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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-19-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. In the first reading, we look at the Book of Proverbs where we see the concept of wisdom personified. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and focuses upon the behavior of those enlightened by God through faith in Jesus Christ. We close with a continuation of Jesus' lesson from last week in which Jesus called Himself the "living bread that came down out of heaven" (John 6:51).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The book of Proverbs is full of true, wise sayings about everyday life and relationships. It is similar to poetry in that it often uses figurative language to make its point. Many of the Proverbs were written by King Solomon, considered the wisest man who ever lived. God blessed him with great wisdom and riches, and early in his life he followed God faithfully. Later he sinned against God by marrying many women who followed after false gods. Sadly, Solomon followed their idolatrous ways. These Proverbs however, were given by God and are still a source of great wisdom today.

The Book of Psalms provides us with an insight concerning wisdom. Psalm 119:102-104 says: *I have not turned aside from Your ordinances, For You Yourself have taught me. How sweet are Your words*

to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! From Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way.

First Reading:

> *Proverbs 9:1-6 NAS95 1 Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; 2 She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine; She has also set her table; 3 She has sent out her maidens, she calls From the tops of the heights of the city: 4 "Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks understanding she says, 5 "Come, eat of my food And drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Forsake your folly and live, And proceed in the way of understanding."*

In Proverbs Ch. 9, the writer uses personification (giving human traits to a nonhuman object or idea) to describe wisdom. She (Wisdom) has built a strong house, indicating that wisdom gives us a strong and secure place from which to live. She is like the mistress of the house who prepares all good things for us to enjoy and invites us in to freely partake of it. Wisdom is available to us if we will only forsake our foolish ways and come and dine. Since God is the source of all wisdom, the food we must consume to get wisdom is His Word—the Bible.

Believers grow in their knowledge of God by developing a deeper understanding of God's Wisdom as revealed through the Bible. As we move to the second reading, we will see how Saint Paul calls believers to express their wisdom through godly expressions of spiritual songs, hymns and psalms. These are activities which happen during the fellowship of believers in the church and they help us to grow in our knowledge of love of the Lord Jesus.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. It begins with the adverb "therefore" which means we must understand the meaning of the verses immediately before to which Paul is referring.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 5:15-20 NAS95 15 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, 16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil. 17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; 20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;*

The "therefore" refers to the fact that as believers in the Lord Jesus we are "children of the light" (Ephesians 5:8b-c) who were formerly in darkness (v. 8a). Since we are children of the light, we are to produce fruit in keeping with the light, "for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and

righteousness and truth" (v. 9). Though we live in evil times (days, v. 16b) we are called as believers to be good stewards of the light that we have through our knowledge of God's word in the Bible. Our understanding of the Bible is how we know God's will (v. 17b). We must let worldly things like wine get in the way of our walking in the truth of the Lord (v. 18), for being drunk is the behavior of the sin darkened unbelievers. One of the ways in which we can express our love for God and also to grow in the knowledge of Him is through "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (v. 19). God also calls us to be thankful for the things that God has bestowed upon us (v. 20).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel reading, we continue the discourse that Jesus had with the crowds concerning his teaching as He being the "bread which came down from heaven." The people to whom Jesus was speaking were misunderstanding both the *nature* of the Messiah as well as His *identity* as the One to whom they were listening.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 6:51-58 NAS95 51 "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh." 52 Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" 53 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. 54 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. 55 For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. 56 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. 58 This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever."*

Once again, we return to the chapter where Jesus refers to himself by a spiritual metaphor—the bread of life. Many people were following Jesus. They saw his miracles, and they were excited about what Jesus had done and curious about what Jesus would do next. They wanted to be part of his entourage. But was that enough of a commitment to call themselves true followers of Christ? Jesus is going to shock the crowd with a stunning metaphor, designed to separate the curious from the true disciples: *"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:54).* As bread gives life through its nourishment, so Jesus gives life to all who believe in Him. Bread provides its physical benefit, not when it is sitting on the table but when it is taken into the body. Jesus provides his spiritual benefits not to the followers who are merely curious but to those who make a full commitment to Him from the heart. Romans 10:9 says, "*If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*." Eating in this case is not physical consumption but belief from the heart that provides the

spiritual benefit of eternal life.

Many could not understand the spiritual nature of Jesus' words. They missed the metaphors, and His talk of eating flesh and drinking blood was offensive to them. They demonstrated the principle that the words of Jesus cannot be understood through human wisdom alone, and no one can come to Jesus unless the Father grants it (v. 65). These disciples, blinded by their own sin, walked away and no longer followed Him.

As Jesus continued His teaching, He began to move deeply in the hearts of the crowd causing them to move closer to the point of decision that we will see next week in John 6:66. In the reading today Jesus once again used the "I am" phrase, something which His hearers would have understood as a claim to divinity. Jesus told the crowd at least one year before His final Passover meal at what we call the "Last Supper" that it wasn't the bread that would save them, but rather their belief in Him. The manna in the Exodus was something created divinely by God which fell from the sky at night for the Hebrews to collect each day (except on the Sabbath). Even though this special "bread" came directly from God, those that ate this physical provision from God still died physically (v. 58b). In contrast, those that "feed" upon Jesus are the ones that believe in Him as the Messiah, which is the only way to eternal life (John 14:6). If we read a few verses later in this section, Jesus explained the spiritual analogy He was using by calling Himself the bread of God. He said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). The people misunderstood His spiritual metaphor and stumbled upon His identity as the one and only Messiah of God.

The Jews understood that they were prohibited by the Law from the drinking blood. Leviticus says, "You shall not eat anything with the blood" (Leviticus 19:26a). This prohibition from a blood meal was repeated in the New Testament so as not to create a stumbling point with the early Jewish believers. The proclamation in the Book of Acts reads, "that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood …" (Acts 15:29a). The practice of consuming blood would have been deeply offensive to the Jews because of their immersion in the teachings of the Mosaic Law. Jesus, aware of the legalistic Pharisees in the crowd, used this metaphor to further deepen the divide that existed between the true and false followers of God.

This theme of separation continued in John's Gospel beyond this point and reached a climax just after today's reading in John 6:66 where John said, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." As we said in the introduction, the people to whom Jesus was speaking were misunderstanding both the nature of the Messiah as well as His identity. Only a small number of them put it all together, those on the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:13). This theme is nowhere more evident that in our current world in which the true followers of the Lord Jesus are in the minority even among cultures which seemingly exalt Christianity.

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Reflection Questions

1. Describe in what ways Jesus was truly wisdom personified, taking into account the relationship between the words of Jesus in the Bible and the person of Jesus?
2. The Gospel reading followed a series of miracles that Jesus performed for the crowd including the multiplying of the loaves and fishes. Yet we know that many of the people in the crowd did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah (John 6:66). What miracles from Jesus have you experienced in your own life? Why are your experiences different from the people in the Gospel narrative?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-12-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from First Kings

in which we find the great Prophet Elijah running away from wicked Queen Jezebel. The story reminds us that God will provide for us in order to accomplish the works that He has in store for us. Then we move to the second reading from Ephesians, which helps us to see what the contrast is between living as a child of the world and living as a child of God. Then we close with the continuing study on Jesus in John 6 where he confronts the unbelieving people by calling Himself the "bread of God."

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from First Kings and deals with the Prophet Elijah who was a mighty man of God in a dark era in Israel during the decline of the theocratic kingdom. This period followed the time of the Judges in which the Scripture said, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). There were bright spots in this age and one of them was the prophet Elijah. Elijah was perhaps best known for the incident recorded in First Kings 18 during a time of severe famine in Samaria. According to the Scripture Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal as to whether they could bring fire down on their sacrifice by calling on their god while Elijah would offer his sacrifice to God and ask Him to send fire to complete his burnt offering. The Priests of Baal began calling upon their god and cutting themselves in order to invoke a response, but failed miserably. Next, Elijah was so certain the God would act upon his request that he soaked the wood with water (1 Kings 18:33). He prayed a simple prayer and asked God to bring down fire on the sacrifice. With a dramatic display of power, God burned up not only the entire sacrifice, but the fire licked up the water as well. Afterwards, Elijah had the Priests taken captive and then put them to death (v. 40). What an amazing victory Elijah had that day! After such an important victory one would think that Elijah would have continued his momentum and never suffered from any sort of worry. If God could light even wet wood on fire in front of the pagan priests Elijah could accomplish anything by calling upon the only true God in prayer. At least that is what one may think. Leading up to today's reading, soon afterwards the Scripture records that Elijah fell into a period of deep anxiety because of the actions of a certain ungodly woman named Jezebel. Jezebel was the evil wife of King Ahab, a king of Northern Israel. Immediately after Elijah's victory over the Prophets of Baal, wicked Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah saying, "So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time (1 Kings 19:2b). His response was to flee for his life because of Jezebel's threat. "And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers'" (vv. 3-4). Later, Elijah fled even further into the mountains to hide in a cave (1 Kings 19:9). How could such a mighty man of God, who had just witnessed God's dynamic power in the victory over the Prophets of Baal find himself holed up and worrying in a dark cave? If a mighty man of God like Elijah could suffer with anxiety, it's no wonder that Christians can also fall into patterns of worry.

This leads us to today's reading in which we find Elijah on the run from wicked Queen Jezebel.

First Reading:

> *1 Kings 19:4-8 NAS95 4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers." 5 He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, "Arise, eat." 6 Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you." 8 So he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.*

Even though Elijah was fresh from his mighty victory, he fled in fear to the wilderness and asked the Lord to take his life (v. 4). God responded to his prayer in a different way by sending an angel to provide fresh food for him (vv. 5-6). After Elijah ate and rested the first time, the angel came back to him again and caused him to eat a second time (v. 7). Subsequent to these two meals, Elijah traveled without food for forty days and nights until he reached Mt. Horeb (v. 8). Evidently, God miraculously delivered Elijah through this extended period of fasting in a similar way that He did when Jesus Christ fasted for a forty-day period (Matthew 4:2). We are not told whether the bread that God provided to Elijah allowed this extended fast but in all likelihood the two meals given to him were for the purpose of lifting his spirits to the point that he continued on his journey to Mt. Horeb. These things happened at the end of Elijah's earthly existence, as shortly after these events he appointed Elisha to be his successor and was then taken up into a cloud.

What can we learn from the reading? Even though we may despair of living because of the impossible obstacles we face, God will provide for us when we call upon Him. He may or may not use his angelic helpers in the way that He did for Elijah, but we can trust that God will not leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). God knows in just what manner and quantity to provide for us the things that will move us to the next step in accomplishing the plans that He has for our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians 4 and shows us the contrast between life as a non-believer and a believer in Christ. It reminds us that our hearts need to be in right relationship with God in order for our outward behavior to reflect God's value system.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 4:30 – 5:2 NAS95 30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed*

> *for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. 1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; 2 and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.*

Saint Paul called the people in the Ephesian church not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God by carrying out sinful thoughts in their hearts and engaging in ungodly behaviors. The emphasis for changed behavior is a changed heart. A changed heart comes from being in a right relationship with God through faith in Christ. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we are "sealed for the day of redemption" by the Holy Spirit (4:30, see also 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14). God has placed upon each believer the seal of redemption through His Holy Spirit and this invisible marking is His certification that He will deliver upon what He has promised. What this means is that we are now inhabited by the very presence of God through His Spirit. Where we go with our thoughts and with our body, we take God with us. Because God lives in us, we are a new creation, the old way of life has gone and a new way of life has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Holy Spirit helps us to see our lives and the world from God's perspective. We can now make decisions based on God's value system, which is in sharp contrast to the world's value system.

Christians are not to have any part in the ungodly behaviors that are associated with the unbelieving world. These behaviors are generated from a "me-first" mentality that is easily offended, resulting in bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice. You can see the progressive nature of sin as it takes on more and more momentum to divide us from others and actually engage in hurtful ways of interacting with others. This is a reflection of the value system of the god of this age, the devil, who is the father of those who do not have God as their father (John 8:44).

Instead, Paul called the people to emulate God through the model of Jesus Christ who willingly sacrificed Himself, not as a victim, but through His own choice (John 10:18). When we receive God's kindness, tenderness, forgiveness and love, we become children of God (John 1:12) and our hearts are shaped by this new value system. We begin to do things more like God our Father and less like our former father. Titus 2:11-13 corroborates this when it says: "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age as we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people of his very own, eager to do good (NIV)."

This means that "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1Corinthians 10:13). In the same way that God provided for Elijah's physical and emotional needs when He asked, God will also

provide the things we need in order to serve Him. This includes the ability through His power to forsake the ungodly behaviors that Paul listed in the reading.

How can we apply this to our lives? This reading is helpful to consider as we interact with others throughout the week and before we partake of communion. God's love transforms how we approach relationships and the community of believers. Communion has in its very word the idea of common unity. The church comes together to participate in remembering God's way of interacting with us, which is typified by Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins. As a result, our way of interacting with others changes as well. Communion reminds us of Jesus' admonition in Matthew's Gospel about asking forgiveness from a person we may have offended before we bring an offering to God. "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering" (Matthew 5:23-24). When we partake of communion we shouldn't grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30) by clinging to ungodly feelings towards others and bringing this into the celebration of remembrance of our Lord's death which took the place for the penalty for our sins. Instead of coming with thoughts of wrath, anger, slander, and bitterness (vv. 30 – 31) we have been changed so that we can come with minds cleansed from these things and present to God hearts filled with kindness, tenderness forgiveness, and love (vv. 32 – 4:1).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is a continuation of the story that was started last week. The context is Jesus' teaching of the crowds that followed him after His feeding of them through the multiplying of the loaves and fishes in the closing of Chapter 5.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 6:41-51 NAS95 41 Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, "I am the bread that came down out of heaven." 42 They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, 'I have come down out of heaven'?" 43 Jesus answered and said to them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. 44 No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. 47 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."*

The main point of Jesus' teaching is that belief in Him is the only way to obtain eternal life and be restored to right relationship with God the Father. Repeating our statement from last week, Jesus' point in this particular teaching wasn't whether or not He is spiritually present in the elements of communion. These issues were not even a part of the mentality of the Jewish people that He was addressing.

The passage opens with the grumbling of the Jews in disbelief against Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. They point to His human origins as proof that He could not be God's promised Messiah (v. 42). They believed that only God or possibly an angel can come down from heaven. Since some in the crowd knew Jesus' earthly father and mother they couldn't accept His statement that He came down from heaven. We know from John 7 that the people held to a tradition about the nature of the Messiah. There they said, "However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from" (John 7:27). Jesus cut to the heart of the issue which was their unbelief in God. Earlier Jesus had told them:

> *John 5:37-40 NAS95 37 "And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. 38 You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent. 39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; 40 and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life."*

This leads us to the central point of the story: the only way to God the Father is through belief in Jesus the Son (v. 47). For "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). Jesus said that they could not come to Him because the Father was not drawing them (v. 44). But we know that God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). It seems that their hard-heartedness and lack of being willing to be "taught of God" was preventing them from being drawn to faith in Jesus. If they would let themselves hear and learn from the Father, then Christ's divinity would be obvious to them. Then they would come to Him and have assurance of a life that is eternal (v. 44b). By offering resurrection life, Jesus is overtly claiming His deity. He continues to make claims of divinity by saying that He is the One who was sent by the Father and has seen Him (vv. 45-46). It is with this backdrop that Jesus makes a bold claim, emphasized by the phrase, "Truly, truly," which is basically putting His word on the same level as Holy Scripture, infallible and inerrant. He says, "he who believes has eternal life" (v. 47).

In order to unpack this a little more, he uses an analogy that the Jews would have been familiar with from the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). He harkens back to the days when the Hebrew people were in the wilderness and ate manna, which was a supernatural food that God provided for them (see Mass notes from last week). Even though they ate this supernatural food, their bodies still died. Jesus was claiming to be more than manna, He is the "manna" (or bread) that brings life to the soul (John 10:10). Being in relationship to Him who is the resurrection and the life,

allows one to live eternally, even if the body dies (John 11:25). When Jesus said "and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is my flesh," he was referring to His bodily sacrifice that He would make to bring atonement for our sins. The Old Testament set a precedent for the need for a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:22). So Jesus was showing that His impending death would be that sacrifice required by the Law to forgive us of our sins (1 John 2:2).

What can we learn from this reading to apply to our lives? When we celebrate communion we remember how Jesus gave up His life to bear the penalty for our sins. When we take of the bread, we remember His body that was broken on the cross for us. When we partake of the cup, we remember Jesus' blood that was poured out for us. Before we partake of communion we should examine our hearts in preparation. We can ask ourselves if we too have become so familiar with Jesus that we overlook that He is God? In addition, when this world starts getting to us, we can look to Him for life that is truly life, realizing that this world is not our home. We walk by faith that someday we will be with Him and all things will be made right. We can also be a spokesperson for God, sharing with others the wonderful opportunity to be made right with the Father through Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. We said about the second reading:

God has placed upon each believer the seal of redemption through His Holy Spirit and this invisible marking is His certification that He will deliver upon what He has promised. What this means is that we are now inhabited by the very presence of God through His Spirit. Where we go with our thoughts and with our body, we take God with us. Because God lives in us, we are a new creation, the old way of life has gone and a new way of life has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Holy Spirit helps us to see our lives and the world from God's perspective. We can now make decisions based on God's value system, which is in sharp contrast to the world's value system.

In what ways do you bring God into your relationships? In your work life? In your relationship with you wife? In relationship to nonbelievers?

2. Reflect upon the last time you celebrated communion. Was your heart focused upon the Lord Jesus' sacrifice for you?

Saint Paul gave us a clue as to the importance of the celebration of communion. He said in 1 Corinthians 11:30 about those who were doing so in an unholy manner, "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep." Although his words were in the context of the full love feast he indicated the sincere need to examine our motives as we celebrate communion. In

light of what we studied today, the next time you take communion examine your heart and sincerely prepare for the remembrance of Jesus dying on the cross for you sins.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 08-05-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Exodus, where God performed a miracle to feed the multitude of Hebrew people who had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt. We then move to the letter that Saint Paul wrote to the Ephesians, where he describes what being a Christian looks like, contrasting new life in Christ to the old way of life in darkness. Finally, we conclude with Jesus' declaration that he is bread from heaven, harkening back to the manna that was described in the first reading from Exodus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus. The Hebrew people had just been delivered from the captivity of the Egyptians. God raised up Moses to lead His people out of Egypt. As we will see, even though God performed many miraculous signs and provisions in this first phase of the Exodus the people quickly complained against Him and wanted to return to their captivity. As you read, ask yourself in what ways you too find it easy to complain about God's ways and would wish to return to captivity's predictability.

First Reading:

> *Exodus 16:1-15 NAS95 1 Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. 2 The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. 3 The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." 4 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. 5 "On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily." 6 So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, "At evening you will know that the LORD has brought you out of the land of Egypt; 7 and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, for He hears your grumblings against the LORD; and what are we, that you grumble against us?" 8 Moses said, "This will happen when the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening, and bread to the full in the morning; for the LORD hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the LORD." 9 Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, 'Come near before the LORD, for He has heard your grumblings.'" 10 It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. 11 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 12 "I have heard the grumblings of the sons of Israel; speak to them, saying, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" 13 So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. 14 When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground. 15 When the sons of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat.*

The Hebrew people were in an interesting transition All of their lives, they had been slaves. Now

slavery is not desirable in any context, but it is predictable and structured. You don't have to make any decisions, everything is decided for you. In the midst of the oppression, though, your basic needs are taken care of. While it was not luxurious living, the Hebrew slaves had a sense of security that was no longer available to them in their new-found freedom. Instead of looking at all that God had done to deliver them from their oppression and trust Him for their daunting future, they chose to rehearse the "good" points of their slavery (the security of food and shelter) and accused God of not caring about them.

This wasn't an isolated instance of grumbling, rather the text says, "The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness" (v. 2). In spite of their hard hearts, God heard the people and answered by telling Moses that He would "rain bread from heaven for you" even in the case when they did not obey Him (v. 4), which He knew they wouldn't. Moses explained to them that their complaints weren't against him but against God (v. 8). God made a special provision to provide for the sabbath by making the manna quantitatively different (a double portion) on the day before as well as qualitatively different – it would not spoil during the sabbath rest day. God then announced the miracle to Moses through the appearance of the Shekinah glory which the people saw (v. 10). In the meantime, in the evening before the raining of the manna from the sky began, God sent quail to the people (v. 13). The text concluded with the people seeing the manna and not recognizing what it was until Moses explained it to them (v. 15). The word "manna" in Hebrew means "what is it." As you can imagine, this was an extraordinary way for God to provide for His people. God seems to work in very unexpected ways.

There are many spiritual parallels in this reading between the provision of God through the manna and the person and work of Jesus Christ who, as we will see in the Gospel reading, called Himself "the bread of life" (John 6:35). In spite of the fact that the people grumbled against God He still provided food for them. The parallel in the New Testament is that in spite of the fact that most of the people didn't accept Jesus as their Messiah, God still provided salvation through Him. The manna was a very unique provision that was done only by God and could not come about by any natural means. In the same way, Jesus was God's supernatural provision and also did not come about by natural means but was instead born through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians and the context is Paul's teaching on the spiritual unity of believers in the church and the unique calling to which God calls His people to walk together in a new way outside of sensual and greedy practices.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 4:17-24 NAS95 17 So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, 18 being darkened in their*

> *understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; 19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. 20 But you did not learn Christ in this way, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 22 that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, 23 and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.*

Paul typified the Gentiles as unbelievers who "walk[ed] in the futility of their mind[s], being darkened in their understanding" of the true salvation that comes only from God (v. 17). Their behavior is typical of the qualities displayed in the unbelieving world, and even among the grumbling Hebrews about whom we read in the first reading. In contrast, believers are called to set aside their former practices and walk in the newness of life, being renewed in their spirits and to put on the "new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (v. 24). Like the manna in the desert on the six day which was qualitatively different, believers are also called to be different from unbelievers who by their nature embrace ungodly behaviors because of the spiritual darkness that reigns in their hearts. As believers in Jesus, we now have a new nature in us. In order to understand our new nature, we must learn the truth about our identity in Christ, which Paul says begins when our minds are renewed. This renewing of our minds is why Bible study, prayer and being with other believers is so important for our growth in the Christian life. These practices help us to begin to see things as God sees them and then our lives become transformed as we let His ways be our ways (Romans 12:1-3).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John 6 where Jesus reveals to the people the parallel between God's provision of the manna in the desert and to Himself as the "bread of life" that provides eternal life through faith in Him. Knowing what happened in the story before we pick up the reading will be helpful. The immediate context of today's reading is just after the multiplying of the loaves and fishes in the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15). Afterwards Jesus fled from there because He sensed that the people were going to take Him by force to make Him their king (v. 15). Jesus, though, did not leave the region with the disciples on their boat, but he nonetheless showed up on the other side with them. This is why they ask Him when he got there and explains why they are confused in today's reading (v. 25). It was during this time that a storm arose and the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water (v. 19). Jesus got into the boat which was then immediately at the opposite shore (v. 21). In this instance, the text says that Jesus wasn't in the boat and never mentioned whether or not He calmed the sea (refer to Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25, and Matthew 8:23-27). But from these other references, we know that Jesus was able to do miraculous things, which was part of Him showing His legitimate right to claim Himself as the Messiah.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 6:24-35 NAS95 24 So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor His disciples, they themselves got into the small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus. 25 When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" 26 Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. 27 Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal." 28 Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." 30 So they said to Him, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? 31 "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.'" 32 Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. 33 "For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." 34 Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread." 35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst."*

Before we study the text, note that Jesus' point in this particular teaching wasn't whether or not He is spiritually present in the elements of communion. The main point of Jesus' teaching is that belief in Him is the only way to obtain eternal life through the Father God. Even though some of the people were familiar with Jesus, this shouldn't have stopped them from seeing the miraculous signs that He was doing and how His work confirmed the teaching of the Old Testament (John 6:45).

The reading is the third of many misunderstandings that the people had about Jesus and the nature of the promised Messiah. In each case Jesus uses a common symbol to describe a spiritual reality. The first time this happened was back in Chapter 3 during His discussion with Nicodemus who misunderstood Jesus' reference to spiritual birth. Jesus explained the need to be born again or from above (John 3:3). The second case was Jesus' interaction with a Samaritan woman where Jesus equated trusting Him with "living water" that would satisfy the unquenchable thirst of the human soul (John 4:6-29). The symbolism that Jesus was using here with the Samaritan woman and the water was an illustration of the eternal life that can only come through faith in Him. Like Nicodemus (and to the Jews in today's reading), this connection between a concrete substance (birth, bread, water) and a spiritual reality wasn't obvious to the woman because she asked him to give her the water so she wouldn't have to keep coming to the well (John 4:15). Jesus gave a clue to His disciples about what was to come shortly after this interaction when they urged Him to eat something (John 4:31). Jesus answered them by saying, "I have food to eat that you do not know about," and "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work" (John 4:32, 34).This is very similar to what happened in the story today but instead of water Jesus used the symbolism of bread. This opens the next chapter in which Jesus feeds the people with physical food to provide for their

temporal needs but unveils their greater need of eternal life through faith in God's only spiritual provision: Jesus, the heavenly manna.

Paul sheds light on these allusions from Israel's past for those of us who are reading this as Gentiles, without the history of the Jewish people as our backdrop. He gave the following explanation about the water, manna, and the people's unbelief in Exodus about which we read in the first reading:

> *1 Corinthians 10:1-5 NAS95 1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; 2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; 3 and all ate the same spiritual food; 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. 5 Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.*

Paul wanted New Testament believers to understand the spiritual heritage and to learn from the mistakes that led to disbelief and rejection of God's provision for their lives. Therefore, it is important to understand this passage in light of the broader context of Jewish history. Jesus claimed to be the promised Messiah, God's special and chosen servant to deliver people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). What they expected of the Messiah and what Jesus portrayed were two very different things. The people had a hard time accepting that God's unexpected ways (faith in the suffering servant as explained in Isaiah 53) was better than their visions of Messiah (a political ruler who would take care of their physical and material needs).

In today's story, people from among the five thousand whom Jesus fed earlier were searching for him (v. 24) Their reaction to finding Jesus miraculously on the other side of the lake was not what we would expect. They did not ask Him **how** He got there but rather **when** He got there, trying to piece together a plausible explanation (v. 25). Jesus didn't bother to answer their impertinent question, but rather cut to the heart of the matter of their deep spiritual need. They were overcome by their desire for physical bread, but Jesus saw their more critical need, spiritual food that would lead to eternal restoration and life. They followed Jesus there because they desired to eat their fill of the bread that He gave them last time, so Jesus explained to them that their physical need for bread was minor compared to their need for spiritual restoration with their Heavenly Father that came only from God. Jesus told them that although they saw the signs He did they still didn't believe in Him as the Messiah from God, but rather approached Him as their physical provider, a sort of genie on demand (v. 26). Remember that Jesus had to flee from them right after the feeding of the five thousand because He knew that they were going to try and make Him their civil King because they saw Him as their provider. Instead of going along with their folly, Jesus instead told them, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (v. 27).

Looking back to the manna in the desert, had the people not been so hard hearted they could have

better understood God's provision. In the case of the manna it was collected for the first five days of the week and went bad overnight. But on the sixth day God provided a double amount of a special type which was preserved for a two-day period in order to provide for a sabbath rest day. In the spiritual sense Jesus is our special manna, the one who provides our eternal Sabbath rest (Hebrews 4). The people in this story then bullheadedly asked Jesus for another sign, an attitude about which Jesus said later, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet" (Matthew 12:39). Jesus answered their request for a sign with an explanation of how God's provision of manna was similar to the spiritual nourishment that He desired to give them, if they would ask God to change their hearts so they could listen and receive God's provision to them through Christ as Messiah. We will see next week in verse 44 that Jesus continues to explain the way to God through Him by saying, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." Jesus addresses their need for restoration in their relationship with the Father by referring back to Israel's history and said, "He gave them bread out of heaven to eat" (v. 31).

The people responded to Jesus' illustration of Himself as their spiritual bread in a similar way as did the Samaritan woman saying, "Lord, always give us this bread." Jesus answered them by using language which included the information about His interaction with the Samaritan woman and the sign of the living water. This he most likely did for the benefit of His disciples who had still not understood the sign of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 8:17 – 21). Jesus used an "I am" statement which strongly indicated His divinity, saying "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst" (v. 34). Jesus was the double provision of the special manna that didn't perish on the sixth day that nourished the people into their Sabbath rest. The work of God is not "works", for Jesus clarified this in verse 29: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." Jesus explained that the way to God was uniquely through faith in Him.

We will see this claim better next week as we study the continuation of Jesus' teaching on this matter where Jesus said, "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and **believes** in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (v. 40). The heart of the matter was **belief** in Jesus as the one and only Son of the Father, the only One through Whom came eternal life. Though the people sought physical bread to satisfy their physical needs, Jesus cut to their greater need of spiritual healing which came only through belief in Him as the only way to God.

What does this mean for our lives? The main point of the reading was Jesus' profound statement that belief in Him as a type of spiritual manna was the only means of finding peace and eternal life with God. Unlike Nicodemus who seemingly believed Jesus later in his life (John 19:39), and the Samaritan woman who believed in Jesus immediately after listening to Him, many of the people in this story didn't believe and separated themselves from Him. This is evident in the infamous John 6-6-6- verse: "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him

anymore." After this statement Saint Peter boldly identified Jesus as the Christ, saying, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68c – 69).

To whom will you go? Will you seek eternal life through the machinations of being a good person and observing religious activities? Will you be like the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus who surrendered their lives to the person of Jesus Christ, or will you respond like many in the crowd that separated themselves from Jesus because their Messiah didn't measure up to their expectations? Later in this discourse Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). May we be convinced from this passage to seek eternal life through faith in the One and Only means, Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What parallels do you see between the people of our day who want God on their own terms and the hard-hearted people of Israel in the Old and New Testament readings? What does the Ephesian's passage say about this way of thinking?

2. How can you be part of bringing a message of hope and light to people who are approaching God with an expectation of God being a genie on demand (and often being disillusioned with God's unexpected ways of interacting with them)? Are there areas of your own life that you need to work through disillusionment with the Lord's unexpected ways so that you can be freed up to minister to others authentically in their own struggles with surrendering to God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 07-29-2018

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we see in the first reading a miracle by the Prophet Elisha in multiplying of the loaves to feed a large crowd. Later in the Gospel lesson we see Jesus doing something similar but on a larger scale in the feeding of the five thousand. We also study Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and see some godly behaviors to which God calls us to walk as His true followers.

This month I was able to take an extended holiday to the south of France along with my wife. During this time I was able to unplug from my work in the IT industry and to meet up with a couple who is involved that country. This loving couple epitomizes the calling given by Paul that we will see in the second reading today "*to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love*" (Ephesians 4:1c-2). In spite of their many hardships they have endured during their forty years of ministry in France they have persisted and seen many people grow in their faith. They are an inspiration to me when I too encounter difficulties in helping people to grow in their faith.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Second Kings in the section where Elijah's replacement Elisha ministered during the time of a great famine. Elisha was a great prophet who provided for the people in a similar way in which Jesus did in the feeding of the five thousand which we will read later in the Gospel lesson. Elisha performed this miracle right after he raised the son of the Shunammite woman and the rendering of a poison pot of stew into healthy food.

First Reading:

> *2 Kings 4:42-44 NAS95 42 Now a man came from Baal-shalishah, and brought the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And he said, "Give them to the people that they may eat." 43 His attendant said, "What, will I set this before a hundred men?" But he said, "Give them to the people that they may eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left over.'" 44 So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the LORD.*

Here Elisha multiplied through God's power some twenty barley loaves into a quantity sufficient to feed one hundred men and most likely their women and children. God used Elisha in many such ways to reveal His power and to call the people to follow the One True God. In a similar way, Jesus used signs to reveal the source of His true power and to point the people to faith in Him (=God). Elisha was different though because he rightly didn't claim to be God or the Messiah but rather pointed the way to Him through the revelation of His power through signs and miracles.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians 4. The context is following Paul's stating of the revelation of the mystery of God that the Gentiles were fellow heirs with the Jews in the kingdom of God (Ephesians 4:6). Paul explained that he was a minister to the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:8) and how he prayed that the Ephesians would understand the riches of God's glory and to "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (3:19).

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 4:1-6 NAS95 1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

God calls us to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (v. 1). What is this calling? The key lies in the adverb "therefore." As we have seen in previous editions of Mass Notes we have to ask "what is it there for"? In this case it links this passage to the previous doctrine described in chapter 3: "8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; 10 so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:8-10). God is making a point to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places (the supernatural realm) about Who He is through the church (you and me and fellow believers). It's not just about me and what I get out of my church experience. Instead, my life

becomes about walking in a way that reflects God's glory to the observant supernatural realm. What does this look like? Paul said it includes attitudes of humility, gentleness, having patience, "showing tolerance for one another in love," and working to preserve unity "in the bond of peace."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is Jesus' feeding of the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. This chapter of John marks the beginning of a series of turning points and especially the one we will study in future weeks in an easy to remember chapter and verse: 6:66. These turning points come about as the people begin to determine in their hearts whether they are true followers of Jesus. One of these turning points occurred in the previous chapter. "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18). This is where the rubber meets the road; the true followers of God are those that recognize Jesus as God in the flesh, the Messiah, rather than just a miracle doer who they though would deliver them from their Roman oppressors.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 6:1-15 NAS95 1 After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias). 2 A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick. 3 Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. 4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near. 5 Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" 6 This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. 7 Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." 8 One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, 9 "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" 10 Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. 11 Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. 12 When they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost." 13 So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. 14 Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." 15 So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.*

As the story progressed, Jesus asked Philip (who was from this region) to provide for the crowd. Philip responded to Jesus showing that he had resources in the amount of 200 days wages, a significant amount but worthless that far away from the city and in light of the huge size of the

crowd. Evidently, the disciples two by two ministry in the preceding weeks had been fruitful in terms of donations. Nevertheless, the people had followed Jesus some distance away from the city and saw Him as One Who would provide for them, so it was natural for Jesus to accommodate their needs through His disciples. In this case, the people found out that God was the true multiplier of things. The people did indeed recognize Jesus as a Prophet, seemingly the One prophesied about in Deuteronomy 18:15. However, they misunderstood the role of the Messiah (vv. 14 – 15). The people saw in Jesus a political ruler Who could free them from their poverty and Roman oppression. In the end, twelve baskets were left over corresponding exactly to the count of Jesus' disciples. Each disciple was left with one basket to highlight Jesus' ability to provide in the midst of impossible circumstances. God provided the food regardless of the people's faith and used this sign to point to the True Messiah Jesus.

We too may have misunderstandings about how Jesus' power should be used in the world. Though we should ask God to provide for our circumstances we have to recognize that like the people of the biblical era we often want God to use His power for our comfort, security, and advancement. We need to careful to let God be God and not expect Him to be our personal "Genie in the bottle" performing miracles on demand. Nobody stands above for His is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and His purposes are beyond understanding. Even though the people in this story wanted Jesus to become their civil King, instead Jesus ministered to them to meet their spiritual needs. One day Jesus will return to rule and reign on the earth and fulfil the expectations of a perfect ruler.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading we read God's calling for us to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (Ephesians 4:1). List some ways in which you may walk in a manner worthy of a heavenly calling. What are some specifics things to which God may be calling you to change in your life?

2. In the Gospel lesson Jesus called upon God's miraculous power to perform a miracle to provide for people's basic needs and at the same time to confirm Himself as the Messiah. It is evident from reading the synoptic Gospels that His disciples didn't understand the miracle until Jesus explained it to them some time later after feeding a second large crowd. What ways have you missed understanding the miracles of God in your own life? List two or three ways in which God has recently provided for you that you may have taken for granted. Tell God your thankfulness for His provision and ask Him to point out to you ways in which He continues to do so.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 07-22-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a message from Jeremiah regarding the ungodly rulers of Judah which includes a message of restoration under a future ruler sent by God whom we know as Jesus Christ. Then we look at how Jesus removed the wall of separation between God and the Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which Jesus' apostles rest period is interrupted by the incessant needs of the people.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. The context is Jeremiah's proclamation of condemnation of the civil rulers, since later in verse 9 (after today's reading) he condemns the prophets (Jeremiah 23:9). This section is the prophet's condemnation of the last five kings of Judah. Included in the gloom is a message of hope and restoration especially that of the reign of ruler called the "righteous Branch."

First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 23:1-6 NAS95 1 "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the LORD. 2 Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: "You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds," declares the LORD. 3 "Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply. 4 I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD. 5 "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. 6 In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, 'The LORD our righteousness.'"*

The rulers of Judah during this time were exceedingly evil, and God blamed them for the ultimate scattering of the tribe to Babylon which happened during the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC. God then promises to rebuild the fallen nation by regathering them under the rulership of "David a righteous Branch" (v. 5). This prophecy points clearly to the future reign of Jesus Christ on earth after His return. Jesus will "reign as a king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land" and be called by the name "The LORD our righteousness." One day the Nation of Israel will be restored under the righteous rulership of Jesus Christ. Israel will awaken to the identity of the Ruler whom they rejected. Zechariah said it this way: "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn" (Zechariah 12:10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. The context is Paul's message of hope to the Gentiles who were formerly "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12).

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 2:13-18 NAS95 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15 by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16 and might reconcile them both in one*

> *body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. 17 AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18 for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.*

God through Jesus' finished work of redemption on the cross made one "church" out of the formerly separate Jews and Gentiles. This one group of believers were united through the ministry of Jesus who "preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" (v. 17). The two groups are now provided access to God the Father through the single Holy Spirit. As believers in Jesus Christ we are united with all of the believers that ever existed or exist in the universe. Ultimately, we will be joined into one kingdom under the rulership of Jesus, the "Righteous Branch" as we read in the first reading.

As believers in the twenty first century we may forget just how separate the first century Gentile believers felt from the Jews. All along God had created the Law to separate the Jews from the surrounding world. He did this through the creation of things like food laws, moral laws, and ceremonial laws. During the time when this was written the temple in Jerusalem was functioning and the Gentiles were prohibited with the penalty of death from entering past a certain point. Through Jesus Christ they were now granted access to the Holy of Holies Who dwelled behind the curtain of the temple, what Paul described in this reading as the "dividing wall." This wall of separation was broken down through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul said in Romans, "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 10:9). He went on to say, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him" (Romans 10:12). Jesus is the One that unites all believers through faith in Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter 6 and the context is just after the apostles had returned from going out two by two to preach the message of repentance to the Jews. It seems that God had opened the hearts of the people to receive their message for it seems that Judas the treasurer had acquired at least two hundred denarii with which to be able to volunteer to buy bread for the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:37). Their ministry was to preach repentance, cast out demons, anoint people with oil and heal them (Mark 6:12 – 13).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 6:30-34 NAS95 30 The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. 31 And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) 32 They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves. 33 The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all*

> *the cities, and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things.*

Upon the return from their ministry the apostles reported to Jesus about their ministry. Jesus, knowing they were tired, called them away to a time of refreshing away from the presence of the people who it seems began coming to them in crowds (v. 34). Their rest and solitude was short lived though, as the crowds continued to come to Jesus and the apostles to the extent that they anticipated their movements (v. 33). Saint John provided a clue that the reason the crowds were so evident was because they were gathering in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover (John 6:4). Jesus accommodated the people's great needs because "they were like sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34b). The main point was that the spiritual teachers of the age had left the preaching of the true ministry of God. Jesus came to awaken the people to their true needs, to repent of their sins and to turn to God in faith.

How many times has God called us to set aside our preconceived notions about what we planning to do in certain circumstances? How many times have we settled down with a good book during a long airplane ride only to be disturbed by someone in an adjacent seat trying to strike up a conversation with us? As you go through the activities of the week, try to find circumstances in which you sense God would have you go in a different direction. Rather than being disturbed by disruptive circumstances, pray to find God's hand in what He would have for you in the unexpected event. Though all of us need times of rest, pray that you don't allow your preconceived time of rest to hinder what God would have you do during an interruption, even if you don't understand the reason or even the outcomes.

I remember one afternoon while I was driving home from work in suburban Detroit I saw a young woman alongside the road with a flat tire. Though I wanted to drive on past something within me caused me to stop and volunteer to change the tire. As I began my work, I had in the car some worn out gloves and placed those on my hands. One of the gloves had a hole in the hand and as I was removed the worn out tire from her car some of the steel from the belting found its way through that hole and into my hand making a nice cut. I didn't say anything but internally cried out in pain. Meanwhile the woman's boyfriend pulled up and stood by talking to her and watched me finish the job without saying anything to me. Between the pain of the pricks in my hand through the "holy" gloves and the awkwardness of having her boyfriend watching me I wondered why I had stopped in the first place. There was a racial element in place as well. Although I didn't understand any of the implications of what I did I still followed through with what God put on my heart to accomplish. I could have simply continued my leisurely drive home to my cushy suburban condo. Instead, I drive home with a bleeding hand and with uncertain kinds of metal fibers embedded along with a healthy helping of grease. When I get to heaven I plan to ask Jesus in what ways he used my service in the lives of these young people that afternoon. Until then I am called to do the things that God puts on my heart regardless of my understanding of the reason.

Reflection Questions

1. One of the things with which I have struggled is with the strong sense of separation I felt after leaving my job at Ford Motor Company as an engineer after a tenure of nine years. During this time, much of my life revolved around the people at my workplace. Once I surrendered my magic ID card which provided me access to things like the revolving gate in the engineering center and the test track across the street I felt a deep sense of separation. Through the years after my separation I have attempted to make peace with my decision as I kept in contact with a small group of people back at the company. After I came to faith in Jesus I found that I could deal with my decision much more easily in part because I discovered that God had brought me into contact with this large group of people in order to intercede for them in prayer. At times I still have dreams about being locked out of the company gate without an ID card to get through the turn style security gate.

A. In what ways have you found yourself separated from others in your life? How has your personal relationship with Jesus helped you through these trials?

B. Consider some ways in which you can use this separation in a positive way.

2. What do the first century Gentile believers have with groups of believers in our world such as the Chinese or Iranian Christians? In what ways does Jesus provide hope to them that we perhaps have difficulty in understanding?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 07-15-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with Amos 7: 12-15 as Amos, a simple farmer, is called by God to prophesy in Israel. Then we move to Ephesians 1:3-14 where Paul explains all the blessings that are available to those who are in Christ. Finally, we conclude with Mark 6: 7-13. Here Jesus sends out His disciples to minister and instructs them to trust God for their daily needs as they call people to repentance.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Imagine you are an ordinary farmer, minding your own business, tending your sheep and your crops. Suddenly God commands you to go to a neighboring land and pronounce judgment on its rebellious people. No one wants to be the bearer of bad news. Yet sometimes God called men to be prophets, foretelling God's plan and delivering God's words of warning and judgment. God's intention was never to simply punish people. His ultimate desire was to restore His wayward children back to Himself. Amos, however, was not a prophet, nor even the son of a prophet. He was simply a farmer trying to make a living in Judah during the time of the divided kingdom.

You may remember that the twelve tribes of Israel were divided into two kingdoms due to the sin of King Solomon. Ten tribes became the Northern Kingdom and were collectively called Israel. The remaining two tribes made up the Southern Kingdom and were known as Judah. In a strange twist, God called this farmer from Judah to go to Israel and prophesy against them.

At first, Amos pronounced God's judgment on Israel's enemies. No one objected to that. But then he began to recite the sins of Israel. Amos first reminded them of all God had done for them. He had released them from bondage in Egypt, defeated their enemies, given them land, and raised up

prophets among them. Yet Israel rebelled. It wasn't that they had completely forgotten God. They still performed their religious rituals. But while claiming to belong to God, Israel oppressed the righteous, deprived the poor of justice, worshipped idols, and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

Religious ritual unaccompanied by love for God and concern for the oppressed does not impress God. He despised Israel's religious hypocrisy. When He used His plumb line (standard of holiness) to evaluate Israel, her crookedness was revealed. Amos warned them that God's judgment would surely come. Their king Jeroboam would die by the sword, and Israel would be taken captive by its enemy.

In the First Reading, Amaziah, a priest of Israel who should have been open to the message of the Lord, instead commanded Amos to cease prophesying and go home. Though Amos conceded he was a farmer and not a prophet, he knew God had called him to prophesy. He would prove faithful to that call despite opposition.

First Reading:

> *Amos 7:12-15 NAS95 12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Go, you seer, flee away to the land of Judah and there eat bread and there do your prophesying! 13 "But no longer prophesy at Bethel, for it is a sanctuary of the king and a royal residence." 14 Then Amos replied to Amaziah, "I am not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet; for I am a herdsman and a grower of sycamore figs. 15 "But the LORD took me from following the flock and the LORD said to me, 'Go prophesy to My people Israel.'"*

We are prophets in a sense, bringing God's message of salvation to those around us. This message is a mixture of bad news and good news. The wages of our sin is death, St. Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, and if we continue in our rebellion against God, we will surely die. That is very bad news. But the good news is in that same verse: "*…the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord*." God has called each one of us to bear this news to the whole world. Will we be faithful to the call?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Some time ago I enjoyed visiting Moody Bible Institute in Chicago when my daughter Emily was a student there. Because Moody is located near the center of one of the largest cities in America, the security on campus is tight, especially in the areas where students live and hang out. Students carry a pass card that allows them access to all the restricted areas. I was an outsider there, but as long as I was with Emily I could enjoy free access to all the college offered: I could visit the dorms, go to chapel, attend classes, eat in the cafeteria, and have coffee at Joe's Coffee Shop. Nothing was kept from me as long as I was with Emily. Without her, I would be on the outside separated from the rich experience Moody offers. I could claim no right to these blessings. But as long as I was with her, all the blessings that were hers were mine, too.

Abundant blessing and privilege exists in the spiritual realm, but in ourselves, we have no right to it. Without Christ, we are on the outside and without hope. In the Second Reading Paul tells the church in Ephesus that God's plan from the foundation of the world was to include them (and us) in these great blessings.

As you read the Second Reading, notice the richness of these spiritual blessings which can be ours in abundance. Note the words *every, all, riches, lavished, fullness*. Observe the words that indicate how intentional God was to bless us—*He chose us, He predestined us, He purposed, according to the kind intention of His will.* And notice how many times the words *in Christ* are used for it is only through Christ that we have access to His abundant blessings.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 1:3-14 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*

Can you fathom the blessings that are ours in Christ?

v. 5 adoption as sons – When we trust in Christ and His death on the cross for us, we become members of God's family with all the rights and privileges of adult sons.

v. 7 *redemption through His blood* – Redemption has the idea of buying someone from the slave market and setting them free. We were slaves to sin, but God paid the price for us by sending Jesus to die in our place. He has purchased us with His blood and set us free to serve Him.

v. 7 *the forgiveness of our trespasses* – We don't deserve forgiveness, but this is evidence of

His abundant grace which He lavishes upon us.

v. 11 *an inheritance* – This is ours because in Christ we have been made a child of God. This inheritance, St. Peter explains in 1 Peter 1:4, "is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you."

v. 13 *sealed with the Holy Spirit* –We are sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit who comes to live in every believer. Our position in Christ is secure.

St. Paul explains the *pass card* that gives us access to God's abundant blessings:

"…after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation–having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14)

We hear the message of salvation, we believe it, and are saved and sealed in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Christ's standing before God is our standing, His inheritance is our inheritance, and His riches are our riches. God lavished them on us, because we are in Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus sent out the 12 disciples two by two as His representatives and under His authority. Their mission was a spiritual one. They would be taking the good news of Jesus to the lost. Naturally Satan and his demons would be opposing them at every turn, but Jesus gave his disciples power over these dark spiritual forces.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 6:7-13 NAS95 7 And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; 8 and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff–no bread, no bag, no money in their belt– 9 but to wear sandals; and He added, "Do not put on two tunics." 10 And He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. 11 Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them." 12 They went out and preached that men should repent. 13 And they were casting out many demons and were anointing with oil many sick people and healing them.*

The disciples were to take nothing for their journey—no food, money, or extra clothing. Commentators have posed three reasons for what seems to us a strange command. First, extra possessions are an encumbrance. We have probably all experienced times when, instead of owning our possessions, they owned us. Our possessions require care and maintenance, consuming time and

money and distracting us from more important matters of life. Are my possessions being used to serve God or are they distracting me from ministry? The disciples were to take nothing extra that could encumber them.

Second, the disciples were to go out in complete dependence on God's power and provision. One of the hallmarks of Jesus' life on earth was that He lived in complete dependence upon the Father (John 5:19, 5:30, 7:16). The disciples were to do likewise, depending on God for their daily provisions.

And third, Jesus established the principle that the minister of God is to be supported by the people to whom he ministers. It was appropriate for the disciples to enjoy the hospitality and provision of the ones who were receiving the blessings of their ministry.

If a city or household rejected the disciples and their message, the disciples were to shake the dust off the soles of their feet as they left. *Jews sometimes shook the dust off their clothing when returning from Gentile lands as a sign of contempt.** When the disciples did it, it was a sign of judgment. The disciples' message of salvation was often accompanied by miracles. Rejecting the message in the face of supernatural authentication indicated an intractable heart. Those who rejected the disciples were ultimately rejecting the One who sent them. And when people reject Jesus, they are rejecting the only provision for their sin. By shaking the dust off their feet, the disciples were communicating a warning: *We offered you what you needed for salvation, but you turned it down. The responsibility for your sins remains on your shoulders. Judgment is coming. We have nothing more to offer you.*

It is a moment none of us would want to face. And we don't have to if we repent and believe.

*https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/reformation-study-bible/Matt.10.14-Matt.10.15

Reflection Questions

1. Which of the blessings listed in Ephesians 1 are you most thankful for and why?

2. If God were to send you out to minister, which of your possessions would be most difficult to leave behind? What could you do this week to decrease your attachment to things and increase your dependence upon God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 07-08-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about the commission of the prophet Ezekiel. Then we study the value of weakness in the life of Paul and by application how God uses it for our good. We close with a study of Mark's Gospel in which we see the rejection of Jesus' message by those close to him from His own home town.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is the opening of his prophecy and would have been written after he had been carried off captive to Babylon in 597 BC. Ezekiel said in 1:1 that he was 30 years old when he began his ministry, the same age as when the priests begin working in their position. Ezekiel was unique in that he held both offices, that of prophet and priest (see Ezekiel 1:3). The young man Ezekiel wrote of the visions he received from God while he "by the river Chebar among the exiles" (1:1). Today's reading is God's commissioning of Ezekiel to speak to the Nation of Israel that was in the process of being judged by Him for their sin.

First Reading:

> *Ezekiel 2:1-5 NAS95 1 Then He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet that I may speak with you!" 2 As He spoke to me the Spirit entered me and set me on my feet; and I heard Him speaking to me. 3 Then He said to me, "Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. 4 I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' 5 As for them, whether they listen or not–for they are a rebellious house–they will know that a prophet has been among them."*

Since Ezekiel was far removed from the temple his ministry duties as a priest would have been practically eliminated. However, God called Ezekiel to a new ministry as a prophet and empowered him through the sending of the Holy Spirit specially to him. The Spirit of God was the One that "set [him] on [his] feet" and only after this event did Ezekiel begin hearing God speak directly to him in contrast to the visions he recorded in the opening of the book. Now that Ezekiel was commissioned as God's prophet, the oracles began pouring out to him. First, God told him to whom he was sent: the "sons of Israel" (v. 3b). Next, as if Ezekiel didn't already know, God told him about the rebellious nature of the people. God used multiple harsh phrases to describe them including rebellious (3 times), transgressors, stubborn, obstinate, as well as implied that they would not listen (v. 5).

What can we learn from this commissioning passage from Ezekiel's life? While we may not be a prophet or a priest, we can see some principles about how God works and what our response to Him should be. First, when God calls a servant He empowers them through His Spirit. As church age believers we are guaranteed that the Holy Spirit lives within us (Ephesians 1:14) to empower us to do works of service that He has prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). Second, we are to carry out God's commission regardless of the response of those who we are serving. We should not be complexly oblivious to receiving constructive feedback in how to improve in serving people. However, this passage is teaching that sometimes our service will go unappreciated. When that is the case God is calling us to remain faithful, regardless of the response.

I know of a missionary who worked in Germany for a dozen years without seeing even a single faith convert to the Lord. It would have been very easy to be discouraged and to evaluate his work as a failure. But in God's value system this man, like Ezekiel, was faithful even though there wasn't a lot on the outside to show for it. In Ezekiel's case, rabbinical tradition says that he was eventually killed by someone who resisted his message. Both of these examples serve to encourage us to persevere under adverse circumstance when we are trying to do God's will in our own lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. In this passage, Paul is explaining the importance of weakness for our spiritual growth.

Second Reading:

> *2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NAS95 7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

When is weakness ever a good thing? In our culture the answer is never, but in God's economy it serves a valuable purpose. Paul, because of his unique position as one who had direct revelation from God, could have tried to do ministry in his own strength. Dependence upon God is our life source. Unfortunately, we can be deceived into thinking that we don't need God, even as a Christian. So God in His kindness and wisdom allowed the "thorn in the flesh" to come upon Paul. The "thorn in the flesh" is a messenger of Satan, which is obviously something bad, something we wouldn't want for ourselves. Even though Paul pleaded and thought that he would be more productive without it, God reassured him that this bad thing could be used for his own good. The good that God used it for was to break Paul's of the dangerous and self-destructive nature of self-reliance and instead develop a spirit of dependence upon God which was his lifeline.

Like Paul, we are often deluded into believing that real life is found in exerting our independence and power over our circumstances. Self-reliance though, does not lead us to eternal life. Instead, abiding in Christ and dependence upon God is where real life is found (John 15:1-5). These character qualities of abiding and dependence upon God do not come naturally to us. God, in His infinite wisdom, knows how to keep us close to Himself and He will use even bad circumstances, i.e. a thorn in the flesh, to carry out His purpose in our life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the next passage, we will see a fatal response to Jesus' display of supernatural power in his home town of Nazareth.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 6:1-6 NAS95 1 Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him. 2 When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue; and the many listeners were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things, and what is this wisdom given to Him, and such miracles as these performed by His hands? 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him. 4 Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not*

> *without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household." 5 And He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. 6 And He wondered at their unbelief. And He was going around the villages teaching.*

In this vignette we see people discrediting Jesus' ministry because of their own short sightedness and resentment. In other passages, we see people being humbled by Jesus' display of power. Here the people of Jesus' hometown list the names of specific family members in an attempt to invalidate His miraculous signs. This would seemingly let them off the hook for being accountable to recognize the Messiah among them. The proper response to the Messiah would be to follow Him but they choose to disdain Him. As we saw in the first reading the people of Israel are a rebellious lot, obstinate, and refuse to listen even when miraculous signs are manifested in their presence. As a result of their great lack of faith Jesus' miraculous signs were withheld because God shows up when we exercise faith in Him (Hebrews 11:6).

This passage teaches us that there are two responses to Jesus' rightful claim as Messiah. One response is to believe and place our trust in Jesus even when it feels kind of awkward or it costs us dearly. The second response is to push away the overwhelming evidence by discrediting the messengers of the Gospel and His message. These people could see the signs because they were coming from Jesus who was to them just a regular human being. Instead of shifting their lives to be open to Jesus' claim of divinity and messiahship they rejected Him. We can learn from their fatal response.

Reflection Questions

1. In the past I have struggled with some health issues that were chronic in nature and undiagnosed. The daily frustration and concern over this continues to cause me to live my life in a way much closer to God's kingdom than the world. Without this constant struggle I would not be as conscious of my need for the Lord and his daily sustenance. List one weakness with which you are suffering from which you have asked God to deliver you. Talk to Him in prayer about how He might be using this to develop your dependence upon Him.

2. During the Fourth of July holiday I frequently travel back to my hometown to celebrate. I encounter people who are aware of the spiritual transformation that happened in my life when I surrendered my life to Jesus. Sometimes they respond to me in a similar way as the people in Jesus' hometown who resented the fact that He was holy. How can the passages from this week's study encourage you to persist in your own holiness and personal service of the Lord even when others disparage or scoff at your spiritual development?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 07-01-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers, encouraging them to be generous with their suffering brothers and sisters in Christ. The Gospel lesson tells the story of Jesus healing two marginalized people: a little girl who died and a woman who suffered with bleeding for many years. In both passages, we see that the heart of God is tender toward those who are suffering.

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. Our study will begin with the second reading, which is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

On his third missionary journey, Saint Paul encouraged Gentile Christians to help their struggling

brothers and sisters in Christ who were impacted by a severe famine in Jerusalem (see Acts 24:17). In this part of his letter to the believers in Corinth, he is urging them to excel at being financially generous and to complete their pledge of support to those who are in physical need. In the first part of this section, he commends them for leading the way in their faith and conduct. He then asks them to become leaders in the area of generosity. So it is not only important to want to give, but to follow through and actually sacrifice on behalf of others. He calls the act of giving a "gracious work" (v. 7). He then ties in this "gracious work" with the sacrifice that Christ made on our behalf, which is the motivating force behind the compassionate giving that should characterize Christians.

Second Reading:

(Verses 8, 10, and 11 which were omitted from the reading were included in order to provide the full context and meaning).

> *2 Corinthians 8:7-15 NAS95 7 "But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. 8 I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. 10 I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. 11 But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. 12 For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 13 For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality– 14 at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; 15 as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."*

Saint Paul points out a few key principles to encourage the Corinthian believers to follow through on their pledge to provide financial relief to the starving Christians in Jerusalem. Paul challenged the Corinthians to be generous in giving the things that God had so generously provided, saying that they "abound in everything" else (v. 7), so why would generosity not be part of their reputation as well? This calling to give was not a command but rather a challenge that Paul provided to reveal the true "sincerity of [their] love" (v. 8b). He is clear that this calling to gracious giving is his opinion, but from what we know about the other times that Paul has given his personal views it is a sound biblical principle if not an outright command.

Paul went on to explain how Jesus was the example of sacrificial giving by saying, "though He was

rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich" (v. 9b –ff). Paul's reasoning is twofold. One, if the Corinthians give during their times of prosperity they can count upon other Christians to give to them during their own time of need. The most basic decency of a human citizen of the world is in giving to others in need out of one's abundance. Second, sacrificial giving is evidence of their true calling to serve God. Although a seed must of course be initially planted, it doesn't go far without proper watering and continued nurturing. Paul admonished the Corinthians not to just begin the good work of giving, but to carry it to completion (v. 11). He closed with a quote from Exodus 16:18, a passage in which Moses explained how through God's sovereign control everyone gathered manna in the exact amount that they required. In the new economy of God after the Exodus God called the Hebrews and all people subsequent to them to act as His agent in distributing goods evenly from each person's excess to fill other people's needs.

What was happening back then historically can be a lesson to us in our own day and age. First, he calls them to recognize the connectedness of the universal church. He challenged them to step up to the plate and become an example for the other churches, who were already contributing generously to the cause of helping their brothers and sisters. Paul wrote to this group of believers in a previous letter about the connectedness of the church by calling Christians the "body of Christ". In explaining how each believer is interdependent, he said, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). What happens to one believer (good or bad) impacts the rest of the body. This interconnectedness with the universal church should awaken our sensitivity to others around us; those we know and even those we do not know. Being others-oriented can release us from the tyranny of self-absorption, which is more oppressive than we often recognize. God's structure of connecting us to the larger body of Christ and giving us an awareness of others in need is a blessing to our spiritual growth and maturity.

The second main point that Paul makes about giving in this passage is that the motive behind the giving is more important than the actual amount of the gift. He emphasizes that generous giving can be an outward display of sincerity of heart and love for others. The supreme example of generous giving is Jesus Christ Himself. Though Christ had all of the privileges of heaven, He gave up His rightful place of authority and riches to submit Himself to the poverty of this world. One of the early hymns of the church focused on Christ's humility for our sake and reinforces the theme of why we should be generous to others. It is a way that we can show the world who Jesus is. The following Scripture helps us to understand this more.

> *Philippians 2:5-11 NAS95 5 "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted*

> *Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Another important and encouraging principle that Saint Paul gives in regard to giving is that God entrusts us with different amounts of financial means so that we might steward resources in a way that promotes equality and unity in the body of Christ. Some parts of our world have very little in regard to material resources. These ones who are not rich in the world's eyes are often rich in other resources, such as faith, relationships and having an eternal perspective. Paul says that their richness can supply what a materially wealthy community of believers might not have. And a materially wealthy community can benefit those who are impoverished by giving sacrificially and providing a sense of unity among the believers (see also 1 Timothy 6:11-19). So while God could magically provide for all of the needs in the world, He does not override the will of believers, but instead, trusts us to live in the power of Christ so that we participate in this "gracious work". We have received grace and so we give graciously to others out of the abundance of what Christ has given to us. This passage encourages all believers to consider our part in being the hands and feet of Christ.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Mark where we will see the story of a miraculous healing.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 5:21-43 NAS95 21 When Jesus had crossed over again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around Him; and so He stayed by the seashore. 22 One of the synagogue officials named Jairus came up, and on seeing Him, fell at His feet 23 and implored Him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death; please come and lay Your hands on her, so that she will get well and live." 24 And He went off with him; and a large crowd was following Him and pressing in on Him. 25 A woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, 26 and had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse– 27 after hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind Him and touched His cloak. 28 For she thought, "If I just touch His garments, I will get well." 29 Immediately the flow of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. 30 Immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power proceeding from Him had gone forth, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?" 31 And His disciples said to Him, "You see the crowd pressing in on You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'" 32 And He looked around to see the woman who had done this. 33 But the woman fearing and trembling, aware of what had happened to her, came and fell down*

> *before Him and told Him the whole truth. 34 And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction." 35 While He was still speaking, they came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?" 36 But Jesus, overhearing what was being spoken, said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe." 37 And He allowed no one to accompany Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James. 38 They came to the house of the synagogue official; and He saw a commotion, and people loudly weeping and wailing. 39 And entering in, He said to them, "Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep." 40 They began laughing at Him. But putting them all out, He took along the child's father and mother and His own companions, and entered the room where the child was. 41 Taking the child by the hand, He said to her, "Talitha kum!" (which translated means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). 42 Immediately the girl got up and began to walk, for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were completely astounded. 43 And He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this, and He said that something should be given her to eat.*

This is a powerful story of Jesus' healing power and His compassion for marginalized people. The two females in this story ran parallel lives until the day that Jesus came to town. The day the little girl was born must have brought great joy to Jairus and his family twelve years earlier. Jairus was a religious man, obviously respected in the community, which is shown by his upfront request to have Jesus come to his home to heal his daughter. At the time when this little girl came into the world, the woman with the hemorrhage began her long journey on her desperate reach toward her last hope, Jesus. Twelve years was a long time to be struggling with a bleeding issue, which would have marginalized her in the ceremonial world of the Jews as "unclean" in everyday social settings. After twelve long years of seeking help in every possible form, it is understandable how desperate she would have been. She was so desperate that she was willing to go against the social taboo of being in a crowd of people even though she was "unclean" in order to reach out and touch Jesus' garment in hopes of being healed.

In the end, Jesus did heal her, but not without correcting her theology. While she placed all her hope in touching his garment, as if his clothes held some special force that could be invoked by her grasping reach, He helped her to see that it was her faith that so moved the heart of God to heal her. This is an important point for all of us to recognize. Faith is living as if something unseen and unrealized is actually at work. When your faith is put in God, it means to lean your full weight on Him, as if there is no other lifeline. The Bible describes it this way: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). It also says that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Jesus thought that is was important for her to understand that she was healed by reaching out to the right Person, not because of her superstitious beliefs.

Now that the woman was healed and made clean, it was time for Jesus to turn his attention to the original request that brought Him on the journey to begin with, Jairus' daughter. She was sick when

Jairus went to implore Jesus to come heal her. But in this delay, she died, and the report came to Jairus that all hope for healing was gone. Jesus, though, encouraged Jairus to have faith and believe that He could not only heal a sick daughter, but that He could also bring her back to life. The Gospel records other incidents where Jesus raised people back to life: the widow's son (Luke 7:13-15) and Lazarus (John 11:43-44). These important accounts were recorded so that we could believe and have life that is truly life in Jesus. Saint John put it this way: "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31).

How does this story contribute to our understanding of Jesus and the role of humans as we seek to have relationship with Him? We learn that Jesus is God because He has power to heal and to raise the dead. While magicians and charlatans could conjure up evil powers to perform signs and wonders, no one but God has the authority to bring people back from the dead. It is clear from this account that the Gospel writer is making a case for Jesus' divinity and authority. Our response, then, is will we believe and surrender to His divinity and authority in our own lives? Will we come to Him as the One who said that He is the way, the truth and the LIFE (John 14:6)? Or will we try to find life on our own terms, pursuing a little bit of religion to satisfy our guilty conscience? Obviously, the Gospel writers went to great lengths to provide enough information about Jesus to convince us of His rightful place as King and Lord of our lives. May our search for His leadership in our lives be as desperate and as focused as that of Jairus and the woman with the bleeding issue.

As I type, I am reminded of a recent incident that has left me desperate for Jesus to be in control of my life and to experience His lordship over my knee-jerk reaction to defend myself. I was criticized for not doing part of my job well. At first I wanted to defend myself and prove my worth to others. But after taking a deep breath, I turned to Jesus and silently asked Him what He wanted me to learn in this situation. I still don't know what that is, but I trust that He will help me to let Him be Lord of my life so that I don't have to rely on my accomplishments or my self-defense to prop up my ego. Instead of taking matters into my own hands and trying to find life in my own sense of self-righteousness, I can rely on Him, leaning my full weight on His perfection. I can learn from people's criticism and solicit feedback so that I can learn and grow. We are all a work in progress!

Reflection Questions

1. How do you feel when you consider the great compassion that Jesus had for the two women who were in need? What needs do you have that you can talk to Him about today? How does knowing His compassion for you encourage your approach to Him?

2. In both passages, Jesus was highlighted as One who has ultimate power. In the New Testament lesson, He became poor to bring us to His heavenly riches and in the Gospel lesson, He was able to heal and raise the dead. When you look at your life and the obstacles that seem to get you down, how does knowing that Christ has ultimate power influence your walk of faith? Sometimes, we are discouraged because we do not see Him using His power to do what we think He should do on our behalf. But take a few moments and ask Him to help you to see where He wants to exercise His authority in your life. See if in this next week your heart might be willing to desperately seek out His lordship in your life as you come up against obstacles and discouragement.

3. 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. Jairus, too, was a religious man, yet he lost his little daughter to a terrible illness. He knew where to turn when life got out of control. He desperately searched for Jesus, the Son of God and the rightful Lord of the universe. These two individuals are pictures of desperate hearts seeking God's help.

How bad do things have to get before we pray? Regardless of our circumstances**, God has called us not to wait until troubles come our way, but to be faithful and pray in order to obey.** This includes praying not only about our needs but also for the needs of others.

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.

A. 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."

B. A very easy way to remember to pray for a very short list of people is to assign each of them to one finger, I call these "finger prayers." If you want to go one step further, meet with one of them and when you pray with them the first time have them hold that particular finger and tell them that this will help you to pray for them.

C. Consider the concept of constructing a kind of "prayer maze" 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.

D. Finally, pray! Ask God to show you ways to improve your prayer life. In a previous edition of Mass Notes we discussed 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.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-24-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. We open with the first reading from Isaiah 49 in which we study one of the "Servant Songs" of God. Then we learn from Saint Paul's message to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch and end with the reading from Luke heralding the birth of John the Baptist.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 49 covering 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. The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long-awaited Messiah. As you read, take note of the purposes of the two servants mentioned, the servant Israel and the Messiah Servant whom we know as Jesus.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 49:1-6 NAS95 1 Listen to Me, O islands, And pay attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called Me from the womb; From the body of My mother He named Me. 2 He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. 3 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, so 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."*

The context of the passage was God's promises for the complete restoration of Israel given to the Nation just prior to the judgement of the Northern Kingdom. The chapter opens with the restatement of both the purposes of the Prophet Isaiah as well as Israel. God said about Isaiah that "He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver" (v. 2). Isaiah was God's chosen instrument to bring the message of His judgment and promise of future restoration to Israel. Next God stated His purpose for the Nation. Isaiah said, "He said to Me, 'You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory'" (v. 3). Isaiah was chosen to be God's messenger to the Jews, and the Jews were chosen to bear this message of salvation to the world. These chosen people were to be a "called out" group, set apart and established by God as salt and light to the surrounding nations. Isaiah continued, "And now says the LORD, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, To bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel might be gathered to Him (For I am honored in the sight of the LORD, And My God is My strength)" (v. 5). The reading concludes with God's promise to restore the entire nation of Israel such as to reach the entire earth with the good news of God's salvation (v. 6).

Now let's look at the servant themes in the reading where we see the purpose of God's servants. 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. The Christian Church has 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).

By means of application, the Christian Church is yet the third servant of God. Despite the temporary unbelief 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 context of the reading from Acts 13 is Paul's Sabbath day speech to the Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. He was accompanied by Barnabas, while Saint John had just left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Paul's address to them began in verse 17 during which he reminded them of their history and how God had answered their call for a king by giving them Saul (v. 21).

Second Reading:

> *Acts 13:22-26 NAS95 22 "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' 23 From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24 after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' 26 Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent."*

Paul told the Jews in the synagogue about God had raised up the Messiah from the line of King David (v. 23). He then moved further forward in history to tell them about how God had raised up the prophet John (the Baptist) who pointed the way towards the Messiah (v. 25). Finally, he told them about how this message of salvation through the Messiah was for them, "sons of Abraham's family" (v. 26a).

Verse 22 says that King David was a man after God's own heart. What does it mean to be a person after God's own heart like David? First, people seeking to be people of God are empowered through His Holy Spirit Who indwells everyone that has been born from above (John 3:3). We learn from 1 Samuel that when King David was ordained by God "the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:13b). Second, we people walking with God must submit themselves to the Lord by being obedient to Him (James 4:7). One of the main stumbling stones that many have in submitting to God is pride. Saint Peter said, "You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE" (1 Peter 5:5). Finally, people walking with God must develop a love for the Word of God. King David said the following about this in the Book of Psalms. "I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate on Your statutes" (Psalms 119:47-48).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from the opening of Luke and provides the details of the birth of John the Baptist through his parents Zacharias the priest and Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary. Zacharias was unable to speak up until the birth because he didn't believe the Angel Gabriel (Luke 1:19 – 20).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 1:57-66, 80 NAS95 57 Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. 59 And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. 60 But his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John." 61 And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name." 62 And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. 63 And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all astonished. 64 And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. 65 Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, "What then will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.*
>
> *80 And the child continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel.*

This John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, the one spoken of Paul in the second reading whose purpose was to announce the coming Messiah Jesus. His birth was similar to the miraculous birth of Isaac to Abram and Sarai in the Old Testament because Elizabeth was both barren and old (Luke 1:7). The miracle of John's birth to his elderly parents continued after his birth when his father was able to speak again (v. 64). John the Baptist was a herald of God's plan of salvation in a similar way as Isaiah was whom we read about in the first reading. We know that Jesus said that John was the greatest man that ever lived (Matthew 11:11). John the Baptist was yet another of the prophets sent by God to draw people to Himself through his announcement of the Messiah Jesus.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 06-17-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with Ezekiel 17: 22-24. The prophet uses a metaphor to show how God sets up kings and takes them down and will eventually establish a King who will reign over all. Then we move to St. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5: 6-10, encouraging the use of our earthly bodies for eternal purposes. Finally we conclude with St. Mark 4: 26-34, as Jesus uses parables to teach about the kingdom of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

When an F5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, on May 22, 2011, 158 people died and countless others were injured. Tornado warnings had been issued and the sirens activated, but many did not seek shelter soon enough. One study found that only 10 percent of the population respond immediately when a tornado warning is given. The others respond with what the researcher called, "denial." * Lives are lost when people don't believe and heed the warnings.

Ezekiel was a prophet of God sent out to warn God's people of impending destruction. God had always been their shelter in a time of storm, but they had strayed far from Him. If they didn't turn back to Him destruction would surely overtake them. Ezekiel and many of the other prophets were sent to sound the alarm, but sadly, many did not heed the prophets' warning.

The people of God were composed of twelve tribes descended from Abraham's grandson Jacob, (renamed Israel in Genesis 35:10). These descendants and the land God gave them for a home were called Israel. From them, the Messiah Jesus would come, and through the salvation He would bring, all the nations of the world would be blessed.

Despite their privileged position in God's plan for the nations, Israel rebelled against God and went after the false gods of the surrounding nations. They forgot the Lord's commands and worshiped idols. This was the fate of King Solomon when he ruled in Israel after his father David's reign. At first, he followed God, and God gave him great wisdom to rule justly. But when Solomon married foreign women, he began to follow after their gods. Because of his idolatry, God would take ten of the tribes from his rule and leave his posterity the tribes of Benjamin and Judah only. The ten tribes became known as the Northern Kingdom and were called Israel. The remaining two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom and were called Judah. It was to Judah that God sent Ezekiel with His warnings.

God had already sent an invading army from Babylon to take Judah into captivity. Ezekiel was with the first wave of captives taken to Babylon. Some of God's people, however, still remained in Jerusalem, Judah's capital. If they didn't repent and turn back to God, they would face a similar fate as their brothers. They ignored the warning, and instead of seeking God, they sought an alliance with Egypt. That failed, and Babylon conquered Jerusalem taking most of the people who resided there into captivity.

First Reading:

> ***Ezekiel 17:22-24 NAS95 22 Thus says the Lord GOD, "I will also take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and set it out; I will pluck from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23 "On the high mountain of Israel I will plant it, that it may bring forth boughs and bear fruit and become a stately cedar. And birds of every kind will nest under it; they will nest in the shade of its branches. 24 "All the trees of the field will know that I am the LORD; I bring down the high tree, exalt the low tree, dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will perform it."***

In the First Reading, Ezekiel uses trees as a metaphor for rulers God sets up and takes down. When kings abandoned God and led the people far away from Him, God sent prophets like Ezekiel to call them back to God and warn them of impending destruction. When the king and his people persisted in their rebellion, God sent conquerors to come and take them captive.

Ezekiel looked forward to the time when God will set up another king. God will take a twig from the lofty top of the cedar and plant it on the mountain of Israel, and it will bear fruit and birds of all kinds will come and prosper there. This tree is a reference to Jesus who will be established in Israel and will bring salvation to all who come to Him. And someday He will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a heavenly kingdom that has no end.

Another prophet sounds the warning for us. St. John tells us:

> *16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (Gospel of St. John 3: 16-18)*

Those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Those that don't, stand judged already.

* http://www.mprnews.org/story/2012/05/09/storm-ready-human-reaction#gallery accessed 5/18/15

Introduction to the Second Reading:

1 and 2 Corinthians were written by St. Paul the Apostle to the church in Corinth. There were sin issues in the church, and Paul had addressed them frankly in 1 Corinthians. Now in his second letter, he wanted to reassure the Corinthians that he did this, not out of anger, but out of love. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul encourages the Corinthian church to forgive and restore the one who had caused the problems. He goes on to discuss practical matters of Christian living such as financial giving and caution regarding relationships with unbelievers. But often his thoughts turn from earthly matters to eternal blessings.

In the proclamation of the gospel, St. Paul had undergone extreme persecution which he recounts in 2 Corinthians 4. He testified, *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."* Encouragement came from knowing that these "light troubles," as he called them, were producing eternal results—people were hearing about and believing in Jesus. His focus was not on the temporary suffering but on eternal rewards. He continued this focus in chapter 5.

Second Reading:

> ***2 Corinthians 5:6-10 NAS95 6 Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord– 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight– 8 we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. 9 Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.***

In the first five verses, St. Paul compares our bodies with an earthly tent. Tents are fragile and temporary and subject to destruction. So are our earthly bodies. While we are in this "tent" we groan and are burdened, Paul tells us. We long for a heavenly body, which is like an eternal house

not a fragile tent.

In this reading (v. 6-10), Paul acknowledges that it would be much better to be away from this body and home with the Lord in heaven. But until then, Paul tells us to do what is pleasing to the Lord. God has ministry for us to do, and it would be pointless to waste this time by wishing we were in heaven. But on the other hand, knowing that we are going to heaven someday will give us courage and perseverance when we face persecution and hardship in this life.

In addition, St. Paul reminds us we will someday have to give an account to Christ for what we have done in this life as Christians. Did we serve Him well? Did we tell others about Christ? Will He someday be able to say to you and me, "*Well done, good and faithful servant*"? He will if we faithfully use these earthly bodies to accomplish his eternal purposes.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Wherever Jesus went, a crowd of the curious gathered. He often spoke to them in parables. A parable is a simple, everyday story that represents a spiritual truth or moral principle. It usually compares a spiritual concept with an earthly object or event.

Gospel Reading:

> ***Mark 4:26-34 NAS95 26 And He was saying, "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; 27 and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows–how, he himself does not know. 28 The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. 29 But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." 30 And He said, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, 32 yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that THE BIRDS OF THE AIR can NEST UNDER ITS SHADE." 33 With many such parables He was speaking the word to them, so far as they were able to hear it; 34 and He did not speak to them without a parable; but He was explaining everything privately to His own disciples.***

In the Gospel Reading, two parables are given. The first one begins, "*The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil.*" Stories like these are often told to illustrate or illuminate a truth. But Jesus spoke in parables not to clarify the truth but to obscure it. It was a judgment on those whose hearts were hard. To the unbelieving, the parables were incomprehensible riddles, but to those who wanted to understand the truth, Jesus would give them understanding. He said to His

disciples and His true followers, "*To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, [12] so that while seeing, they may see and not perceive, and while hearing, they may hear and not understand….*"*

In the first parable, the kingdom of God is compared to a man who plants seeds. While he goes about his daily routine and without any further help from the man, the seed sprouts and matures. So it is with us. We plant the seed of the gospel in people's hearts when we teach or preach or proclaim the truth of the Bible to our friends, neighbors, and relatives. Then God causes the implanted truth to take root and grow. A mature Christian is the result.

The second parable says that the kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed which grows into a large plant with branches capable of providing shade for birds of the air. The church was small in the beginning–just a little band of disciples. But when those men were empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of the Gospel to the whole world, the church grew rapidly. Many have found comfort and salvation there. If we plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts, God will cause that seed to spout and the church to flourish.

*Information gleaned from a sermon by John MacArthur accessed 5/20/15.
http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/90-464/the-purpose-for-parables

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Reflection Questions

1. What would you need to do differently in order to live your life for eternal purposes? List two areas in which you will write down on a card or in your personal journal.

2. If we plant the seed of the Word of God in people's hearts, God will cause it to grow. What are some ways you can plant more "seeds" this week? Give at least two ways in which this could be done.

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