Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-25-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about suffering and persecution, first from the Prophet Jeremiah, then from Saint Paul and Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Jeremiah. This passage is set amongst the backdrop of Israel receiving dire consequences for rejecting God's rule in their lives. Jeremiah, a true prophet of God, had been beaten and mistreated by a false priest named Pashur (Jeremiah 20:1-2). While Jeremiah proclaimed cursing on Pashur in a veil of confidence, this section of verses in our reading shows that inwardly he was troubled by the persecution he faced. This is Jeremiah's prayer of complaint before the LORD.

First Reading:

Jeremiah 20:10-13 NAS95 10 For I have heard the whispering of many, "Terror on every side! Denounce him; yes, let us denounce him!" All my trusted friends, Watching for my fall, say: "Perhaps he will be deceived, so that we may prevail against him And take our revenge on him." 11 But the LORD is with me like a dread champion; Therefore my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will be utterly ashamed, because they have failed, With an everlasting disgrace that will not be

forgotten. 12 Yet, O LORD of hosts, You who test the righteous, Who see the mind and the heart; Let me see Your vengeance on them; For to You I have set forth my cause. 13 Sing to the LORD, praise the LORD! For He has delivered the soul of the needy one From the hand of evildoers.

Jeremiah's suffering at the hands of an evil man provide an important lesson for those of us who follow after him. Just like Jeremiah, we cannot control how people treat us. But we can take our complaints to God and ask Him for justice and help.

Jeremiah was quite graphic in his lament, showing that he could be brutally honest with God about how he felt and what he was experiencing. He felt persecuted by his enemies and realized that even his friends had turned against him, waiting for him to mess up. Jeremiah was in a very, very difficult place, and could have relieved his suffering by denouncing the LORD and His ways. But he stood firm in his convictions, banking his life on the justice of God to prevail. These are some of the things that Jeremiah knew were true about God:

- God listens (otherwise he wouldn't waste his energy praying)
- God is a champion, which causes the enemy to fear
- God's justice will prevail in an everlasting way
- God is the LORD of armies (hosts)
- God tests the righteous
- God knows the mind and heart of humans (we can't pull the wool over His eyes, so to speak)
- God will deliver vengeance upon the enemy
- God is worthy of praise, even in the midst of persecution and suffering
- God delivers the soul of the needy from the hand of evildoers

These important truths can sustain us in the midst of trials as well. Just like in Jeremiah's case, it may not seem like God is in control, but He is providing an opportunity for His children to walk by faith and not by sight. When we cannot see God, and it doesn't make sense to keep trusting Him, we are in a great test of faith. God highly values our faith (Hebrews 11:6) and will allow trials to come into our lives so that we might internalize the reality of His existence apart from receiving immediate rewards. That is why James says that we can "count" it all joy when we face trials of many kinds (James 1:2-3). For God is working to produce a higher vision in us—a vision of maturity and stability in Him that stays strong in spite of shifting circumstances.

Jeremiah's perspective can be our perspective as we encounter disappointing and debilitating things in this life.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

One of the debilitating experiences that all of us face is the loss of someone we love. At the loss of a loved one, many of us contemplate existential things: life, death, meaning, and purpose. We wonder why life has to end and whether there is meaning in our existence, if we will all end up in the grave

at some point. These existential questions are dealt with in the New Testament passage. Saint Paul, in the Book of Romans, provides some background logic that helps explain the universal reality that we all face: death.

This reading is set in the context of explaining the power of the Good News, which is that we can be free from the law of sin and death (Romans 6-8). Instead of feeling like paupers in the throne room of the King, Christians can bask in the lavish grace given by God. Paul carefully lays out the contrast between Adam's one sin, which affects all humans and Jesus' free gift of eternal life that overcomes the grave and results in abundant and eternal life. The gift of eternal life is an overwhelming extension of God's heart towards wayward humans. Paul reminds the reader that God sent His righteous Son to die for unrighteous humans. "For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8). God's grace is not stingy or miserly. It is abundant and overflowing.

Second Reading:

Romans 5:12-15 NAS95 12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned– 13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. 15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.

Adam is the man through whom sin entered the world. In the Garden of Eden, Satan did not disclose to Adam the far-reaching and universal effects of his choice to live outside of God's provision. God had provided all of the trees in the garden for Adam and Eve's enjoyment, except for one (Genesis 2:16-17). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was excluded from their experience because the Lord knew that determining what is right and wrong was His responsibility. But Adam stepped outside of God's protective covering, and ate of the "forbidden fruit," thus exposing himself to a world he was ill-equipped to handle. While the effects of physical death were not realized immediately (Adam lived to be 930 years old according to Genesis 5:3-4), a spiritual death occurred instantly. Previously, they were naked and unashamed, but now "the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7).

Because Adam represented all of humankind and gave to us a sin nature, all of humankind receives the mark of death. God is not being mean-spirited in allowing death to reign in this world, He is merely being consistent with the laws He had set forth from the beginning. Life apart from Him results in death. Life with Him and in Him results in eternal life.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul explains that everyone has sinned, even those who lived before the Law was established through Moses. In the days before Moses, people were still reaping the effects of sin, i.e. death, even though God had not given them the Ten Commandments. After Moses and the Law, people were not able to follow God better, they just were more aware of how far short they were missing the mark (Romans 3:23). Paul's point is that either way you slice it (before or after the Law), people have been reaping the tragic effects of sin.

One of the greatest words in the Bible is the word "but" which shows up here in our passage as a huge turning point in the universal experience of the tragedy of death. Paul is almost overflowing with enthusiasm as he recounts the abundant grace of God displayed in Christ Jesus, the One who "was to come" (v. 14). For if Adam's sin permeated all of humanity to bring death into the world, how much more would Christ's life counteract this tragedy and actually re-tell the story of humanity, showering us as actors in the story with the possibility of redemption. The grace of God does not just cancel the many debts, it provides richly for those who accept the free gift offered in Christ. We do not have to quiver before God the Father if we are in Christ, for He has provided grace upon grace (more than enough) to root us and establish us in His love. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). This is a game-changer, for in Christ, the story of our lives can have meaning and purpose, not just here but for all eternity. Death is not the final chapter and no longer deals a tragic sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). This is the victory that is ours in Christ!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Because we have such a great Savior, who has justified us though our sins were many, our loyalty to Him should far outweigh our loyalty to our own physical comfort or ease in this life. The cost of discipleship is not hard to pay when we realize what a great salvation He has provided for us.

The cost of discipleship is something about which the Gospel reading deals. One of Jesus' most strategic ways of making a lasting impact in the world was to "disciple" a group of people in His way of life. He spent time with them and taught them about life in the kingdom of God, which was in sharp contrast to life lived under one's own reign. In the Gospel reading for this week, Jesus was preparing his 12 disciples to go out and teach others what they had been taught by Him. "Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness "(Matthew 10:1). He gave them specific instructions which would help them to be ambassadors for God's redemptive purposes in the world. He also warned them that the road of discipleship would not be easy. They would be persecuted, questioned, and hated (Matthew 10:17-25). The only way that they could move forward would be to know the truth claims that Jesus' would state in the following verses.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 10:26-33 NAS95 26 Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not

be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops. 28 Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows. 32 Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33 But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

Jesus gave the disciples support to help them overcome the trial of persecution that awaited them. The big idea of this passage was to share an eternal perspective that would give them comfort when they are wrongly treated for the sake of Christ. He reassured them that God, who is eternal, was keeping track of the injustices of this life and would hold humans responsible for their choice to be disloyal to Christ.

Jesus communicated several important points that can help each of us, who consider ourselves His disciples, as we face ill-treatment for the sake of Christ. First, He said to not fear those who mistreat us. Fear is only legitimate if there is no life after death. If this life is all there is, then we will find that the values of the Christian life are untenable. But because there is a God, who is eternal, and because He has made a way for us to live with Him, we can live our lives on earth with an eternal perspective. Jesus reminded his followers that there will be a day of reckoning and that God's final evaluation of a life is the only thing to fear. If evil people get away with things on this side of eternity, that is not the end of the story. Therefore, we can have confidence to share the truth of Jesus' teachings, even if it brings persecution and ill-treatment.

Second, since God sees and knows the smallest details of our lives (how many hairs on our head), how much more, then is He acquainted with the most important details of our lives? If God can keep track of the little things (sparrows), He surely is capable of keeping track of the bigger things. When we are suffering, Satan would like us to believe that God does not care about us and has lost track of what is best for us. These verses counteract that lie by pulling back the veil to see the supernatural realm, where God, who sits on the throne is actually intimately acquainted with the details of our lives. This truth can provide comfort and hope in the midst of trials and persecution for the believer in Christ. This truth should also be a warning for those who abuse God's people, for their evil deeds will not go unpunished.

The main point that Jesus wraps up with is the reminder that our loyalty needs to be affixed to Him, no matter what pressure is on us. We may be presented with an easier road if we stay silent about our relationship with Christ, or we may even have our physical life spared if we deny Him. But we will forfeit our eternal soul—which is far worse than losing our physical life. Loyalty to Jesus in this life will translate into His vouching for us before the throne of the Father, thus atoning for our lack of righteousness in this life. That is called grace. But if we deny what Jesus has done on our behalf

by rejecting Him in this life before men, there is no other way to the Father's heart and eternal rest for our soul. In another place, Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, but through me" (John 14:6). The centrality of Christ for eternal salvation is very clearly stated by Jesus in this and other passages. It is important that we prioritize this relationship above all other pursuits and pressures. That is what true discipleship looks like.

Reflection Questions

1. Review the list of attributes of God in the first reading that Jeremiah is banking on. What attributes are you having trouble believing are true about God based on your current or past circumstances? Talk to God about your desire to walk by faith in these truths, asking Him to help you to believe He is faithful to His Word. You might even have a spiritual friend to share this struggle with and ask for prayer support to grow in living by Truth.

2. As you think about the pressures you face to deny Christ, what form does persecution take in your life? What are the costs of discipleship? How can reflecting on the abundant grace of God from Romans 5 help you to count the cost of discipleship and stay loyal to Christ in the midst of persecution? How does the loyalty of Christ to you engender loyalty back to Him?

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The focus of the readings this week is on the background and importance of communion. We open with a reading from Exodus in which Moses recounted God's provision of manna to the Hebrew people during their desert wanderings. Then we move to Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians with some teaching on the communion meal and then conclude with the Gospel lesson from John in which Jesus taught the people that He was the "bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). As you study this week keep in mind Saint Paul's admonition to examine ourselves before we partake of communion that will be covered in the reflection questions.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Deuteronomy 8. The context is God's giving of the Law to Moses after they had escaped from the wrath of the Pharaoh and struggled for forty years in the desert. The main audience whom Moses addressed were those who were either born during this 40-year period or those who were under twenty when it began. This was because all of the adults where were 20 years and older at the time of the Exodus perished except for Moses, Joshua, and Caleb (Numbers 14:29). The context of the reading today is Moses final address to the people about to enter the Promised Land. "Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: 'Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully'" (Deuteronomy 5:1). He continued in the next chapter, "Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the judgments which the LORD your God has commanded me to teach you, that you might do them in the land where you are going over to possess it (Deuteronomy 6:1). He then proceed to recount the main points of the Law.

The reading that follows includes all of the verses that were skipped in order to provide the full context and to illuminate the complete meaning of the text.

First Reading:

2 You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 3 He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. 4 Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years. 5 Thus you are to know in your heart that the LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son. 6 Therefore, you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him. 7 For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you. 11 Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 15 He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. 16 "In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. (Deuteronomy 8:2-16)

Moses' purpose of this address was to remind the people of God's miraculous provision and protection of them during their desert wanderings (v. 2). First, Moses recounted God's provision of clothing that did not wear out (v. 4a) as well as protection from injury (v. 4b). Second, Moses reminded the people that they were disciplined by a loving God in the same way that a father disciplines his child (v. 5). He reminded them of the manna that God provided (v. 2) a food that pointed to God's supernatural provision as well as to looking forward to His coming Son the Lord Jesus who called Himself the "Bread of Life" (John 6:35) that we will talk about later in this study. Next, Moses gave the people some insights into the nature of the Promised Land that they were about to enter (vv. 7-9) and warned them about the dangers of forgetting the Lord and His commandments (v.11). He said that if they forget the Lord by not keeping His commandments their hearts would become proud in spite of His supernatural provision (v. 14). Finally, he reminded them of how God had delivered them from the fiery serpents (v. 15) provided water for them in the desert

(v. 15), and fed them manna from heaven (v.16). Both the manna and the incident of the people with the fiery serpents prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ. The latter incident was recorded in Numbers 21 in which Moses instructed the people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sin and given eternal life as a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we saw in the first reading, the Old Testament provided many important parallels for the disciples and first Christians to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of God's predictions concerning the Savior. As we move to the second reading, we will see how Saint Paul spoke against the idolatry that was prevalent among the people of Corinth in the First Century. Paul reminded the people about the curse that was placed on God's people for grumbling against God as recorded in the Book of Exodus. Paul said, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction" (1 Corinthians 10:11) and urged the people to flee from idolatry (v. 14), "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." The issue that he was confronting here was the objection that some had to eating food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 10:18-33). The reading today is sandwiched right in the middle of this important discussion.

It is important to understand the context of the Book of 1 Corinthians. Paul wrote this Letter to church filled with disharmony and division. This particular passage is part of how he sought to unite the weak and immature Corinthian church. He focused upon the fact that they were all one through Jesus' sacrificial death, something that leveled the playing field because all are equal because of the cross.

Second Reading:

16 Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Paul said is that in order to partake of the communion service we must be in unity together and in fellowship with God. Matthew Henry said it this way. "By partaking of one broken loaf, the emblem of our Savior's broken body, who is the only true bread that came down from heaven, we coalesce into one body, become members of him and one another." Unlike the pagan sacrifices which were repeated and never brought redemption to those participating, Jesus' single sacrifice resulted in salvation for all those who believe (1 Peter 3:18). Also, unlike the continual sacrifices offered by the

Jews that looked forward to Jesus, Jesus can never be sacrificed again because after he made one sacrifice for sins forever He sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12). "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). When we celebrate communion we remember the single, final sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross (Luke 22:19). We celebrate the fact that when we share in the communion cup and the bread we unite in the belief that Jesus poured out His blood and allowed His body to be broken to pay the penalty for our sin.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from John Chapter 6. The context of the reading is after Jesus went from Jerusalem where He had healed a paralyzed man, to the "other side of the Sea of Galilee" (John 6:1). It was here on the east coast of the lake that Jesus went up on the mountain near Bethsaida to teach His disciples and was followed by a large crowd (v. 2). He evidently ended up teaching this discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum (John 6:59). Jesus opened this section of teaching with a bold statement regarding His deity. He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). This is the core of the Gospel message, the Good News, that anyone who believes in Jesus as his or her Savior has eternal life. Next, Jesus made another of His bold statements that He was God in the flesh, the manna sent from heaven when He said, "I am the bread of life" (v. 48). The Jews would have clearly understood His use of the Greek phrase "ego eimi," translated in English "I am." Jesus is the eternal God, the preexistent One, the "bread of life" sent from God the Father (John 6:46) as the supreme and final sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:12).

As you read, notice Jesus additional use of the "I am" phrase, and how Jesus used this to confirm His identity as God in the flesh.

Gospel Reading:

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." (John 6:51-58)

Jesus again affirmed His divinity when he said, "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven" (v. 51a). Next, He said that the way to eternal life was by partaking of His body (v. 51b), something

which was a stumbling stone to the religious Jews and Pharisees (v. 52b). Jesus answered their objection by telling them that although their forefathers ate the bread of God (manna, see Exodus 16:1-36) and later died (v. 58b), anyone that partook of belief in Jesus would have eternal life. Jesus said, "he who eats this bread will live forever" (v. 58c). In the Jewish world, there was a high emphasis given upon the value of community that occurred around a meal. What Jesus said was that in order to partake of Jesus, the bread of life, you must commune with Him. One of the ways that we as believers commune with Jesus is through the communion meal.

This reading follows a train of thought where Jesus is explaining and defending His deity to both seeking and skeptical people. The disgruntled and skeptical Jewish leaders ask Jesus in John 6:42 how He could claim to be the contemporary version of God's "bread of heaven" when they knew both of his parents and had seen Him grow up as any normal boy and become a carpenter like his dad. Jesus therefore refers back to their common knowledge about how God worked in the Old Testament when he provided food from heaven called "manna." Instead of being physical bread, which had to be eaten regularly in order to live, Jesus referred to Himself as spiritual or "living" bread that came down uniquely from heaven. Jesus invited them to "eat of this bread" in order to live forever.

What does it mean to eat of His flesh and to drink His blood? We often focus on the communion service as the answer to this question. While participating in communion is a righteous, sacred ritual, we must not replace the ritual with the intended outcome. A better question is, what is the intended outcome of communion? Jesus partially answered these questions in the text of the reading. "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:56). Abiding in Jesus, relating to Him, doing life with Him is the end goal of communion. So, if we are not being drawn closer to daily trust and mindful awareness of Jesus' presence in our lives, something is wrong with how we are participating in the Lord's Supper.

What do the teachings from the readings and Gospel lesson mean for our lives? First, God calls us not to forsake the assembly together in the communion service (Hebrews 10:25). As we celebrate communion from now until the day the Lord Jesus returns we look back to the one sacrifice that He made for our sins. Second, we can recognize that we are saved by grace through faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9) the same as Moses and the other believers in the Old Testament. They looked forward to Jesus through the symbols of God's supernatural provision through manna and the healing by faith in God by humbly kneeling before the bronze serpent. The elements of communion are the way in which we remember Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed to pay the debts for our sin. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

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Reflection Questions

1. In First Corinthians 11 beyond what we read in the second reading today, Saint Paul called for believers to make a serious self-examination before the partook in communion. "But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). He warned, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" (v. 27) and even went so far as to say that "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep" (v. 30).

If you take communion this week, as yourself the following question. What does it mean to "examine yourself" before communion? What are two or three things that you could bring before God in prayer this week prior to communion?

2. Read the following quote from Jesus that He said in the Sermon on the Mount.

"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).

What are some ways in which this verse speaks to the practice of examining ourselves before communion?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 6-11-2017

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the narrative of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai. This is where God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, which are still guiding lawmakers today. Then we move to the New Testament where we will see the outworking of a higher law, the law of Love. It is God's love for us that allows a new way of living to emerge in us.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus 34. The backdrop to this story includes shame and glory, for this is Moses' second time to receive the law from God on Mount Sinai. The first time ended in shame, for he came down from the mountain to find the people of God worshiping a golden calf (see Exodus 32). The second time ended in glory, for Moses asked to see God's glory and this is what God revealed. The new stone tablets and God's patience with His people are an indication of His character, which this passage describes.

First Reading:

4 So he [Moses] cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. 5 The LORD descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the LORD. 6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." 8 Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth

and worship. 9 He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession." (Exodus 34:4-9)

The importance of this passage may be missed by its brevity and simplicity. But let us not underestimate the foundational nature of this revelation of the character of God to His people. Remember, the newly released Hebrew people had just been delivered from being ruled by the Egyptians as slaves. You can take the slave out of Egypt, but something internal has to happen in order to take the mentality of a slave out of the person of God. A revelation of God's true nature would be the antidote to the slave mentality. Here is what we learn about God from this passage:

- God is a self-disclosing, self-revealing God. He desires to make Himself known to His people. Without God first revealing Himself to people, humans would have no way of knowing Him. The Hebrew people were his special chosen people to reveal His character. How would they reveal His character without knowing Him? The self-revealing nature of God is the foundation of relationship with God to all people. This is His grace.
- The word "LORD" which is used as His special covenantal name for the Jewish people, means "I AM". This reveals that God is ever-present and absolutely existent. The Hebrew people needed to know that the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was also their ever-present Father as well.
- God is compassionate and gracious. These words are packed with depth and the rest of the Bible should be understood in light of God's character of compassion and grace. Here are some helpful definitions. **Compassionate:** refers to deep love (usually of a superior for an inferior) rooted in some natural bond (i.e. Mother to child; Father to child). Compassion is the deep feeling one for another who is totally helpless, and usually results in providing aid to the one who is in need. Mercy and forgiveness go hand in hand with compassion.

Gracious: unmerited favor, the root word depicts a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need; it is an adjective that describes the generous acts of Yahweh. It is generous in the sense that it is not deserved. Mercy is when you don't get the bad that you deserve; Grace is when you get the good that you don't deserve. God demonstrates both compassion and grace toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).
- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out! The word for love used here means loving-kindness. The two characteristics put together mean that God is fiercely loyal to His children. We can count on Him to love and to forgive.
- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in

surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

In this passage we also learn some things about people and the proper response to God as seen in Moses:

- When God's glory is revealed, the only appropriate place for humans to be is bowed to the ground, worshiping.
- When God's glory is revealed, Moses wanted God to go with him and the people. He could not envision being alone in this world. God's presence is appealing, we do not have to protect ourselves from getting "too much of God."
- When God's glory is revealed, Moses recognized the sinful state of himself and the people. God's glory makes us more self-aware of our own short-comings. Our shabby excuses don't really hold up in God's presence, therefore we must rely on God's grace in order to stand in His presence.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians Chapter 13. This is the close of Saint Paul's letter and serves as a reminder of the sort of people that God calls us to be now that we have entered into relationship with Him. Since we know Him to be compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, we can be people who are growing to look more and more like Him.

Second Reading:

11 Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints greet you. (2 Corinthians 13:11-13)

Paul has had a tenuous relationship with the Corinthian believers, with multiple visits and multiple letters used to try to point them to what it looks like to live differently than the pagans. The relationship one has with Christ as Savior ushers us into a new way of life that does not operate according to the world's system. Therefore, he summarizes his message with instruction on how to live out the Christian life.

- "Brethren": shows that those who are in Christ are in a family relationship. The laws that govern a family are higher than a governmentally enforced system. Family relationships are governed by the higher law of love.
- "Rejoice": why must Paul command the Corinthians to rejoice? He must know that it is easier for humans to be critical and despair over life than it is to rejoice. We must be reminded that we have a lot to be thankful for.

- "Be made complete": reminds us of the believer's status in Christ. We are positionally complete in Christ (for Jesus cried "It is finished" from the cross), but it takes some effort on our part to live out the reality of this new status.
- "Be comforted": Paul started this letter telling the Corinthians that the God of all comfort will comfort them in their troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). He closes it by encouraging them to appropriate the comfort that only God can give.
- "Be like-minded and live in peace": means that Christians should seek to live in an understanding way with each other, allowing the Truth to unite us.
- "and the God of love and peace will be with you": Is He not with us when we are living contrary to these commands. Well, in a way, yes. It is true that God is omnipresent. His love and peace is available to all people at all times. But the difference between having God's love and peace and not having God's love and peace is the choice we as humans make to accept or reject who God is in our lives. If we live contrary to His ways, His love and peace will not be in us. If we want to have the God of love and peace making His presence known to us, we have simply to ask and receive, making room for Him to manifest Himself in us and through us. We can't have His love and peace without having Him.
- "Greet one another with a holy kiss": this actual practice may not be common in our churches anymore, but we have similar expressions of fellowship by shaking hands, giving a hug or smiling across the aisle at someone. The idea behind this is to be welcoming and inclusive with others who are in fellowship with us in our local places of worship.
- "All the saints greet you": this closing phrase gives Saint Paul's theology of sainthood. He frequently uses the word "saint" to describe genuine believers in Christ (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1; Philippians 1:1). He opened the letter to the Ephesians by saying: "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 1:1). God gives the status of saint to all who have bowed their knee to Jesus as Lord, for now Christ's righteousness is credited to our account (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is what makes us a saint before God.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 3. Verse 16 is the famous verse which is often seen printed on signs being waived by people at various sporting events. The context of this section is the conclusion of a meeting that happened at night between Jesus and Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), meaning that he was a member of the Sanhedrin that is the Jewish ruling council. Evidently, Nicodemus feared the reaction of the Jews so he met secretly with Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, Nicodemus came with Joseph or Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39), an action which revealed his willingness to make a bold, public statement about his identification with Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall

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

We see in this passage once again that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connation of being unique. So, to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So, what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. But if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save. Have you entered into the life of Christ by putting your faith in His atoning death on the cross and receiving His resurrection power for daily living? If you want to do so, you can make that decision right now and talk to God about wanting to put your faith in Christ. The following prayer may help you to express your heart to God:

Dear God, your word says that you loved the world, and I trust that that includes me. In your love you gave your one and only Son, Jesus, to bring me eternal life. I realize that without the gift of Your Son, my life will end in eternal death, it will perish. I need Jesus to be my Savior. I want to believe in Him. And even though I don't know exactly what that means or entails, I trust that you will show me how to enter into His life and be saved. I trust in Jesus to save me from the eternal consequences of my sin. I believe in You, Jesus, and receive your free gift of eternal life. Now please help me to walk in light of your Truth and love. Change me into the saint that the New Testament declares your people to be. I am Yours, Lord. Amen.

If you made a decision either now or some time ago to put your belief in Jesus, would you ask God to give you an opportunity to share this good news with someone else? It may be with someone who already knows Jesus, but needs encouragement that God loves them. Or it may be to someone who has never heard of God loving the world so much that He would send His one and only Son to save them from the consequences of their sin. Perhaps you would even be willing to share your testimony on the Christians for Christ website. The good news is so good, we can't keep it to ourselves!

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Reflection Questions

1. We saw God's love in a myriad of ways in this week's reading. Go back through each passage and write out in your own words below some of the ways that you see God's love.

Exodus 34

2 Corinthians 13

John 3

2. How does the description of God's love in His Word differ from your own understanding of God? What false notions do you need to reject and what truths do you need to ask God to help you keep in mind?

3. How is God calling you to live in light of His love? Choose one of the points of application below or write out your own:

- To receive His free gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus
- To receive His forgiveness for a particular sin that you previously thoughts was too big for God to forgive
- To treat another Christian as a brother/sister
- To recognize your identity as a saint and make choices based on this
- To be "like-minded" with other Christians over the truth
- To be comforted by the God of all comfort
- To let God's compassion and grace be your interpretive framework for the circumstances of your life

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday,

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6-04-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for Pentecost Sunday. We open with the first reading from Acts that chronicled the Day of Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in the early church. Then we move onto the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and discuss the gifts of the Spirit. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Saint John where we will examine what it means when Jesus said, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The theme of the readings this week goes like this: In the first reading, we see God's sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. In the second reading, we see the revelation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we find the commissioning by the Holy Spirit for all believers to spread the Gospel message. Let's begin with the first reading from the Book of Acts. This is the record of the momentous day on which God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell the believers in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (John 14:17). This event occurred fifty days after Jesus had risen from the dead and ten days after Jesus returned to heaven.

First Reading:

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were

sitting. 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. 5 Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9 Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs–we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." (Acts 2:1-11)

God's sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18). The Holy Spirit is the Person who empowered the disciples to turn from hiding in the upper room to being bold speakers in the name of Jesus. Notice how the first ministry of the Holy Spirit was to cause the disciples to speak in various languages in such a way that the Jews from around the world heard them in their own language (v. 6). It's not known whether each of the disciples spoke a different foreign language or if they spoke some sort of holy tongue that the foreigners were able to understand. Jesus had earlier told the disciples, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). This first ministry of the Spirit was to spread the Gospel to the foreign Jews gathered for Pentecost by allowing them to hear the Gospel message in their own language. Their testimony was that "we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God" (v. 11).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. His ministry through the believers in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. As we move to the second reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we see some of the gifts sent to us by the Holy Spirit. Note that the reading this week skipped verses 8 -11, these are included in order to provide the proper clarity of Saint Paul's instruction.

Second Reading:

3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. 7 But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given the word of wisdom through

the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:3-13)

In this reading, Paul cataloged some of the gifts of the Spirit and said that the purpose of the gifts was "for the common good" (v.7). Although this was not an exhaustive list of the gifts (see also Ephesians 4:7-13 and Romans 12:3-8) they included wisdom and knowledge (v.8), faith (v.9a), healing (v.9b), miracles (v.10a), prophecy (v.10b), discernment of spirits (v.10c), speaking in tongues (v.10d), and interpretation of those speaking in tongues (v.10e). Later in the reading, Paul stated that although the gifts of the Spirit were diverse with everyone having a different gift, they were delivered by God in such a way as to work perfectly together in the whole body of the church (vv. 11-13). Even though not everyone would have the same gift, the diversity of gifts among the believers would accomplish God's purposes through the unity of the believers (v.13). For example, only certain people were given the gift of prophecy, meaning either the ability to foretell future events or more prominently in the New Testament context to forth tell through the preaching of the Scriptures. In today's age, some of the gifts that Paul listed are more prevalent than other ones. During the early church immediately after God sent the Holy Spirit certain gifts such as tongues and healing were very important as "sign gifts" that greatly increased the spread of the Gospel to a culture thoroughly immersed in the worship of idols. God used these sign gifts in a powerful way as we can see in the first reading with the empowerment of the disciples to speak in various languages.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God the Holy Spirit commission the believers in the early church to spread the Gospel. The context of the reading from John Chapter 20 is the evening of the first Easter Sunday when Jesus' first appeared to the disciples who were gathered together in the upper room with the doors locked. This didn't stop Jesus, who was able to walk right through the wall or door by exercising His divine power with His new glorified body. Only ten of the disciples were present as Thomas "The Twin" didn't see Jesus until the next time the whole group was gathered together (John 20:26) and Judas had already given up hope and killed himself.

Before we read the text, since the central focus of the lesson will be on the concept of the forgiveness of sin let's review what God's Holy Word says about this crucially important subject. First, God says that everyone, except for Jesus, is a sinner. Paul said in Romans, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Second, God says that because of our sin, we deserve the penalty of death; having sinned against a Holy God Who is completely separate from sin.

Paul said, "for the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). We can never enter into the presence of our Holy God because we are sinful. The only way that we can enter into a relationship with God and be in His presence when we die is to have our sin forgiven by God. Third, there is good news. Paul continued in Romans 6:23, "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b-ff). Finally, only God can forgive sin. In Luke's Gospel Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees after he proclaimed the forgiveness of a paralyzed man's sins and they challenged Jesus authority to forgive sin. In response Jesus said, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, –He said to the paralytic—'I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home'" (Luke 5:23-24). Though Scripture tells us to "confess our sins one to another" (James 5:16), only God can forgive sin. Jesus came to the earth as God in the flesh for the express purpose of dying on the cross for our sin (Romans 4:25). "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Paul explained later in Romans Chapter 10 how to receive the free gift of eternal life through the forgiveness of our sin:

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

We see that the forgiveness of our sin is free gift of God that comes by believing the good news of the Gospel. Jesus gave the disciples, and by application every Christian, what is called the Great Commission to preach this message about the forgiveness of sin. Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). This is the Gospel, meaning good news, that Jesus instructed his believers to preach to the world for the forgiveness of sin.

Now, with these things in mind let's read what happened that Sunday evening when Jesus made a surprise visit to the disciples gathered in the upper room.

Gospel Reading:

19 So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with

you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." 22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." (John 20:19-23)

What did Jesus mean when he said in verse 23, "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained"? The key to understanding Jesus' teaching in verse 23 is found in the previous two verses. Jesus said "as the Father has sent Me, I also send you" (v.21b). Next in verse 22 He promised that God would send the Holy Spirit. This "sending" or "commissioning" of the disciples (and all believers) is one of the main purposes of the church as expounded in the Great Commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). The binding and unbinding of sin is found in the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) when a person comes to the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Jesus said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36). Jesus instructed these ten men that anyone who believes in Him through the preaching of the Gospel will be saved, just as we saw in Romans Chapter 10. The interpretation of Scripture must always be consistent with the whole counsel of God's Word.

What do the three themes we discovered in the readings today mean in our lives? First, God sent the Holy Spirit to indwell His believers in order to accomplish His purposes. He sent a diversity of gifts to a diversity of people in such a way that it forces the Church to work together as the Body of Christ. Second, God commissioned all believers, not just the ten disciples that were gathered in the room at Pentecost, to fulfil His Great Commission. This means that everyone that believes is to work to spread the Gospel message and to disciple believers, recognizing that not everyone will be gifted in either of these two particular areas. Some will be called to teach, and some to evangelize. You can rest assured that if you truly commit your heart to the Lord that you won't automatically be called by Him as a missionary in Africa. But you can be assured that God will call you to use whatever spiritual gift(s) that He has given you to your fullest ability.

Earlier this week I was driving home from the local lake after spending three hours windsurfing, which is one of my favorite pastimes. As I turned the corner on the road leading up to our house at around 7:00 pm, I recognized my neighbor as he drove by me on the way back to work at our local Christian college. Although he goes into work at 8:00 in the morning with his wife and returns with her sometime after 5:00 pm, he usually returns after dinner. Although God has gifted this man in a variety of ways, through it all is one of his preeminent qualities: faithfulness. This really inspired me to be faithful as well. Although God doesn't call everyone to work 10 plus hours each day on a fixed salary as my neighbor does, He does call us to be faithful in using the gifts that He has given us.

Reflection Questions

1. The full list of spiritual gifts can be found in three passages: Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 28-30, and Ephesians 4:11. We looked at part of the list from First Corinthians today. Read each of the other passages and see if you can locate the full list of spiritual gifts: Administration, Knowledge, Apostleship, Leadership, Discernment, Mercy, Evangelism, Miracles, Exhortation, Pastor/Shepherd, Faith, Prophecy, Giving, Serving/Ministering, Healing, Teaching, Interpretation of Tongues, Tongues, Wisdom

Romans 12:6-8 NAS95 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:28-30 NAS95 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

Ephesians 4:11 NAS95 11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,

2. What is your spiritual gift? One of the best ways to understand your gifting is to ask other believers. Another way it to use one of the variety of spiritual gift tests available online. See for example:

http://www.churchgrowth.org/cgi-cg/gifts.cgi?intro=1

In what ways are you using your particular gift to serve God?

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



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. The context is forty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus had gathered the disciples together and they had just asked Him the question, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6c). This was an honest question and indicated what was evidently on all of their minds. Would Jesus now usher in His reign on earth as both a religious King *and* supreme civil ruler as foretold in the Scriptures? They would have been familiar with what the Prophet Micah had predicted regarding His future rulership. "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity" (Micah 5:2). Jesus answered their question with something that they probably did not want to hear. He said, "It is

not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority" (Acts 1:7). However, Jesus went on, "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Afterwards, Jesus was taken up into heaven leaving the disciples waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

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

First Reading:

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

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

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

Third, note that John said "These all with one mind" (v. 14a). When all of the believers in a group have the same mind, they are united not only in their purpose but also work to align their will with

the revealed will of God through the mutual understanding of His Word in the Scriptures. One of the practices that I did with my own prayer partner was that when we ran out of things to say we just read the Bible aloud. Having just experienced Jesus' last 40 days of ministry and also being fresh from the Emmaus Road experience the disciples must have studied the Old Testament Scriptures (as we call them) with a renewed fervor and understanding. This unity of thinking and mission would help the early church to persevere during the subsequent persecution that early on descended upon the Church.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson for today has to do with Jesus' call for unity in the Church. John opened the Gospel lesson today by saying, "Jesus spoke these things," and then he prayed to the Father. What were "these things" to which John was referring? If we look back to the previous two verses, we see

what John was referring to. Jesus said, "Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be **scattered**, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:32-33, emphasis added). Jesus knew that the disciples, with the exception of John, would scatter during his tribulation and death on the cross. He also knew that they would scatter because of the persecution that would come upon the young church after he went back to heaven.

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

positions on certain moral issues including affirming the rights of all unborn children we can have courage that God will glorify His name through our obedience.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

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

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

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

First Reading:

> *5 Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6 The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7 For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8 So there was much rejoicing in that city.*
> *Omitted Section:]*
> *9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God." 11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12 But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13 Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed. 14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16 For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17 Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:5-17)*

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

Second Reading:

> *15. but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame. 17 For it is*

> *better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. 18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; (1 Peter 3:15-18)*

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

Several important points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how Jesus opened this section with the conditional phrase, "If you love me" (v. 15a). The word in the original translated "love" is a form of the word "agape" which refers to love that exists between Jesus and God. Jesus said rhetorically that if you love Him then you would follow His commandments. In the Jewish mind, the "commandments" would have referred to the whole of the Jewish Law including the Ten Commandments. However, later in John Jesus summed up the whole of the Law by the following statement. "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Jesus expressed the greatest love of all by giving His life for our sin. He said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). We are to express our keeping of the law by loving one another with Jesus sacrificial love as our example.
Second, when you examine the reading, you will see that the word "commandments" exists twice, once at the beginning and another time at the end. This "bounding" can be a clue to a central

mean that exists between the two mentions of a concept of word. In the case, the central truth that emerged from between the two words is God's revelation of the sending of the Holy Spirit, something that happened fifty days from that first Easter Sunday on the Day of Pentecost. Sandwiched in the middle of this pronouncement is another of Jesus famous "I am" statements that indicated His unity with God the Father. Here we see Jesus testimony that not only is He one with the Father, but He is also one with the Holy Spirit.

Third, notice what Jesus said about the nonbelieving world. He said about the Holy Spirit that He "is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him" (v. 17). When Jesus did rise from the dead He only revealed Himself to a select group of people. Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). The unbelieving world has been blinded to the identity of the Person of the Holy Spirit through their inherent sin (Romans 3:23) along with the work of Satan and his agents.

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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



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

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

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Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

4 And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, 5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For this is contained in Scripture: "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 7 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone," 8 and, "A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE"; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed. 9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;(1 Peter 2:4-9)

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

1 "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. 2 In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 3 If

I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way where I am going." 5 Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. 7 If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him." 8 Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. 11 Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. 12 Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father." (John 14:1-12)

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

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

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

Jesus said:

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

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

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

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

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

"14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord "(1 Thessalonians 4:14-17)

John said about this second event:

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

Almighty" (Revelation 19:11-15).

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

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

Have a great week.

Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

to understand what the "therefore" is there for, we will summarize the important points from the intermediate verses (15 – 35). First, read the opening of Peter's address in verse 14.

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

Peter said in other words, "listen up." Next, he immediately corrected some of the people's false assumptions that the followers of Christ were drunk (v. 15). He said that what was happening was the fulfillment of the Prophet Joel's message (v.16) regarding God's pouring out of His Spirit on all mankind in the end times (Joel 2:28 – 32). In retrospect, we understand that what Peter meant was that this was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. After Peter quoted from this section of Joel, he presented testimony about how the people crucified "Jesus the Nazarene" and God raised Him from the dead (vv. 22 – 24). Next, Peter quoted from the Psalms to show how Jesus also fulfilled those prophetic writings by King David (vv.25 – 28). He noted that David died and his tomb is "with us to this day" (v.29), but Jesus fulfilled the prophecy that Someone would sit on David's throne (vv. 30 – 31). Saint Matthew went to great lengths to show that Jesus was of the line of David (Matthew 1:1-17). Additionally, the Prophet Isaiah stated explicitly that the Messiah would be of the line of David (Isaiah 9:6-7). Next Peter said, "This Jesus, God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (vv. 32-33). Peter closed this section of his address by again quoting from a Psalm, this time one that contained a conversation between God the Father and God the Son. "THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, 'SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET'" (vv. 34a – 35). To summarize, the sending of the Holy Spirit was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that signaled the start of the end times, after the Messiah came. Second, Jesus fulfilled the prophecies that He would be of the line of David. Finally, in the future Jesus the Lord will overcome all of His enemies, and be exalted above all of creation (1 Corinthians 15:27).

Now let's proceed with the reading.

First Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

I became friends with a man named Ron Christy several years ago just before he was diagnosed with

ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Ron provided a powerful story about how a Christian can suffer while still providing a strong testimony for the Lord. You can read Ron's testimony online at the following link: https://www.christiansforchrist.org/articles/testimonies/ron-christy-my-walk-of-faith-with-als

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

A wealth of rich points can be drawn from the reading. First, notice how as the story unfolded that Jesus was the Shepherd (v. 2), then in verse 7 he became the "door of the sheep" which led to the

pasture (v. 9d). In the first century, the shepherds sometimes slept in the gate in order to protect their sheep. Anyone or anything that wanted to come into the sheepfold would have to enter through the gate and thereby come past the shepherd. By application, Jesus is saying that the only way to God is through Him. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Faith in Jesus is the only means provided by God for a person to cross into Jesus' fold and be saved (v. 9).

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

Third, notice Jesus' "I am" statement in verse 7, which is the third of this type of statement in John's Gospel (in the English translation, in the Greek text this is the 13'th). This phrase was something that the First Century Jews would have recognized as a strong statement of divinity. In Jesus' earlier use of this phrase in John's Gospel He said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:35). In today's reading Jesus said, "I am the door" (v. 9a). Jesus is our source of life, our spiritual sustenance. He is the Light of truth from God, the Light that leads us to the single door to obtain eternal life, the only way to God.

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

Some years ago, I completed a study of the Book of Genesis and made an interesting observation about God's gathering of the animals into the ark. The Bible says, "So they went into the ark to Noah, by twos of all flesh in which was the breath of life" (Genesis 7:15). The insight that I had was that many of the people in that region that had either watched, or possibly even been involved in the building of the ark, had to have seen the animals entering two by two into the ark. Perhaps the people on the outside were saying something like, "There they go, two by two into the ark, just like

Preacher Noah had said they would." Noah, a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5) must have suffered terribly knowing all the people that he ministered to perished, except for his small family. The story went on, "Those that entered, male and female of all flesh, entered as God had commanded him; and the LORD closed it behind him" (v. 16). In retrospect, it was easy for them to be convinced of Noah's prophecy regarding the Great Flood once the door of the ark was sealed shut by God and the deluge began. Noah would have allowed anyone entrance to the ark, right up until the time the flood began. Instead of just eight people being saved (1 Peter 3:20), the Scripture **could** have read something like this:

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

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

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

And a man named John (my words added).

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

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

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Reflection Questions

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

13 And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus, which was about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 And they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place. 15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus Himself approached and began traveling with them. 16 But their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. 17 And He said to

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

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

The big ideas behind the Gospel lesson are first, Jesus is alive, and His resurrection was affirmed not just by his disciples but by others. We can rest in the fact that the biblical account of Jesus' resurrection is true in part because it includes unflattering details about the behavior of people. The men on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus even though He explained the things concerning

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

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

22 "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know– 23 this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24 But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. 25 For David says of Him, 'I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN. 26 'THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; 27 BECAUSE YOU WILL

NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. 28 'YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.' 29 Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 And so, because he was a prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH AN OATH TO SEAT one OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE, 31 he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY. 32 This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. Acts 2:14-33

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

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

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

- "Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (Luke 5:21c)

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

First, Peter emphasized the great and eternal value of Jesus' blood that He shed for us. He said that we ought to guard our behavior carefully (v. 17) because of the great price that Jesus paid for us through His blood. God paid a ransom for us (v. 17, "redeemed"), and that price was His Son Jesus. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Second, Peter affirmed the eternality and glory of Jesus

as the One "foreknown before the foundation of the world" (v. 20a) who made a brief, physical appearance on earth in order to bring us hope through His resurrection from the dead (v. 20). Finally, Peter emphasized the necessity of faith for salvation (v. 21). While the Jews exercised faith through the Old Testament sacrificial system, this verse points out the New Testament understanding of that system: faith is the basis for reconciliation and relationship with God. As we saw in the Gospel reading today with the 2 men on the road to Emmaus, even though glimpses of the way to God had been provided to the Jews through the prophetic Scriptures, it took Jesus to explain it to them for them to be able to understand. The Jewish sacrificial system prefigured the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary. Jesus was the Passover Lamb, the one slain since before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). In the same way that the disciples of Jesus didn't understand salvation through His sacrifice, we too require the explanation found in the New Testament for us to discover the only means of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

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

Reflection Questions

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

2. Spend some time thanking Jesus for being the Lamb of God, redeeming you with His precious

blood. What do you think would be a proper personal response to St. Peter's challenge to "conduct yourselves in fear" ("fear" meaning sober reverence for what has been done on your behalf)?

For Further Study

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

https://www.facebook.com/ChristiansForChristMinistries

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. Since this Sunday marks the first week after the celebration of Easter, the readings for today are focused upon the activities that occurred immediately after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Since the grave could not hold Jesus, if we have faith in Him we can

trust that someday we too will rise from the dead with an incorruptible body. This week we are beginning with the Gospel lesson in order to accentuate some of the themes that emerged from the Saint John's message. Then we will move onto the first reading from the Book of Acts and conclude with the second from First Peter, a study that will continue for the next several weeks.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

Several other points can be drawn from the text, First, notice that Jesus entered the room without knocking, without even opening the door; He just walked right through the wall! Talk about a grand entrance, and it's no wonder the disciples were scared. The point is that Jesus had supernatural powers in His new, resurrected and glorified body. Second, although Jesus' resurrection body was different in it's capabilities, there was a one to one correspondence between Jesus' body that was crucified and laid in the grave and His resurrected body. Jesus' appearance to the disciples in His resurrection body served as a foretaste of the body that all believers will receive one day when Jesus returns. Jesus will be forever recognizable by the scars given to Him during His earthly lifetime. Though we will never be God, we will become **like** Him. Saint John said, "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2b). Third, since it was before the sending of the Holy Spirit the disciples were "in fear of the Jews" (v.19c). This contrasted greatly with what we read about the disciples and first believers in the first reading. Though we may fear those that persecute us, we, like the early Church, have the Holy Spirit of God living in us to give us boldness and hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3). Finally, Jesus was gentle with Thomas even though he expressed doubt among circumstances that we may consider compelling for him to believe. Since Jesus treated Thomas with such concern even though he doubted Him, we can be sure that Jesus walks with us through seasons of our own doubt.

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

A lot had happened by the time we reach the end of chapter 2 where we pick up with today's

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

First Reading:

42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

The second reading is from the Epistle of First Peter where Saint Peter addressed groups of

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

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

Second Reading:

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

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

Why all the fuss about the meaning of a particular word? Peter's point was that through the evidence of a person's spiritual birth a person has hope through the reality of Jesus' resurrection from the

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Mother Teresa, when confronted with the suffering of millions of people in Calcutta expressed

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

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

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