gospel Reading:

27 Now there came to Him some of the Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection), 28 and they questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that IF A MAN'S BROTHER DIES, having a wife, AND HE IS CHILDLESS, HIS BROTHER SHOULD TAKE THE WIFE AND RAISE UP OFFSPRING TO HIS BROTHER. 29 "Now there were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died childless; 30 and the second 31 and the third took her; and in the same way all seven died, leaving no children. 32 "Finally the woman died also. 33 "In the resurrection therefore, which one's wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife." 34 And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage; 36 for neither can they die anymore, for they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. 37 "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB. 38 "Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him." (Luke 20:27-38 NASB)

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

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

Even though the Sadducees only believed that they would go around once in life, they believed in the biblical truths from the Old Testament Pentateuch. Jesus showed them that they were responsible for their actions in this life. Jesus graciously taught them through their own Scriptures that their eternal destiny was a direct result of their choices made during their lives. They were responsible

for paying careful attention to the walk with God. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Believers are transformed through the resurrection into a "world" that is also transformed, a place where sin no longer exists and God will walk among us. As believers, we can look forward to eternal life with God through the promises made by Jesus that "we are saved by grace through faith and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

1. What is the importance of the resurrection for you? What difference does knowing the truth of the resurrection make in your day to day life as a Christian?
2. Describe the importance of sharing your faith with nonbelievers. How does the promise of God to give you a new eternally perfect body free from pain and one in which you will be free from sin and able to stand with God in your renewed, eternal flesh, motivate you to share with others this good news?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-03-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians and then the Gospel reading from Saint Luke.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom.

> *Before the LORD the whole universe is as a grain from a balance*
>
> *or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth.*
>
> *But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things;*
>
> *and you overlook people's sins that they may repent.*
>
> *For you love all things that are*
>
> *and loathe nothing that you have made;*
>
> *for what you hated, you would not have fashioned.*
>
> *And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it;*
>
> *or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you?*

But you spare all things, because they are yours,

O LORD and lover of souls,

for your imperishable spirit is in all things!

Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little,

warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing,

that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O LORD!

Wisdom WIS 11:22-12:2

The reading from the Book of Wisdom affirms the biblical value that God places upon repentance. God I patient with us as sinners so that He gives us the time and wisdom we need to repent. Saint Peter affirmed this. "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God calls us, as the reading says, to "abandon (our) wickedness and believe in (Him)", the only source of total and true forgiveness. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Even though "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a), "the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

It was a very windy midsummer day in northern Michigan as I raced my windsurf board across the Straits of Mackinaw on my way back from Mackinaw Island, Michigan. Earlier, I sailed between the towers of the mighty Mackinaw Bridge and then returned to the shore of Lake Huron to make a few adjustments on my sail. Next, I sailed seven miles across the Straits to Mackinaw Island and was on my way back towards the campground where we were staying. At this point the wind began calming and shifting in a direction that was going to make it very difficult to return to the spot from where I had launched. Eventually I made it back to the sandy shore on Lake Huron, but was a few miles down from where I launched. I walked up the hill, borrowed a cell phone from someone, and called my wife to pick me up. I heard a strange silence on the other end and she said, "You're alive!" As it turned out someone had given some bad information to the police who then called the Coast Guard thinking that I had gone down somewhere in the Straits. This led to a series of cascading events including a large manhunt with a helicopter, rescue divers, and local police operating from a command center in a marina in Mackinaw City. Evidently, a fellow camper had been watching me from the shore and at some point, she couldn't locate me. She then proceeded to tell one of the authorities at the campground who then called the police. The police then alerted the Coast Guard

and the manhunt was on! The whole affair began by one piece of bad information. [*If you are interested you can read the story online here:*

http://www.cheboygannews.com/article/20130720/NEWS/130719421]

In the same way that a false report led to a series of cascading events that day while I was windsurfing, false information in the church can lead to a plethora of serious effects in the Christian church. This was the case in the second reading today from Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians. This was Paul's second written communication to this group of believers who had believed some false information concerning the timing of and events surrounding the return of the Lord Jesus. The overall purpose of the letter also included the encouragement of the believers in Thessalonica during their ongoing persecution for their faith.

Read the text including verses 3 – 12 which were skipped in the lectionary and are necessary understand the context and the points which Paul were addressing.

Second Reading:

> *11 With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. 12 We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2:1 Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God. 5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming. 9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, 10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2 THES 1:11-2: 12 NIV)*

The key verses that revealed the context of Paul's address in this section were chapter 2 verses 1-2. "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come." Evidently, the people had believed a false report from a forged letter reportedly written by Paul that Jesus had already returned. This news was very disturbing to the Thessalonians because they were enduring persecution for Jesus and if He had already returned then they had possibly been suffering for nothing. Paul had explained in his first letter to them how believers would meet the Lord Jesus upon his return. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). The phrase "caught up" in the original language is the word "harpazo" which means to snatch or take away. The same word translated in the Latin is "rapturo." Although the timing of this biblical event is unknown, Paul's teaching provided hope for the Thessalonian believers who were undergoing persecution. Paul was clear that Jesus' return wasn't something that they possibly could have missed since every single believer would be affected.

The Day of the Lord (DOL) is a very significant topic in both the Old and New Testament. The DOL is the time when Jesus will return for His Church and the Father will pour out His wrath on unbelievers. The interpretation of the meaning of DOL depends upon the theological grid from which you view the events of the end times. Most scholars believe that the DOL occurs in the middle of what is called the tribulation period, what the Book of Daniel calls this period the 70'th week. "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city" (Daniel 9:24). The DOL marks the beginning of the second half of the period known as the Great Tribulation. Joel said about this period, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming. It is close at hand–a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness. Like dawn spreading across the mountains a large and mighty army comes, such as never was of old nor ever will be in ages to come" (Joel 2:1-2). He also said that this was a time of redemption, for many people (especially Jews) will come to faith. "And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls" (v.32). Like the "catching up" from 1 Thess 4:17, the DOL wasn't something that the believers wouldn't notice. The purpose of Paul's writing to the church in Thessalonica was to correct this erroneous belief.

Paul continued with a very detailed explanation of the series of events that would lead up to the

return of the Lord Jesus to carry away His Church. Paul said that a "man of lawlessness" would be revealed, a future world leader known throughout the Scripture as the "Antichrist." This satanic person would "oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (v.4). The lawlessness of this end time will be held back by the power of God until the time that the man of sin is revealed (vv.7-8). The man of sin will be accompanied by "the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (v.9). The people that remain on the earth during this time will "refuse to love the truth and so be saved" (v.10b). This leads to a terrible conclusion. "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (vv. 11-12). The powerful delusion is partly the counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders brought about through satanic powers that are allowed to rule the earth during this terrible period of time. The satanic deception of the Antichrist, the person known as the False Prophet, and Satan constitute an unholy trinity that will wage war upon the people left on earth during the end times. To read about these three evil personalities read Revelation Chapters 12 and 13.

After the believers in Thessalonica read Paul's prophecy about what would happen around the time of the Lord's return, they would have been comforted to know that they hadn't missed Jesus as they had heard among the rumors that had been circulating. Paul's teaching about the end times helped them to view their suffering in light of the epic battle that would rage in the era when the Lord Jesus really did return. The "battle" though is no battle at all, for "the Lord Jesus will overthrow [him] with the breath of his mouth" (v.8). That shows us the undisputed ruling power of our Lord, which should bring us hope and comfort, just as it did for the Thessalonian Church.

Our take away from this passage is to heed Paul's warning. Don't be deceived – the Day of the Lord is still to come. Therefore, love the truth and let it lead you to safety. Many books have been written on the subject of the end times and we hope that everyone investigates these matters for themselves by carefully reading and studying the Bible. The brief introduction that we gave today perhaps raises more questions than it answered! We will close this brief introduction to *eschatology*, or the study of the things of the end, and move onto the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson for today is from Luke Chapter 19. It is essential to survey the context of the verses we are studying today in order to understand the full context and therefore the meaning of the text. If we back up to Luke 18:18 – 27 we found an occasion where Jesus was confronted by a certain person that was both a ruler and chief tax collector. This ruler asked Jesus, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 18). Jesus explained to him the requirements of the Jewish Law, and then addressed wealth, the particular obstacle to finding God that existed in the ruler's heart. "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (18b). Read the subsequent verses in this section.

> *23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:23-27).*

Jesus mentioned the impossibly of a camel being able to pass through the eye of a needle. Throughout the ages, a story circulated that goes something like this. Somewhere along the wall in Jerusalem there was a gate called the "eye of the needle" which required a man to dismount his animal in order to pass through at night when all of the other gates were closed. As the saying goes, the existence of this certain gate meant that when Jesus spoke of a camel going through the eye of a needle he was referring to this particular feature in Jerusalem. The legend went on to say that in this Gospel story Jesus wasn't actually saying that it was impossible for a rich man to enter heaven because he was referring to this certain pint-sized entrance along the wall of Jerusalem. What he meant was that for a man to be saved he would have to prostrate himself before God and crawl on his knees in the same way that he could fit through the tiny gate. God does require a humble and prostrate heart in order to come to faith and to a certain extent, this legend is helpful if interpreted that way. Many people have researched this matter and have found that no such gate has ever existed in Jerusalem. Jesus gave an even better explanation of the whole matter in the text itself. Jesus knew that this young man was relying heavily upon his wealth and that it would be very difficult for him to lay it down in order to rely only upon Jesus for salvation. Jesus clarified that it wasn't impossible for rich people to be saved, but this could *only happen through the power of God*.

With this context in mind, let's move onto the Gospel lesson in Luke Chapter 19 in which Jesus encounters an unusual rich man that *does* receive salvation through the power of God. He didn't even have to locate the fictitious "eye of the needle" in Jerusalem!

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" 8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:1-10*

Zacchaeus' statement about giving away his wealth and repaying those he had cheated provided a glimpse into the true condition of his repentant heart. Jesus, who through the power of the Holy Spirit was able to read people's minds, understood that Zacchaeus truly did turn from pursuing wealth as his god rely upon God for his salvation. With the exhibition of his faith, Zacchaeus revealed that he was saved through belief in God. Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house" (v.9b). Once again, we saw that Jesus chose someone to pursue whom everyone in the community knew was a lost sinner, to "save what was lost" (v.10b). As we have pointed out in last week's study notes, good works and intentions do not make us a Christian, they merely reveal the condition of our heart. In this case, Zacchaeus' good works indicated that his heart had truly been changed by God's power.

What does it take for a person with power, privileges and wealth to become a Christian? The story about the Philippian jailor in the Book of Acts helps to shed light on what it takes for a person of authority like Zacchaeus in Luke's Gospel to be saved. In this particular story, the gates of the prison flew open after an earthquake, and the jailor feared for his life because he was responsible for the security of the men inside. If one person escaped, it might mean the death penalty for him. After the jailor awoke from the earthquake, he was sure that the prisoners were gone. Instead, he found Paul and Silas inside. "He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved– you and your household'" (Acts 16:30-31). Rich people and people in positions of authority such as this jailor can have a very difficult time coming to faith in Jesus Christ. However, through the power of God even the hardest hearts can be broken. The conclusion of the story is as follows. "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had *come to believe in God*— he and his whole family" (Acts 16:32,34 emphasis added). The Philippian jailor was saved in the same way as Zacchaeus, through faith in Jesus Christ by the hearing of the Word of God.

Reflection Questions

1. Paul told the Thessalonians not to be deceived but instead to love the truth that will save them. Read the following list of false beliefs. With which of these false beliefs can you identify? Pick one and then study the corresponding verses such that you understand the corresponding truth.

A. False Belief: All religions lead to God. Anyone that acts according to their conscience, even if they don't trust in Jesus, will go to heaven.

John 3:16-21 NIV 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that

whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Acts 4:8-12 NIV 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

John 14:6 NIV 6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Matthew 13:40-43 NIV 40 "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Mt 25:41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

B. False Belief: God doesn't provide salvation to people who "just" repent and believe, salvation can only come through the authority of the Church.

Luke 23:32-43 NIV 32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with

the criminals– one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

C. False Belief: I'm basically a good person. If I go to church every Sunday and Holy Day as well as adhere to most of the teachings of the Church, I will go to heaven.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

John 14:6 NIV 6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 4:12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

> *John 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."*

2. Now that you see these false beliefs contradict the truth, meditate on the following scripture. Then, take some time to talk to God, confess any false beliefs that you may hold, and ask God the Father to help you love the truth.

> *Romans 10:9-13 NIV 9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. 11 As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile– the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week I relay a story about an airplane trip I (Jim) took a few years ago and how that relates to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

> *The LORD is a God of justice,*
>
> *who knows no favorites.*
>
> *Though not unduly partial toward the weak,*
>
> *yet he hears the cry of the oppressed.*
>
> *The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan,*
>
> *nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint.*
>
> *The one who serves God willingly is heard;*
>
> *his petition reaches the heavens.*
>
> *The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds;*

> *it does not rest till it reaches its goal,*
>
> *nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds,*
>
> *judges justly and affirms the right,*
>
> *and the Lord will not delay.*
>
> *SIR 35:12-14, 16-18*

The writer proclaims how God cares for those in the lower classes of society like the weak, orphans, and widows. Widows were especially oppressed in biblical times although God proclaimed throughout the Old Testament Bible how the nation of Israel was to care for them. God said in Psalm 68:5 that He is the "father of the fatherless and the protector of widows." In the New Testament we see how God calls His believers to care for these people. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." God calls us to emulate His spirit of compassion for those in the underclass and oppressed in our society.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This passage comes from the Apostle Paul's last known letter, written to Timothy, his son in the faith.

Second Reading:

> *6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*
>
> *Skipped verses (9-15): Personal Remarks*
>
> *9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.*

> *14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.*
>
> *16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Last words bring a sober realization of one's life and values. Here we see Paul's values being consistent with his message of salvation through faith in God's grace. The first section points to these important truths about biblical Christianity:

- Faith is not easy—Paul said he was being poured out like a drink offering (read "sacrifice"). He also likens faith to a fight and a rigorous race. While he feels spent on behalf of his call, he realizes that the sacrifices have been a special offering to the Lord.
- Faith is worth it! Paul looks back with satisfaction that he has kept the faith. He is not implying that one can lose his or her salvation. He is marveling that God has kept him faithful in the midst of great opposition.
- Faith provides us with hope for the future. Death is not the end of the story. Paul states that there is great reward on the other side for him—specifically a crown of righteousness. Why is this so valuable to Paul? Righteousness, being right with God, is the entrance requirement for heaven. Paul knew that he was not right with God based on his own performance in life. So to think that at the end of his earthly life he would be rewarded by being in right standing with God was a treasure he cherished.
- The Lord is righteous in his judgments, which means that his perspective and rulings are the final word and they are right. There will be no arguing with or manipulating the Lord, the righteous judge, at the end of our lives. His say is final. This should give us motivation to get on the same page with Him now, so that we will not be surprised in the life to come.
- Faith is equated to longing for Jesus' appearing. We may wonder how these two concepts connect. Longing for Jesus' appearing implies faith, since we long for things we love. Longing for Christ's appearing is an expression of our relational intimacy, affection and value system bent towards Christ. The treasure of a crown of righteousness can be ours as well, if we, like Paul, long for his appearing.

Although verses 9-15 are skipped in the Mass Reading, they are important for establishing Paul as a

real person with real relationships, in real messes, expressing real faith. The application for us is that we can be encouraged to know that real Christians have real struggles with circumstances and people that our out of our control, but are very much still under God's control.

The last section tells how Paul got through his struggles and the open opposition he felt against the message of Good News. He attributes his success to the Lord, who stood by his side and gave him strength. This strong trust in the Lord is what allowed him to forgive others who deserted him. He was not compelled to pay anybody back for the wrongs they had done to him. He could let them off the hook because he trusted the Lord to defend him. What a vision for us—to have such deep roots in the Lord that painful offenses and hurts can be released and brought into perspective.

I (Christy) remember a time when I was deeply hurt by an individual who claimed to love me. His desertion in my time of need left a large wound that I could not, in my own strength, forgive. Up until this point in my life, I had been able to easily forgive others of their offenses. But curled up in fetal position on my bed, crying from the emotional pain that would not go away, I asked the Lord to help me forgive. While the feelings of forgiveness did not happen overnight, eventually, I was able to release this person from the debt that their offense had incurred. I imagine that Paul, too, had to work through feelings of bitterness, resentment and anger, in order to not hold these hurts against those who deserved severe consequences. Like the story of the tax collector, when one sees the great debt that has been forgiven on our behalf, it is difficult to feel justified in withholding forgiveness from others.

Paul ends with a sense that the Lord will rescue him and bring him safely to his heavenly kingdom. So, no matter what obstacles or trials we face, we can trust that because we are in Christ nothing can ultimately harm us. No wonder Paul breaks out in praise: "To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." What a place a deep, abiding rest and assurance that God will take care of His children, no matter what!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

It was the classical dark and stormy night as I (Jim) flew the instrument approach into snowy Saranac Lake, New York with two friends nestled warmly in the seat behind me one night in March. As I made the necessary turns and altitude changes, I manipulated the aircraft's radar system downwards such that it revealed the two mountains on either side. These showed up in bright red on the screen, although my passengers were oblivious to the danger. Later they told me that what they perceived was a methodical series of a dozen button presses and knobs being turned followed by the plane emerging from the clouds and being greeted with flashing runway lights welcoming us to New York. As we taxied off the runway, they congratulated me on a great landing and we headed for the terminal to pick up our rental car. As we made our way towards the resort at which we were staying in Lake Placid I settled down for a relaxing drink in the lounge. What a great trip!

Then the terror hit me. I had forgotten to cancel my flight plan with air traffic control! As I frantically called air control on my cell phone I knew that I was in a lot of trouble. I knew that since this was a flight performed under instrument flight regulations that once I did not report on the ground after a few minutes of signing off from the in-flight air traffic control that search and rescue procedures would have been initiated immediately. The flight service station answered on the first ring and I explained that I had made a huge mistake and had forgotten to cancel my flight plan. In my state of utter shock, I begged for forgiveness and prayed at the same time. The controller explained that the sheriff had indeed been called and had launched a search for the plane. The first place that they looked was in the aircraft parking area where they had already located my plane safely tied down. I knew that I deserved punishment since the typical response to such an infraction would be at a minimum the suspension of my license for a period along with a hefty fine. But the controller said, "Never mind, it's OK. We are just glad that you are safe. Have a good evening." [If you are interested in reading the whole story, I wrote about it **here**.]

Have you ever been in a situation where you deserved punishment and even knew it was coming but got off the hook? What if I had acted proudly and told the air traffic controller that it wasn't my fault. Do you think that he would have let me off the hook easily by confronting him this way?

That is what we are going to talk about in our Gospel lesson today. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus told a parable about two people who approached God with completely different hearts. The New International Version entitled this section, "The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector" since it was evident from the context of the previous chapters that the first man in this parable today was a member of the group known as the Pharisees. We have frequently discussed this group in past lessons, here's a review of their primary traits. The Pharisees were people who held to a strict interpretation of the Jewish Law but also added requirements known in the New Testament as traditions. Their doctrine evolved over several hundred years until the observance of their traditions became more important to them than obeying a basic interpretation of the Jewish Law. Jesus said in Mark's Gospel regarding the Pharisee's traditions, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:9). Jesus summed up his feelings about them by saying several chapters earlier in Luke, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness." The Pharisees approached God with a proud heart compared to the tax collector who we will read about in the next parable today.

The Gospel lesson today was a parable through which Jesus illustrated prayer through the contrast of two different types of people, a religious Pharisee and a humble tax collector.

Gospel Reading:

> *9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am*

> *not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*
>
> *14 I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 18:9-14 NIV*

It was helpful in this study to step back and survey the context of this text. This parable was sandwiched between the parable of the persistent widow (that we studied last week) and an incident in which a group of children who approached Jesus were scolded by the disciples (Luke 18:15-17). The point of the first parable was that believers are always to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1). The persistent widow expressed grownup, godly faith and never gave up seeking justice. The point of the story of the children coming to visit Jesus was to illustrate the value of possessing childlike faith. Jesus closed the section by saying, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." It was useful to understand this context because the parable we are studying today deals with the same subjects addressed in the two surrounding stories, prayer and the condition of a person's heart while praying. It was with these truths in mind that we approached the central text being studied today.

This parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector was a study of contrasts between the proud heart of the Pharisee and the meek heart of the tax collector. Luke began with a summary statement about the condition of the Pharisee's heart. They were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else (v.9). On the other hand, the tax collector referred to himself as a sinner (v.13b). The Pharisee's prayer was nothing more than a boast about his perceived goodness. His prayer was similar to a eulogy which he gave himself! The Pharisees' works were substantial since the Law only required fasting once a year and tithing only upon crops and animals. But his boastful prayer never made it up to heaven to the one who could answer it, though this man never actually asked for anything. It was evident that the Pharisee believed that he obtained righteous standing with God through his religious works or perceived goodness. The tax collector on the other hand perceived that righteousness came only through God's power. His prayer reflected a humble and contrite heart. The deep contrast between the two men in the story illustrated the central truth of the parable. God calls believers to be reconciled to Himself through humble acceptance of their sinful position before Him. They are unable to earn their way to God but must accept Jesus' finished work on the cross in order to be found righteous before Him.

One of the defining doctrines of the New Testament is justification by faith and not by works. The

topic of justification is found this in verse 14, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home *justified* before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The key word is "justified." This word in the New Testament is a legal term that means "a declaration of one to be innocent or just." A way to remember the biblical application of the word "justified" is the phrase, "Just as if I'd never sinned." When a person is declared just in the eyes of God, they are considered righteous such that they don't receive their rightful *penalty* for their sin. The source of a believer's righteousness is foreign, which means that it doesn't come from any of their own works or self-perceived goodness. God's righteousness can only come through the gateway of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. God has declared the universality of sin. Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He explained further in Romans that the proper payment for a life of sin was death, meaning eternal separation from God. However, with this bad news he also brought good news, literally the word in the New Testament translated as "Gospel." "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Paul explains that faith in Jesus is the mechanism through which the gift of eternal life is imparted to the believer. "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, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Good works are important in serving the Lord and provide evidence of salvation, but they are not the *source* of our justification. Righteous standing before God can only be granted by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Some questions may arise after this very brief study of justification. Some may ask, "Can we just keep on sinning since we believe and are going to heaven?" Paul answered quite succinctly in the Book of Romans. "*1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2 By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*" (6:1-2). What about the role of works in our salvation? The Scripture is very clear that we cannot earn our salvation through our works, but works are very important because it's the method through which we serve the Lord Jesus. Finally, others may inquire, can we *know* that we have received salvation through faith in Jesus, isn't that being presumptuous? The Disciple John said, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know* that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Yes, you can know that you have received salvation. The Holy Spirit testifies to this fact. Paul said in Romans, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (8:15-16). Having questions is normal and reveals that a person is really seeking the truth of Scripture. Paul said about this, "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?" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Reflection Questions

1. Justification through faith in God's grace is an important concept. Summarize your

understanding of what justification means, why it is necessary for salvation and how one can be assured of their just standing before the LORD.

2. If you recognize that you, like the Pharisee, have been trusting in your good works to get you into right standing before God, take a moment and confess this wrong attitude in your heart to the LORD. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleans us from all unrighteousness."
3. Review the bullet points about biblical Christianity from the discussion on the second reading. Which of the points address a specific question, concern or fear of your life? How does this truth provide you with comfort, hope or direction?
4. In what real relationships and real messes are you finding it hard to exercise real faith? How can Paul's example of fighting the good fight, longing for the appearing of the Lord, and forgiving those who hurt him be an inspiration for you? Take a moment and talk to the Lord about your situation. Ask him to stand by your side and give you strength, so that you too might say—"To him be glory for ever and ever"!

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-20-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about what is called a "type of Christ" in the first reading and much about prayer in the Gospel reading. We begin this week's study with a story from another Gospel passage that provides some important insights into faith and prayer that are relevant to the Gospel lesson.

Once upon a time there was a woman who enjoyed an abundant life with many friends and material blessings. Even the weather smiled on her as she lived in a region where it was nice most of the time. This lady went to worship services every week and enjoyed fellowshipping with her friends from the community. One of the things that she enjoyed most was shopping at the market near the largest and most beautiful lake in the country. This person felt loved and accepted and was very thankful for all that God had granted to her.

One day, things began to change. This blessed woman started getting very weak and was troubled by a wound that no matter what she did just wouldn't stop bleeding. She went to the local doctor and when she couldn't find a cure, she spent more money and went to all of the doctors in the region. However, no doctor was able to solve her chronic medical condition. This was very troublesome for her because as time went by it became common knowledge around town that she was sick from this certain disease. Because her faith community considered blood to be unclean those with whom she worshipped began to consider *her* unclean. In fact, the leaders prohibited her from even entering the worship center until she could find a cure. The people in her faith community wouldn't help because remember, she was considered unclean. She longed to go down to the market and buy the things that she used to. To make matters worse she had spent so much on the doctors that she didn't have much money left to buy food there anyway. She had no one to turn to except God. Every day

she poured out her heart in prayer and begged Him to heal her. Years passed yet she continued to slide deeper into despair.

The situation for the women in the story was dire. If we consider our own lives, how bad do things have to get before we pray? What circumstances would have to arise in order for us to pray for others? We shared the story because it helps set the stage for the Gospel lesson later in this week's study.

The story of the woman with the incurable disease is found in the Bible in the Gospel of Saint Luke, Chapter 8.

> *43 And a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone, 44 came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. 45 And Jesus said, "Who is the one who touched Me?" And while they were all denying it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing in on You." 46 But Jesus said, "Someone did touch Me, for I was aware that power had gone out of Me." 47 When the woman saw that she had not escaped notice, she came trembling and fell down before Him, and declared in the presence of all the people the reason why she had touched Him, and how she had been immediately healed. 48 And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." (Luke 8:43-48 NASB)*

The Bible says to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17) regardless of the circumstances. How hard do you think the woman in this story prayed for help? Since she had nowhere else to turn it's easy to imagine that she was very persistent in her calling upon God for help. Certainly, God allowed these dire circumstances in the woman's life in order to bring her to faith in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of her sins. Perhaps the woman was always faithful to pray, even before she became afflicted with the disease.

How bad do things have to get before we pray? What about praying for the needs of others, how are we to sense that their needs are serious enough for us to pray for them? Regardless of the seriousness of the circumstances, *God has called us not to wait until troubles come our way, but to be faithful and pray in order to obey.*

Introduction to the First Reading:

The woman in Luke 8 was a person who turned to Jesus in faith. Another great person of faith in the Bible was Moses. The Scripture says that he, "chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25). Let's move to the first reading to

see an instance of how this godly man prevailed through a close walk with God in prayer. The context was a battle with the Amalekites just after God's provision of manna for food and water from a rock in the Wilderness of Sin, an appropriate title for the way the people had been behaving! "Why now have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst" (v. 3)? Did the Hebrew exiles really believe that God didn't know that they needed water to drink and for their animals?

First Reading:

> *Exodus 17:8-13 NIV 8 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. 9 Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands." 10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. 11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. 12 When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up– one on one side, one on the other– so that his hands remained steady till sunset. 13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.*

In the story Moses acted as what is known as a "type" of Christ. A "type" is a theological term for people, statements, or events prefiguring or superseded by antitypes. In this case, Moses' actions through praying with his staff and outstretched arms prefigured the *antitype* Jesus Christ, the one to whom people would eventually look to for their ultimate victory of sin and the devil. During the battle the people were compelled to look to Moses for victory or face certain annihilation. Moses was a type of Christ who acted as an intercessor between the people and God. In Deuteronomy 18 Moses said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him (v. 15, emphasis added). Moses knew to whom this verse pointed, the future Savior that we know as Jesus. Moses acted as God's appointed leader for His chosen people during this tremendous time of trouble. As long as the people of God looked to Moses with his outstretched arms calling out to God they were victorious in battle. However, when they shifted their focus away from Moses (and God) the advantage moved to the enemy. In the same way we must focus our attention upon God, both in prayer and through the dedication of our thoughts and actions. Prayer and reading of the Bible are the two main ways in which we communicate with God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Moving onto the second reading for today we find some remarkable truths about the source and value of Scripture. Understanding Scripture is important for us because the more we know the Bible, the better we understand God! Prayer is about deepening our relationship with God. Memorizing is also important because we don't always have a Bible available at the times when we may need it. Let's read from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy.

Second Reading:

> *2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:2 NIV 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 1 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage– with great patience and careful instruction.*

In the reading today Paul provided some foundational principles for living as a Christian. He said that the source of Scripture was from God the Holy Spirit, the breath of God (v. 16a). He affirmed that salvation was through faith in Jesus (v. 15). The result of learning the Scriptures was that they "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (v.15), and "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (17a). Paul called believers to minister to people through the Word of God, whether it was convenient or inconvenient, and said to do so with "great patience and careful instruction" (4:2b). Paul's foundational teaching was very important to the church at this time because it revealed the great value of Scripture, something for which believers in the early church had to be willing to die.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Let's move onto the Gospel lesson from Luke 18:1-8. This is another in a series of parables and happened after Jesus' return to Jerusalem from Samaria where he had healed a group of lepers that we discussed last week. As you read, see if you can catch the rhetorical method Jesus used known as "arguing from lesser to greater."

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 18:1-8 NIV 1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always*

> *pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

Let us back up a bit and briefly look at how Jesus taught using parables. His method for teaching through this genre was to provide a simple story in order to illustrate a significant spiritual truth. We have to be careful to try to make a parable "walk on all fours." Instead, our objective must be to search for the single intended meaning. There may be multiple applications in our lives with the single meaning gleaned from the parable. In this particular story, Jesus made it very easy for us in that he stated the spiritual meaning before he told the story. "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (v.1). Jesus call was to be persistent in prayer while waiting on God's timing. The theological application of this spiritual truth was that God is faithful by teaching us the necessity of prayer.

Examine the parable more closely. The story was about a widow who through her constant pleading finally convinced the "unjust judge" to agree to her request. Widows were one of the lowest of people of all the social classes in the Bible. God has commanded throughout the Scripture to care for people in this lowest of social classes, along with orphans and aliens (not people from Mars). Jewish Law included many provisions for widows including the right to glean crops from the corners of the field left un-harvested for this purpose. The fact that someone with no social standing could convince a judge to rule in their favor provides evidence just how persistent this particular woman must have been! Jesus didn't mean that God was an unjust judge. Instead he used a rhetorical method of arguing from lesser to greater. Jesus used a very similar method in another parable in Matthew. "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11 NIV). What Jesus meant in Luke's parable was that if the unjust judge was able to be swayed by the persistent pleading of someone from the lowest level of society, how much more would God delight to grant answers to our prayers as believers in Jesus and part of the family of God?

A second but very important point arose indirectly from the parable, something that was often repeated in the Bible. God not only called us to be persistent in prayer but also to wait for His

timing. Psalm 37:7 says, "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him." Psalm 27:14 said, "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." Paul said in Philippians 4:6, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Hebrews 4:16 said, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Patience is essential in prayer, as only God knows the best timing to answer our requests!

What are some practical ways that we may improve our level of persistence in prayer? Here are some methods that have worked for me, although they may not be suitable for everyone.

1. Write your prayer requests down on a 3×5 card. Carry this with you and as you find time pray throughout the day. It's helpful to categorize your requests, such as "Healing" or "Come to Faith in Jesus."
2. Consider if you construct a kind of "prayer maize" in your head by assigning the people for whom you are praying to a geographical map of where they are located. For example, you could begin with praying for people in your home town, then move on to prayers for those located in the western part of your state, then to the north, east, and so on. This has proven very helpful to me since many times I pray for people during my daily exercise where I would not have access to cards on which I had listed prayer requests.
3. Finally, pray! Ask God to show you ways to improve your prayer life. Remember what we discussed several weeks ago in the section on Luke 16:1-13. The application of this text was that God has called us to use our talents and ingenuity in order to lead people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Pray and ask God to energize your prayer life through the use of your time, talents, and materials possessions. This includes using our technological devices like smart phones and computers.

I bet that some of you are mighty prayer warriors and that your prayer lives came about because of certain circumstances that God allowed. Others may just need a bit of encouraging from time to time about keeping up with the discipline of prayer. Remember, God has called us not to wait until troubles come our way, but to be faithful and pray in order to obey. We shouldn't do this out of guilt or obligation, but to deepen our relationship with the Father.

Reflection Questions

1. Ask God to reveal to you the spiritually lost people in your life. Who are the lost causes in your life whom only God could change? Write down their names and as God leads pray for them like the persistent widow.

2. We said that prayer and reading of the Bible are the two main ways in which we communicate with God. What are some others ways that God communicates with us?

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Going Deeper:

Do you have a story to share about the power of persistent prayer? You can email me at jim@christiansforchrist.org.

Recommended Readings on Prayer:

"The Way of the Heart" by Henri Nouwen (Ballantine, 1981).

"A Journey to Victorious Praying" by Bill Thrasher (Moody, 2003)

"Prayer" by Ole Hallesby (Augsburg, 1994)

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