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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-20-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, Marla shares by opening with Isaiah 53: 10-11, which is part of a chapter that depicts in graphic detail Jesus' suffering and death for our sin. Then she turns to a passage in Hebrews 4:14-16 that shows how Jesus has faced the same temptations we face and as a result, is not only sympathetic to us in our struggles but can give us victory over them. Finally, she concludes with the Gospel of St. Mark 10: 35-45 where Jesus tells us the key to greatness is being a servant of all.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Isaiah 53 gives one of the clearest depictions in the Old Testament of Jesus as the suffering servant, as it predicts in devastating detail His rejection, humiliation, and death for our sin. Although the prophet Isaiah doesn't reveal the name of this suffering servant, later generations understood that only Jesus in His death fully corresponded to the one depicted here. This was confirmed by many New Testament writers as they quoted from Isaiah 53 in speaking of Christ. (1 Peter 2: 21-24 is a prime example.)

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What Jesus suffered for our sins in order to redeem us is sobering. The 10 verses that precede the First Reading reveal the awful truth. He was despised and forsaken. Furthermore, He was smitten (struck), afflicted, pierced, crushed, chastened, scourged, and oppressed (Isaiah 53:3-7). Yet, "He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth" (v. 9). His death was truly the just dying for the unjust, that He might bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

Jesus did not open His mouth in protest because He knew He was fulfilling the Father's will. Referring to His life, Jesus said, "No one has taken it away from me, but I lay it down on my own initiative (Gospel of St. John 10:18).

The next verses, which comprise the First Reading, may seem puzzling at first, for they teach us that the suffering Jesus endured was according to God's good pleasure. The word pleasure here does not mean happiness, but that all would take place according to the LORD's will. As you read the First Reading note the Father's purpose for the Son's suffering.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 53:10-11 NAS95 10 But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. 11 As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities.*

Our iniquity (sin) separates us from God, but the LORD caused the iniquity of us all to fall on His Son (Is. 53:6). Jesus took our guilt and punishment, and by His suffering we are justified, that is, made right before God and restored to a right relationship with Him.

As we consider Christ's suffering and sacrifice on our behalf, let us seek to live out that sacrificial love for the benefit of others. One of the most important ways we can love others is to introduce them to Jesus and tell them of the One who suffered on their behalf.

The Second Reading speaks about another kind of suffering—the struggle against temptation. Jesus faced it and was victorious. When we face temptation, we don't face it alone. We have someone who understands and helps.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The Second Reading takes us to a group of verses set in a larger context that speaks of Jesus as our high priest. In the Old Testament sacrificial system, when someone sinned, he would bring an animal to the priest and the priest would sacrifice it (shed its blood) on the altar in the tabernacle/temple. Behind a heavy curtain was the Holy of Holies (or Holy Place) where God would appear in a pillar of cloud or fire. No one could go in there except the high priest, and he could go in only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would make a sacrifice for himself (for he is a sinner, too) and for the sins of all the people and carry the blood inside the curtain and present it to God. The sacrifice had to be repeated year after year.

Hebrews Ch. 7 and 9 tell us that Jesus is a high priest, but one far superior to the human ones we read about in the Old Testament. And here's why. Jesus himself was both the high priest and the sacrifice for sin. His sacrifice was perfect and total, and God accepted it as final. There was no need for any further sacrifice. No more work needed to be done to procure our salvation. Jesus had done it all. He rested from His work, and now as we hear the Gospel and believe, we enter into that place of rest. We cannot work for our salvation. We can only, by faith enter into the salvation and rest Jesus has provided (See Hebrews 4:1-11).

Our First Reading along with all of Isaiah 53 depict the pain of rejection and suffering Jesus endured for our salvation. We don't have a high priest far removed from our pain and struggles, but One who has experienced in a body like ours the sufferings of this world. Consequently, He can sympathize with each of us in our weakness and suffering. This is true also of the temptations we face each day. He has faced them, too. Notice the comfort and encouragement found in our Second Reading.

Second Reading:

Hebrews 4:14-16 NAS95 14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed

> *through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

Because Jesus has faced the same temptations we face, we can come to Him and find mercy and grace in our time of need. He displays mercy as He sympathizes with our struggles, and He gives grace to overcome them. Because He was victorious, we can be also.

In the following Gospel Reading, the subject again turns to suffering as Jesus takes his 12 disciples aside and reveals disturbing details about his upcoming suffering and death.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

This week we return to the Gospel of Mark. While on a journey to Jerusalem, Jesus takes his 12 disciples aside and tells them of the suffering He will soon be facing. He will be delivered to the Jewish leaders who will condemn Him to death. Then He will be handed over to the Romans who will mock Him, spit on Him, scourge Him, and kill Him.

Knowing the culmination of Jesus' life was at hand and apparently believing He would soon set up His kingdom, James and John make a bold request. They ask to sit with Him in glory in places of honor at His right hand and His left. Jesus knew the path to glory was through the suffering of the cross, and that all who follow Him would likely suffer, too. Rejection, persecution, and even martyrdom awaited them. Did they know what they were asking for? Could they drink the cup of sorrow He would drink?

Jesus then reminds them that whoever wishes to be great among them doesn't do it by seeking a place of honor or authority. Earthly rulers seek honor, authority, and power and lord it over their subjects. But this is not the way of God. Notice in the Gospel Reading how someone can be great in God's kingdom.

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Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 10:35-45 NAS95 35 James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You." 36 And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" 37 They said to Him, "Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." 38 But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" 39 They said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. 40 But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." 41 Hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John. 42 Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. 43 But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*

True godly leadership requires serving. In St. John's Gospel, the apostle John recounts how Jesus demonstrated servanthood by humbly washing the disciples' feet—a job reserved for the household servants. Jesus told His disciples, "*If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you*" (St. John 13:14-15).

Serving sometimes requires not just humility, but sacrifice and suffering. Jesus demonstrated His willingness to suffer by dying for our sins on the cross, the ultimate act of service. Are we willing to follow Jesus' example and serve one another, even if it results in suffering? Whoever wishes to be great among us must humbly serve. For even Jesus himself came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many (v. 45).

Reflection Questions

1. Read all of Isaiah 53 and contemplate all Jesus suffered on your behalf. How does this motivate

you to serve Him more?

2. Jesus lived a life of sacrifice and service. Who is God calling you to serve today? Write down ways you can do that. Be specific and be thankful for the opportunity to follow in Jesus' steps.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-13-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. I remember the time when I came home from the office and I saw an ambulance in my neighbor's driveway. Harvey was a man that had retired from the assembly line at General Motors. He was a rough-around-the-edges kind of guy, not someone that you would find going to church each Sunday, although his wife did regularly attend. Harvey had struggled with sepsis and had been very close to dying. I had wondered about his spiritual beliefs, and I was sad that I had never shared with him the faith that I had in Jesus Christ. He pulled through this episode, but had horrible ongoing issues, including kidney failure and the need for dialysis three times a week. After Harvey returned home, I finally got up the courage to send him a letter explaining the facts of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Even though I could not break through to him face to face, I figured that he would at least read the letter. I explained that his continuing

life was evidence of a miracle from God. Later I moved to a far-away state, but I kept in frequent touch with Harvey by cell phone. I never saw any signs of spiritual life in him, but I maintained the relationship, and we developed a closer relationship than we had had when he was living across the street.

This week we will examine two very deep readings dealing with the important subject of eternal life. We will see in the first reading that the author used the Old Testament as a means of providing an important spiritual lesson for his readers. Then we will learn how Jesus answered a bold question about how to obtain eternal life. If you stick with us, you will also learn about what happened to my friend Harvey.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

First Reading:

> *Wis 7:7-11 I prayed, and prudence was given me;*
> *I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.*
> *I preferred her to scepter and throne,*
> *and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her,*
> *nor did I liken any priceless gem to her;*
> *because all gold, in view of her, is a little sand,*
> *and before her, silver is to be accounted mire.*
> *Beyond health and comeliness I loved her,*
> *and I chose to have her rather than the light,*
> *because the splendor of her never yields to sleep.*
> *Yet all good things together came to me in her company,*
> *and countless riches at her hands.*

In this reading we find the theme of wisdom personified, something which is featured in many ancient Greek writings. Here, wisdom is preferred over kingship, priceless gems, silver, and good health. Wisdom, especially the biblical wisdom of God, is something to be extremely valued. Also, if we desire wisdom, we should ask for it. The Bible says in the Book of James, "*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him*" (James 1:5). Finally, understand that wisdom comes not only from the Word of God, but also from the godly counsel of others, and through the experience of trials that God allows in our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews, which we also studied last week. This week's reading follows the author's warning in chapter 4 about falling short of true salvation. The writer is providing a clear warning about the sin of unbelief by using the story about what had happened to the unbelieving Jews wandering in the desert. Saint Paul explained the use of the Old Testament Scriptures this way. "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). The writer of Hebrews expects his readers to be aware of the Old Testament writings and to take them to heart!

Hebrews 4 begins with the conjunction "therefore," connecting what he is about to say with the previous section. The author had explained the danger of the sin of unbelief. Those that don't believe, he said, would not enter God's rest, meaning the Promised Land. "And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:18-19). He is referring to the report of the spies after they had checked out the land they were to enter. "So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, 'The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size'" (Numbers 13:32). The unbelievers were those who had accepted the majority report given by the spies after they had surveyed the Land. Moses said that the people wouldn't enter their physical rest through entrance into the Promised Land because of their unbelief, but the writer uses this Old Testament story as a metaphor to teach a much more significant application.

Unbelievers then and now will also not enter into God's eternal rest, since the only unforgivable sin in the Bible is the sin of unbelief (Mark 3:28-30). This explanation provides clarity to chapter 4:1, "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to

have come short of it." The author is drawing a metaphor from the Old Testament experience. There, the people's physical rest was gained through entrance into the Promised Land. This is compared with his contemporary readers' finding eternal rest by entrance into a relationship with God through faith. Everyone throughout history gains eternal life the same way—through faith in the One True God and his Savior, so the author used the illustration of the unbelieving Jews in the exodus as a warning to his readers about the danger of this unforgivable sin.

As we move to verse 12, where today's reading begins, we see the author's summary statement about the heart of the matter, belief in God's written Word. "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard" (Hebrews 4:2). The writer goes on to explain that entrance into God's rest comes through faith, not works. "For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His" (Hebrews 4:10). Saint Paul, also, emphasized that faith is the basis for salvation: "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). With this extensive introduction, which we included because of its direct connection to the Gospel lesson, let us now study the text from today's reading. As you read, keep in mind the key concept of the saving value of faith.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 4:11-13 NAS95 11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.*

The author warns his readers not to follow the example of disobedience set by the unbelieving Jews in the exodus. The wandering Jews in the wilderness had God's direct testimony to them in many ways, including the revelation of His Law to Moses and His presence with them through the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Exodus 13:21-22). Yet, the Hebrew people still didn't believe God's promises about finding rest in the Promised Land. When Moses sent out spies to survey the Promised Land, only Joshua and Caleb came back bearing the good news about what they saw in the land, and that they were confident about God's promises to them about taking control of it (Numbers

14:6-9). Instead of following this "minority report," the Hebrews believed the majority's view that it would be better to return to Egypt than to attempt to enter the Land. And they then began making plans to do just that (Numbers 14:1-4).

The author uses this spiritual metaphor to warn us not to follow their example of gross disobedience, not believing God, the only unforgivable sin in the Bible. Interestingly, verse 12 opens with the preposition "for," which provides a natural linkage with the immediately preceding context. The opening verse, then, could be read this way, "[With] these previous things in mind, the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . ." In the case of the Hebrews in the exodus, the Word of God came to them directly through Moses and the priests. In the case of the New Testament context, the Word of God comes through God's written Word. It is this written Word that is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword (v. 12a). The author says that the Word is "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (v. 12d). The Word of God convicts us of our sin through the illumination provided by God's Holy Spirit. "Illumination," in the spiritual sense, is the turning on of the light bulb in the mind of a person regarding the things of God. There are levels of illumination, and the knowledge of sin is the very first and most basic level. This is what the author of Hebrews is getting at in the reading, where he later criticizes his readers because they are spiritual babies able only to partake of spiritual milk and not solid food (Hebrews 5:12). He cautions his readers in the closing verse to remember that they cannot fool God about all of this because "all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him" (v. 13b).

There is one primary application of the reading for us today. The testimony of God given through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Bible must not be neglected by anyone. We must not follow the example of the disobedient Jews in the exodus who did not believe God's promises. Rather, we should believe and follow the only way to God which is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus has made this perfectly clear. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Peter warned the unbelievers in the Book of Acts about rejecting Jesus, when he said, "He (Jesus) is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. 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 4:11-12). As believers, we follow the minority report given by the godly patriarchs of the faith like Joshua and Caleb. We don't follow the majority view of the unbelieving world, and we work to fulfill the Great Commission in leading others who are on this broad road to the narrow way of life through faith in Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:13-14)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel reading continues with the study in Mark. This week's story occurs just after Jesus was confronted by the Pharisees who attempted to trap Him with a question about divorce (Mark 10:2). Jesus referred them to biblical truths from the Old Testament and then privately explained them in further detail to His disciples. Afterwards, the crowds brought children to Jesus, and the disciples tried to turn them away, which caused Jesus' rebuke of them (Mark 10:13). As Jesus was preparing to leave this area, He was confronted by a man who asked Him a very important question.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 10:17-30 NAS95 17 As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 You know the commandments, 'DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.'" 20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." 21 Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. 23 And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." 28 Peter began to say to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." 29 Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, 30 but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."*

In the reading we see a man who just asked Jesus the most important question in the universe, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 17). Yet in the man's question there is an inherent fallacy. As the crowd was fresh from Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees who were committed "doers" of the Law, the man asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus, knowing the man's heart, knew that this man had kept the Ten Commandments, and so He recited the ones dealing with things to do and not to do (v. 19). However, although Jesus didn't question his observance of the

Law, He cuts to the heart of the matter for him, his stumbling stone, which was the worship of his personal treasures over the worship of God. Jesus knew that, although the inquirer was following most of the commandments, it was the first one over which he was stumbling: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:2-3). Saint Paul said that it wasn't riches itself that created evil, but that the love of money was the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

Jesus then went on to explain the quandary using an illustration of a needle and camel (v. 25). Some have thought that Jesus was referring to a certain very low gate in Jerusalem, which required the rider and camel to duck down in order to enter. No such gate has ever been located in Jerusalem, and if there was such a gate, it wouldn't prove that a man can enter the kingdom of heaven through his good works. Instead, what Jesus was teaching was it is impossible to gain eternal life through any good works, but that it is offered only by God's gracious provision alone. Even rich people, Jesus explained, can enter the kingdom through faith because "all things are possible with God" (v. 27). Entrance into this kingdom does require sacrifice, though, because one must give up the things he trusts in in order to trust fully and only in God's grace. In the case of the rich man this would mean giving up the "worship" of his riches and turning only to the worship of God. Remember that Jesus had just told the people to take drastic actions regarding the things which were keeping them from following Him: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43 On one occasion Peter told Jesus that he had given up everything to follow Him, to which Jesus replied that he, and anyone who gave up something for Jesus, would receive a hundred times what was given up (v. 30). In other words, the investment in Jesus would be worth it, with a ten thousand percent return on investment in the present age, with eternal life thrown in, to boot.

What does this mean for us today? We cannot overstate the importance of the application of Jesus' teaching in these few verses. First, we cannot earn eternal life by doing anything; that comes only through belief in Jesus Christ alone. Saint Paul said, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are all sinners and cannot change that without the outside intervention of God, no matter how hard we try. The rich man in the story tried very hard, yet even he was unable to cleanse his heart through keeping the commandments. When measured against God's perfect standard, he fell far short, and Jesus revealed to him that he had disobeyed the first and most important commandment, loving God above everything else. If we think we can be saved by our good works, or that our good works are meritorious towards salvation, Paul explains the relationship between faith and works. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10, emphasis added). Paul said, "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5,

emphasis added). Our good works flow out of our faith in Jesus Christ as the result of a heart that has been changed by God, or "born from above (or again)." Jesus told Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3b). Nicodemus didn't understand Jesus until later in his life, but God saw to it that his story was recorded in the Bible so that we could identify with this "Nick at Night."

What about us, are we relying upon something other than God to earn our way into heaven? Are we like the rich man, who was likely very generous in giving, withholding our true worship of God alone? Do we believe the minority report offered up by men of faith, or following the majority view of those who shrink back from following God, or who try to purchase their way into heaven through their supposed good works, no matter how valid they may be? Do we think that we can duck low enough to ride our camel through some super-secret entrance gate into heaven? These are powerful things for us to ponder, and we can be overjoyed that God has given us clear answers from His Holy Word. "Our good works are the true riches that we will be able to present to God as evidence of salvation. Jesus called it our "bearing of fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

I introduced my former neighbor Harvey in the introduction to this week's lesson. After I moved away, I kept in touch with Harvey and also developed a closer relationship with his wife who kept me up to date on the various emergencies that developed concerning my friend. One weekend I travelled back to my former town to visit some friends who just happened to live down the street from my former home and my friend Harvey. One night I had a strange sense that something was going on with Harvey and I planned to visit him the following morning. After I awoke the next morning, I received a call from his daughter who told me that Harvey had passed away early that morning. She explained that the local pastor was with Harvey, and that he had requested to be baptized before he died. Harvey evidently gave testimony regarding his faith in Jesus. Harvey proceeded with this bold testimony of faith by submitting to baptism and died a short time later. A few days later I had the opportunity to meet the pastor at the funeral luncheon. I explained to him how Harvey had been deeply moved by the frequent visits of his church's members during years as he suffered from declining health. As his eyes began to well up with tears, along with my own, I told him that his faithful service and that of his church were the reasons that Harvey trusted in the Lord Jesus. I told him that Harvey often spoke about their visits and how thankful I was that they had served him in this way.

As I reflect upon what Harvey meant to me, I remember that at some point God had prompted me to begin praying for Harvey. God gave me a sense that salvation was possible even for Harvey, no matter what my feelings told me about the matter. Just to check, I plugged his name into a Google search and was greeted with his smiling face from his memorial page. That reminded me that

Harvey is alive forever in heaven, and one day I will visit him again. I have asked God to make this man one of the first people that I meet when I get to heaven. The evidence of his changed life just before he died has been a life-changing event for me. His testimony provides me with hope that God can reach even those we think are too hard to reach.

What about you, is there someone in your life who you feel is would never believe, but yet God seems to keep having you bump into them? Will you pray to begin reaching out to them in even the smallest ways, and that God would embolden you to share the story of how Jesus has changed your life?

Reflection Questions

1. We saw in the opening verse of the passage from Hebrews (which was omitted from the reading) this key sentence: "11 Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:11). Later, we provided this verse from Saint Paul. "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

List and discuss how you have benefited from studying the lives of two specific biblical characters in the Old Testament. In what ways have you learned from their obedience or disobedience?

2. What you understand about the relationship between faith and works in terms of gaining eternal life? Second, how does your position correspond to what James said, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2:17).

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 10-06-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open this week with a reading from Genesis, the first and foundation Book of the Bible. This is one of the Books that I read once a year, along with the two other Books that I consider the foundation for any student of the Bible. The other two that I read (and sometimes the entire Book in one sitting) are the Gospels of John and the Book of Acts. When I speak with new believers, I frequently tell them to proceed in the following order. Begin with Genesis, then with John, and finally conclude with Acts. In this way, the reader picks up many very important names and biblical constructs in a very short time. In addition, when reading in this order a person will quickly recognize the connections between the Old and New Testaments. This week as we begin with a reading from Genesis, we will see how Jesus connected this first Book of the Bible to His contemporary teaching on divorce as well as the Mosaic Law which His nemesis the Pharisees were trying to twist for their own advantage. We will also study in the second reading how the Old Testament proves that Jesus is the Christ as we look at the Book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews was a star student of the Old Testament and understood extremely well the themes and theology of the Old Testament and how it connected with the New as revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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The first reading is from Moses Chapter 2. This reading is from Moses' retelling of the creation story that added additional details to the summary account he provided in Chapter 1. Beginning in verse 4 of this chapter, Moses adds additional details to his account. Although God had already created man (Genesis 1:26, 2:7) he was placed in the garden to work it alone (2:18). God knew that Adam needed a mate who was like himself, and to provide a means to fulfil the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). In today's reading, we will find out the remedy for Adam's loneliness.

First Reading:

> *Genesis 2:18-24 NAS95 18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." 19 Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. 23 The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man." 24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*

After God created the animals, He brought them to Adam, who completed the task of giving names to each one (2:20). Adam's naming process may have taken a long time, and the absence of any helper in the process reinforced his need for a spouse. Early in the reading we see the phrase it was "not good" in reference to Adam being alone. This contrasted with the closing of chapter one at the conclusion of the creation account in which God said it was "very good" after everything, and everybody including Adam and Eve, had been created (Genesis 1:31). During Adam's naming process, the text says that "there was not found a suitable helper for him" (v. 20d) among the animal kingdom. Although Adam had close fellowship with the animals, as any pet owner can attest, these very special bonds still didn't satisfy his need for **human** companionship. Remember that during this time before the Fall the Lord God walked with Adam in fellowship with him (Genesis 3:8), however, even this relationship left Adam desiring a mate because God had designed him for it. God, then remedied Adam's need by creating the woman we know as Eve (Genesis 3:20) from out of Adam. In the Hebrew, the word transliterated "woman" is "ish-shah" which sounds much like the word for man which is "aw-saw." In the original the word for rib also means side, so the woman was literally from Adam's side and named a word with the same root sound. In the English the idea of her name is

similar, with "man" being the root and "wo-man" being the person taken from the man's side. In verse 18, the text says that a suitable "helper" was not found for Adam. The word in the original is "ezer" pronounced "ay zer" which means aid. This word brings with it an association with another word found later in the Bible, "Ebenezer," which by interpretation is the "stone of help" and is used of God in the Old Testament. Ebenezer reminded the Jewish people of God's presence, and Eve created by God as a helper should do the same for us. Adam was created as a relational being, and God is a relational being consisting of three Persons in the Godhead. After the Fall, we know that Adam and Eve's relationships were shattered, in contrast to that which exists among the Persons of the Godhead (Who are eternally in perfect relationship). Although Eve is literally the helper person drawn from Adam's side, the inevitable conflicts would begin between Adam and Eve after her creation, not matter how lonely he was before. These two had a mission, as the woman joined Adam in the work that God had given to him as the leader of the effort to maintain the garden that had been entrusted to him (Genesis 2:8, 15). Second, they were to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28).

Later in the Gospel reading, we see how Jesus used the last verse of this reading to show how it was God's original plan that man and woman be united in the relationship of marriage during their lifetimes. Verse 24 explains that "for this reason" the man and woman shall leave their parents and become one in marriage, both in the spiritual sense and through the sexual union. The phrase "for this reason" points back to the previous verse where God explained that woman was formed from the man, and since this is so, the two are now one in marriage. Jesus will explain this essential truth to the Pharisees who were trying to twist the Law to hold their followers in the same bondage that they placed upon themselves.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Hebrews, a Book about the superiority of Jesus Christ over angels and everyone else. This Book teaches us how Jesus was in the line of the Melchizedekian priesthood, which is eternal, rather than the Levitical priesthood which is tied to the human lifespan of the high priests. We know that one of the heresies that plagued the early church was the worship of angels, and the author of Hebrews attacked this headlong in showing Jesus' superiority over them. Saint Paul talked about this in the Book of Colossians when he said, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the **worship of the angels**, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind" (Colossians 2:18). In the first chapter of the Book, the author explained how angels are "ministering spirits sent to those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). Angels are God's agents who do His business for Him. They are never to be worshiped in any manner, since there is only one mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). The author's teaching on Jesus' position relative to the angels

continues into chapter 2, which is the reading for today.

Second Reading:

> *Hebrews 2:9-11 NAS95 9 But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. 10 For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. 11 For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren,*

In today's reading, the author explains how Jesus submitted to God the Father's plan for Him by allowing Himself to be born as a man in order to serve the world. The theological term for the process by which Jesus emptied Himself of His independent use of His divine attributes during the ministry of His first advent is "kenosis." This concept is explained more clearly by Saint Paul in the Book of Philippians in the reading below. We are including this because of the great importance of this subject and for the fact that the author of Hebrews assumes the reader's familiarity with this concept. Saint Paul explains this in the verses below.

5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Philippians 2:5-10).

With Paul's teaching in mind, the meaning of the reading from Hebrews becomes clear. Jesus voluntarily became human during His earthly lifetime, making Himself "for a little while lower than the angels" (v. 2a). Jesus died for everyone according to God's rich grace by humbling Himself on the cross not as a victim, but as a victor. Nowhere in Scripture is Jesus ever called a victim, rather Jesus gave His life willingly for us in order to suffer the penalty for the sins of the entire world. The purpose of Jesus' work is explained in verses 10–11. Jesus is "bringing many sons to glory," and sanctifies (meaning makes perfect" those whom He calls brethren. At the first moment we believe

we are given a new Spirit, the old one is gone and replaced with something new who knows God (Ezekiel 36:26, 2 Peter 1:3). In this new relationship, we are united in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and the Father. The author stated in the reading, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father" (v. 11a). This relationship is never something from which we can become divorced, as it was given to us by God. "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35). As we transition to the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus taught about the relationship of marriage as created by God for the purpose of a lifetime of fellowship between two followers of Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is a continuation of the study from Saint Mark. Before we continue, let's take a step back and look at the big picture of this Gospel. Mark's writing was one of the earliest of the four Gospels. In this important Book of the Bible, the author emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John Mark is held by tradition to be the author and there is strong evidence regarding this. He was very likely influenced by the ministry of Saint Peter, whom the Lord Jesus called the Rock of the church. Remember that this Rock of the church wrote about how as believers, we become the heirs of God's great gifts through an eternal relationship with Him, something which the Pharisees did not understand. Peter said that as believers we are born again to a living hope "to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3). Throughout Mark, there are three primary groups of people, and in the reading this week each them appear. The first is Jesus' primary nemesis, the religious leaders, including the Pharisees. The second is the crowds who follow Jesus and continually misunderstand Him. The third group is Jesus' disciples who also suffer from no small amount of misunderstanding even up until Jesus had risen from the dead when He had to explain everything to them regarding Himself from the Old Testament (Luke 24:13-32).

In today's reading, Jesus responds to a question from the religious leaders who came to Him not to learn, but rather to test Him (Mark 10:2). Jesus responded with a question, something that He often did when questioned. Do we know anyone who, when we ask them a question responds with a question, and afterwards we learn something from them? Jesus used this inductive approach when He was addressing the crowds, as contrasted with a deductive method in which He would have plainly given them the answer to their question. He uses those two different approaches consistently when He was addressing those two different groups of people. With the inductive method, He spoke mostly with questions and parables, but then later explained His public address privately to His disciples. In this case, the religious leaders didn't really desire to learn from Jesus by understanding

the true answer to their question, instead they were trying to test or trap Jesus by asking Him a question about some obscure or difficult subject dealing with Jewish Law. In the reading, we see Jesus following a familiar pattern. Someone from one of the first two groups asks Him a question, and Jesus responds with a question, which if answered properly could have led them to the answer themselves. Then, once He is away from them, He plainly explains to His disciples the answer to both questions. As you read, ask yourself how you would answer the question from the Pharisees, and then the question posed by Jesus.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 10:2-16 NAS95 2 Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife. 3 And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They said, "Moses permitted a man TO WRITE A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND her AWAY." 5 But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, God MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE. 7 FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, 8 AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH; so they are no longer two, but one flesh. 9 What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." 10 In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. 11 And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; 12 and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery." 13 And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all." 16 And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.*

The context of the reading follows Jesus' teaching on the seriousness and spiritually harmful nature of sin. Jesus had taught them, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea" (Mark 9:42). Afterwards, He left Capernaum and came to the region of "Judea beyond the Jordan," meaning the largely Gentile land to the east of this important watery landmark (Mark 10:1). Here, the crowds met up with Him again and were joined by the Pharisees who led with a question in order to test Him (v. 2).

The Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful (according to Jewish Law) for a man to divorce his wife (v. 2). They didn't of course mean whether it was lawful according to Roman Law, but rather according to their strict, literal and often wrong interpretation of the Mosaic Law. Jesus responded with a question, asking them to locate the answer from what Moses had written in the Law (v. 3). Jesus explained to them following a method that would have been very familiar to the Pharisees from the Old Testament. In the Book of Nehemiah, the people after they had been held in captivity in Babylon for seventy years had lost track of the Scriptures. Once Ezra had located a copy, he gathered the people around him to teach them, and Ezra and the priests read the lost biblical text. We see that it said, "They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8). This is what Jesus did by reading from the text and at the same time providing the interpretation of it. Moses didn't write in Deuteronomy Chapter 24 saying that God in any way favored divorce, but rather that God **authorized** divorce. Jesus explained this very crucial difference. Moses said that it was an abomination before the LORD for a man to remarry a woman whom he had previously divorced and had remarried, and taught the people through the Law not to do this because it would bring "sin upon the land" by doing so (Deuteronomy 24:4). Jesus continued the biblical teaching on the matter of divorce by drawing the people back to the Scriptures, a behavior which all of us would do well to follow. In responding to the question from the Pharisees, who didn't really care to hear the true answer, Jesus simply pointed them back to God's original teaching on the matter.

The closing of the reading was the second instance where the crowds were bringing children to Jesus (v. 13). Once again, Jesus rebuked His disciples for not allowing or even encouraging this. "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these," He said (v. 14). As true followers of Jesus, all of us must approach him humbly, and He was teaching His disciples this very important lesson.

This week we saw how Jesus turned to the Scriptures to answer a question by the Pharisees. Even though this group of religious legalists didn't desire to listen to His answer, Jesus still explained to them the sanctity of marriage and how this flowed from the relationship of the first man and woman God created during Creation about which we read in the first reading. In the closing verses of the Gospel, reading Jesus had to remind His disciples to be humble and receive Him just like the children. In the second reading, we learned how Jesus humbled Himself in order to accomplish the will of His Father. As followers of Jesus, He calls us to humble ourselves and receive Him as little children.

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Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we read how God created the first woman out of Adam as a helper and companion for him to accomplish the purposes that He had previously assigned to him. Later in the Gospel reading, we saw how Jesus used these same verses to explain the lifetime relationship of marriage as arising from God through this same creation account. Read the following verses and then discuss in what ways a husband and wife model the more perfect relationship that exists between the Persons of the Godhead.

> *John 14:16-20 NAS95 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.*

2. How does knowing that God exists eternally in a perfect relationship help you in your own relationship regardless if you are single or married?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-29-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Over the years, I began to keep in my computer a folder in which I filed obituaries and death notices. As I am getting a bit "long in the tooth" myself, this folder has been growing larger and larger. From time to time, I look through this folder and contemplate the lives of all the people who have passed away that I have known. To be truthful the ones I really think about are the people who I am not sure trusted in the Lord Jesus as their savior. Some of the people listed in this folder are the ones whom I prayed for over the course of a decade or more. As I think about these people, I remember all that Jesus said about hell, and how anyone that does not trust in Him will spend eternity in that awful place. I am very glad for those precious few people listed in my folder whom I knew had trusted in the Lord Jesus. This week we will learn some things that Jesus said about hell. We will see how even Jesus' own disciples got distracted through their own spiritual pride which kept them from proclaiming the message that Jesus gave them, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17).

This week we start with some history and context of the first reading from the Book of Numbers. Then we continue with the study from James and conclude with the Gospel lesson in which Jesus addresses spiritual pride and the danger of sin.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading from Numbers is that Moses' father in-law Jethro had earlier approached Moses about setting up judges to help with the administration of disputes just after the Hebrews had fled from Egypt (Exodus 18:22). Next, Moses received the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai and the Hebrews left Mt. Sinai to begin their first (and unsuccessful) approach into the Promised Land. They complained to Moses about their food as they became very tired of eating manna day after day (Numbers 10:12-13, 11:1). Moses was so overwhelmed that he cried out to God for help (Numbers 11:10-15). The LORD's solution was twofold. First, He promised to send them meat, and second, He told Moses to appoint seventy elders who would help him carry his responsibilities (Numbers 11:16-18). Our reading today picks up with the consecration ceremony of the elders. Be careful to note the use of capitalization of the pronouns in verse 25 as referring either to God or to Moses.

First Reading:

> *Numbers 11:25-29 NAS95 25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again. 26 But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. 27 So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them." 29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!"*

This passage tells the story of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit of the elders to speak the Words of God (prophecy). Even though two of them (Eldad and Medad) were not in the Tent of Meeting during the commissioning ceremony, they still received the Spirit which enabled them to prophesy in the camp among the Hebrew people. Instead of restraining them after it was discovered that they were prophesying although they had not been at the formal ceremony, Moses taught them a valuable lesson. Moses said, in essence, "I wish everyone was so filled with the Spirit that each person would prophecy like this" (v. 29b).

There are two lessons from this passage for us today. First, we learned from Moses what humility and leadership look like. Instead of hoarding God's power, Moses celebrated the distribution of

God's power to others. Second, in spite of the disobedience of the two elders, God still used them to minister to the people. Note that the text never mentioned the works of the sixty-eight faithful elders. God's first choice is to use His faithful people to accomplish His works, but he will use others as well. God can use sinful people to accomplish His greater purposes, and this reveals His grace.

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus taught His disciples a very similar lesson as to what Moses told Joshua. In the meantime, we will move to the second reading from James in which he discusses the reality of judgment and hell for nonbelievers. This is also something that Jesus will also discuss in the Gospel reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James but skips ahead to chapter 5 from where we left off last week at James 4:3. The intervening verses covered a variety of subjects but were primarily about pride. This week's reading is a brief departure from the instructions to believers and is instead a warning to the unbelieving rich. In biblical times, there was no such thing as a middle class. A possible exception to this was the few shopkeepers the existed in the cities and even they owned very little property making them subservient to the rich property owners. Wealth in those days was distributed mostly to the super rich and the rest of the people struggled for survival. It wasn't until the 19'th century that these wage gaps began to slowly disappear. James would have written just two decades before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans who saw to it that the possessions of the rich were stolen, the rest reduced to rubble, and all the Jews were evicted from the city. James, as the leader of the Jerusalem church, would have known the Lord's prediction about the coming destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (Matthew 24:2). Perhaps the tenor of the people's relationship with the Roman government was moving in that direction. It is evident from the reading that James also had a telescopic view in mind like how Isaiah writes with near and far term fulfillments stacked on top of one another. Although the near term fulfillment of James' warning to the rich would have happened with the destruction of Jerusalem, the ultimate fulfillment was as in Jesus' story of Lazarus and the rich man, when the wealthy man died and stood before the Lord in judgment. As you read, keep in mind both of these upcoming judgments.

Second Reading:

James 5:1-6 NAS95 1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming

> *upon you. 2 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! 4 Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 5 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.*

James' focus in the reading is upon the eternal judgment coming from God after the unbelieving rich person dies. He says that the rust of their golden and silver treasures bears witness against them. Also crying out against them during this terrible day of judgment is the laborers whom they exploited during their lifetimes and whom they "condemned and put to death" (v. 6a). Even those in what we may consider the middle class, people like the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick makers were taking advantage of by the rich in this polar society with two social classes – the very rich and everyone else. Yet we know that around two decades later there was also an earthly judgment that happened to everyone in Jerusalem, not just the rich. This was a judgment in the sense that it was against the Jews for rebelling against Roman authority, and God says that no authority exists unless He ordains it (Romans 13:1).

The unbelieving rich people to whom James addressed this writing would have done well to listen to his warning. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus described in grim detail the conditions in Jerusalem during the Roman siege in the days leading up to the destruction of the temple and city in AD 70. During the three-year blockade, the distinctions between the social classes were obliterated and all of the people were reduced to plundering and stealing to find food. Josephus wrote that cannibalism was commonplace, and "Tufts of withered grass were devoured, and sold in little bundles for four drachmas" (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews Book II*). Yet, although we could say that James' prophecy about the "miseries which [were] coming upon [them]" (v. 1) Was fulfilled in the physical sense in AD 70, the ultimate terror was yet to come when the non-believing people died and stood in judgment before the Lord when they died.

We can be profoundly happy that although we will stand to account before the Lord for what we did with what He gave us, we will not suffer with any miseries that will come upon us when we die (v. 1). This doesn't mean that since we are relatively rich compared to people in the early church that we don't have to be good stewards of the things that God has entrusted to us. We must recognize the great responsibility that God has entrusted us since we are comparatively rich compared to the early readers of James' Letter. In contrast to the rich person who will have nothing when they die, we

have now and will possess even greater riches from God after we die. Saint John said, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life" 1 John 5:13, emphasis added. It is not a sin to know that we have eternal life with our Lord Jesus. Saint Paul said, "but just as it is written, 'THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM'" (1 Corinthians 2:9). So even if we are poor, we can trust that we are rich in spirit.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is a continuation of the study from Saint Mark. The context is just after the disciples were arguing about whom among them was the greatest (Mark 9:34). Afterwards, Jesus taught them that the way to be great was to become a servant (Mark 9:35), and provided an object lesson to them by setting a child before them and saying, "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me" (Mark 9:37). This illustration revealed someone (the child) who needed to be served, but was unable to serve in return. In the same way, Jesus calls us to serve even if we are unable to pay him or her back. As you read, keep this context in mind of Jesus' call to achieve greatness by being a servant.

Gospel Reading:

Note: Verses 44 and 46 which were omitted from the reading have been included below.

> *Mark 9:38-48 NAS95 38 John said to Him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we tried to prevent him because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not hinder him, for there is no one who will perform a miracle in My name, and be able soon afterward to speak evil of Me. 40 For he who is not against us is for us. 41 For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he will not lose his reward. 42 Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, 44 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. 45 If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two*

> *feet, to be cast into hell, 46 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. 47 If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, 48 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED.*

In the opening of the reading, Jesus answered the objection of His disciples about someone they saw casing out demons in His name. From the context, it is clear that Jesus was continuing His teaching on the matter of spiritual pride as He had just finished teaching them about this through His illustration with the child. Jesus told His disciples that they should humble themselves and in essence be glad that others were serving Him and accomplishing good works in His name. Next, Jesus taught His disciples about how great a sin it was to cause another person to sin as well as the reality of hell. There are degrees of punishment in hell and Jesus is warning them that any non-believer who leads others deeper into their non-believing, sinful state will suffer the worst eternal punishment in hell. Jesus used a hyperbole of the hand, foot and eye to illustrate the danger of sin in the life of a believer. The hand refers to the things we do (v. 43a). The foot refers to the places we go (v. 45a). The eye refers to the things we see (v. 47a). Jesus is using exaggeration to say that believers should take radical actions to deal with the sin in their lives. Some people have taken literal actions against themselves, including the church Father Origen of Alexandria, who emasculated himself in order to deal with his problem of lust. He doesn't mean that we should physically cut off the body part which brought the sin on, but rather take drastic actions to see that we don't continue in the sinful pattern.

What are some practical applications we can take away from the lesson today? First, one of the primary ministries that we have as believers is to tell the world about the danger of sin and the need to turn from their sin and place their faith in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of their sin. God calls us to remember that the first message that Jesus brought when He began His ministry was the call to repent. Jesus picked up where John the Baptist left off who said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). This could mean coming alongside someone who you know is leading others into sin as there is a multiplying effect that their sinful actions are bringing upon the world. The greatest sinners in the world tend to become the greatest evangelists after they come to faith in Christ. Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Sin when left unchecked in the life of a nonbeliever will eventually lead them to an eternity in hell, and they need to be told about this fact.

Second, all of us need to keep an eye on our spiritual pride. Jesus went to great lengths to caution people about the danger of sin in the life of a believer, the foremost of which is pride. Just after the disciples finished arguing about who was the greatest among them, Jesus had to calm their

objections about someone who was doing good works in His name. Pride is hard to see in ourselves, but oftentimes easy to see in others.

We can develop many practical ways to safeguard ourselves from runaway sin. One way that I have found it helpful is to develop a relationship with a believer of the same gender to share prayer requests and to hold each other accountable for the things going on in their lives. A realistic schedule could be to agree to meet for one hour a month to meet face-to-face, talk to each other at least once a week by phone or email, and pray for each other each day. In this way, it is harder for sinful patterns to develop unchecked without any feedback from another believer.

Reflection Questions

1. In biblical times, the rich were the primary nemesis of the working poor. James comforted the believers by reminding them of the judgment that was to come upon the rich and that their abusers were actually **spiritually** poor. In our day, we are relatively rich compared to the first century Christians and have to refine how we view the "rich" as discussed by James. Who are the "rich" people who oppress you? How does knowing that you are spiritually rich help you to mentally overcome these oppressors in your life?

2. Ask yourself the following question. Have you ever developed a relationship with another believer in which you have been able to share personal and spiritual matters? If your answer is no, or if you are no longer meeting with this person, pray that God would place someone in your life with whom you could meet and know that someone was praying for you each day.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-22-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Recently I watched the movie *War Room* that featured a man who was engaged in a struggle between the wisdom of God and the "wisdom" of his carnal fleshly desires. We will read about what James said about this struggle in the second reading. Later, I will provide some additional insights I gleaned from the movie. Then we will learn about servant leadership in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark where we see the disciples arguing about whom among them was the greatest.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocrypha. This body of work provides some important historical insights into the 400-year silent period just prior to the birth of Jesus during which no prophets spoke. We encourage our readers to become familiar with the cultural and historical context leading up to the publishing of the New Testament.

First Reading:

Wisdom 2:12, 17-20 The wicked say:
Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us;
he sets himself against our doings,
reproaches us for transgressions of the law
and charges us with violations of our training.
Let us see whether his words be true;
let us find out what will happen to him.
For if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him
and deliver him from the hand of his foes.
With revilement and torture let us put the just one to the test
that we may have proof of his gentleness
and try his patience.
Let us condemn him to a shameful death;
for according to his own words, God will take care of him.

So much of what is written in the Apocryphal writings accord with the Book of James in the New Testament (from where the second reading today is drawn). In this reading we see a contrast between the wicked person and the righteous one, the intended reader of the Book. The wicked person's thoughts are (perhaps unknowingly) focused upon wicked words, here personified as a sort of literary foil. A literary foil often comes into the scene saying things in order to provide important contextual information, such as, "How did you find yourself on this boat on this sunny Tuesday afternoon in August during the middle of the second world war." In this reading, the foil expresses the secret thoughts, context, and other insights from the perspective of the wicked mind who is set against the things of God. The wicked say things like, "*For if the just one be the son of God, God will defend him and deliver him from the hand of his foes*." This sounds much Satan's accusation of Jesus recorded in Matthew 4:6, *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone*." Jesus' response was, "You shall not put the LORD God to the test," (Deut 6:16).

As Christians, we understand that we will suffer trials in spite of the fact that God is for us. Even though those opposed to the Gospel, even unknowingly oppose God and falsely accuse us, in the end we will prevail. There will be a separation of the wheat from the chaff. For, "*His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*" (Mt 3:12).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James but picking up in Chapter 3. The context is just after James' treatise on the power and danger of the tongue. He calls the tongue a fire (James 3:6), a "restless evil full of deadly poison" (James 3:8). He says, "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so" (James 3:10). The main theme of today's reading is the contrast between human wisdom and godly wisdom. As you read, take particular notes of the words and phrases that constitute each side of this spiritual battle. Especially take note of repeated words and phrases.

Note: Although the reading omitted verses 14 – 15, we included them below. This was because although verse 14 forms a conclusion to his teaching on the dangers of our speech it also provides a natural linkage to his subsequent teaching below.

Second Reading:

> *James 3:14 – 4:3 NAS95 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. 1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.*

In the reading, James contrasts the "wisdom from above" (v. 17a) with that which arises from within the human heart and results in the ungodly speech about which he just finished speaking (James 3:1-12). James calls this outpouring of sinful thought patterns of the heart "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" and repeats it twice (vv. 14a, 16a). These sinful patterns of the heart result in "arrogance and [lying] against the truth "v. 14b-ff). They are not from God (v. 15a), but are instead of non-divine "earthly, natural, demonic" sources (v. 15b-ff). They result in "disorder and every evil thing" (v. 16). In contrast, wisdom originating from God as described verse 17 is 1. Pure, 2. Peaceable, 3. Gentle, 4. Reasonable, 5. "Full of mercy" and results in good works, 6. "Unwavering," and 7. "Without hypocrisy." It's like there are two freight trains pulling against one another in our hearts. The first is that of sinful patterns originating from within the fallen condition of our hearts with input from Satan our enemy feeding the coal into the steam heading pulling away from God. Opposing that train

is another engine that is God's "wisdom from above" Who opposes all of these sinful seeds implanted into our lives. The planting of God's seed in our hearts, meaning the Word of God from the Bible, results in the fruits of righteousness and peace "v. 18).

As James continued his teaching in chapter 4 with the source of the troubles already clearly in our minds, he asked the hypothetical question, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you" (v. 1a). He answers his own question with a summary statement of the things that came before. The source of the "quarrels and conflicts among [us]" is our "pleasures that wage war in [our] members" (v. 1b). These "pleasures that wage war against our body parts" form Satan's tools to lead us to "commit murder" (v. 2b) because of following the lust in our heart (v. 2a). The war between our spirit and bodies continue and when we are "envious and cannot obtain," meaning we covet the things from others which we cannot have; we "fight and quarrel." James says that even when we pray because we want something we don't have, we "ask with wrong motives, so that [we] may spend it on [our] pleasures" (v. 3). Hidden within James teaching upon the contrasts between our fallen human condition and godly wisdom is a principle to ask God in prayer for the things that we desire (v. 3a). We will speak more about this later.

How many of us can identify with the ongoing struggle between our flesh and the devil's ways that rage in our hearts? In this section, James closely links our speech with the revelation of the secret battles that rage within us. Our ungodly speech provides an insight into the ways in which we are walking in opposition to the plan that God has for our lives. God said, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). I remember once I was talking to a friend of mine and as men have a habit of doing the subject moved to women. He made a statement about engaging in a certain specific form of carnal behavior with a woman. In my heart, I knew immediately that because of his current life situation he had been engaging in viewing pornography. Pornography is one of Satan's key ways in which he pours ungodly wisdom into the lives of people, be they unbelievers like my friend, or believers who know better. Engaging in the viewing of pornography is a channel through which flows the "wisdom" of our enemy. God stands ready to deliver us from our temptations, and as James said, all we have to do is to ask Him (v. 3a).

Additionally, just recently a friend of mine going all the way back to kindergarten was arrested for possession of child pornography. He evidently searched the web and then downloaded some sort of child pornographic materials. What worse is that this friend is a professing Christian.

I mentioned in the introduction that I had just returned from watching the movie *War Room*. This Christian movie provided a powerful illustration of the power of and necessity of prayer for couples as they engage in the unseen spiritual battle surrounding their lives. The movie told the story of a young mother met an older woman who mentored her about the power of prayer. Once this young woman began honestly seeking God by honoring Him in prayer huge things began to her in her life as well as that of her husband. James said in verse 3 of the reading, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." We need to ask the question; do we even ask? Regardless of our motives, we need to regularly assess whether we are honestly praying for the important things in our lives, such as our mate, children, and the lost people whom God has brought into our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson continues from Saint Mark but moves ahead from 8:35 where we ended last week and picks up with Chapter 9 just after the story of Jesus' transfiguration with His chosen subset of disciples consisting of Peter, James, and John. In between, Jesus had healed a demon possessed boy (Mark 9:16-27). This miracle was unique because someone in the crowd had presented the boy to Jesus after the disciples could not heal him (Mark 9:18). Afterwards, when the disciples had asked Jesus about why they could not heal him, Jesus told them, "This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer" (Mark 8:29). Interestingly, this followed the father of the boy's request to Jesus when he said, "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 8:24). It was as if Mark expressed a teaching moment with the disciples that the boy's father had the courage to ask Jesus to help his unbelief, yet the disciples were unable to heal the boy "by anything but prayer." As we saw in James, God calls us to ask Him in prayer for the things we desire (James 4:2e), yet at this stage the disciples did not yet understand the power of prayer in freeing the boy from his enslavement to a demon. Obviously, this was because Jesus was still with them, and they would understand later the powerful ministry of prayer.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 9:30-37 NAS95 30 From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it. 31 For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later." 32 But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him. 33 They came to Capernaum; and when He was in the house, He began to question them, "What were you discussing on the way?" 34 But they kept silent,*

> *for on the way they had discussed with one another which of them was the greatest. 35 Sitting down, He called the twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." 36 Taking a child, He set him before them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one child like this in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me."*

Jesus and disciples left "from there" (v. 30), meaning the event of the last healing. This would have been at the base of the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured before His disciples. The two traditional sites of this event are Mt. Tabor and Mt. Hermon. After they left "there," Jesus wanted to be alone with His disciples as we see in verse 30b, "He did not want anyone to know about it." Along the way on their journey to Galilee, after they got to Capernaum Jesus asked the disciples what they had been arguing about (v. 33c), but they refused to answer Him (v. 34). Mark tells us that they had been debating which among them was the greatest disciple (v. 34b). It's not coincidental that this argument arose after the chosen three (Peter, James, and John) experienced seeing Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is also possible that these three were still radiating some of God's glory after coming down from the mountain as happened with Moses. (Exodus 34:29). Perhaps this created in these disciples' minds a sense of superiority, and the others perhaps wondered why they weren't chosen for the trip up the mountain. Jesus quickly corrected their misunderstanding concerning the pecking order by telling them, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (v. 35c). Next, Jesus proceeded to provide them with an object lesson by placing a child in front of them to illustrate this principle (v. 36). Jesus used this illustration of the child to show them greatness does not consist of one's position. Even the lowest "child of the kingdom" can act as an ambassador for Jesus, and an ambassador for Jesus is also for God the Father. Therefore, the disciples shouldn't be arguing about their relative positions of greatness but should pursue the kingdom with a childlike faith and humility as servants of Jesus in pointing people to God the Father.

In summary, Jesus illustrated in the story today the principle of servant leadership. Even though He told the disciples that He was going to be "delivered into the hands of men" and killed (v. 31), they persisted in arguing about whom among them was the greatest. The presence of children provided Jesus with a means of using these young people as an example of how the disciples should view themselves.

What does this mean for our lives? Regardless of our social position in society, God calls us to view ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus. This Lord of the Universe is the same One Who washed the feet of the disciples (John 13:12-17). Saint Paul emulated these principles of servant leadership in his ministry. He said, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). God empowers us through His Holy

Spirit to carry out the work that He has started within us (Philippians 1:6). As we go about the week, let's keep these principles in mind when we are tempted to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:3).

God continues to teach me about my sinful pride and how I have often viewed myself as superior to others. This week I was mowing my lawn using my large zero turn lawn mower while my neighbor was mowing his using an older riding type mower with a missing hood and various Band-Aids holding it together. The background of this particular neighbor is that he is some two decades younger than his wife who moved in a few years ago with her first husband and two kids. However, something happened between them, and she later married the much younger "boy" who was now out mowing her lawn. As I was contemplating the matter and zoomed past him on my tiger-striped racing machine I admit that I felt superior to him as he mowed with the broken-down junk machine. In an attempt to get a handle on my pride, I actually found myself saying, "When I was his age (i.e. riding a bike with training wheels), I would have been glad to have had a mower as nice as that." How's that for getting a handle on my pride! In reality, God calls me to be the servant even of my boyish neighbor who also needs to hear the message of the Gospel. In retrospect, what I can do in the future is to pray for him as I see him mowing his lawn, and even pray for an opportunity to build a bridge to him in order to be able to share the hope that I have through faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. All of us have heard the expression, "put your foot in your mouth." Jesus said in Luke's Gospel, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (Luke 6:45). From what you learned from the second reading today, reflect upon the last time which you put your foot in your mouth. What was the underlying condition that brought about this action? Through God's wisdom in the Bible, what are one or two ways that you can avoid this in the future?

2. The super disciples, including Peter, James, and John had every right to view themselves as being in a privileged position since they were the only ones invited to the travel up the mountain with Jesus and subsequently experienced His transfiguration. In what ways are you tempted to view yourself as being in an exalted position either in society or in the church? Using what you learned from the Gospel lesson, how does what you know about Jesus' view of leadership change your view?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-15-2024



One time while I was studying the first reading from Isaiah Chapter 50, I came across an interesting commentary on a web site. This supposedly Christian pastor wrote about the identity of the servant figure in the reading either as the Nation of Israel as a whole, or perhaps as he said, "an individual person." Then he gave an analysis of verses 4 – 9a in which he never once identified the "servant" mentioned there with the Person of Jesus Christ. This contradicts the Gospel narrative who very clearly ascribed these exact events in describing the Passion of Jesus Christ (for example Matthew 26:67). This week we will study that reading from Isaiah and learn about what Jesus had to say in the Gospel reading about those who like the pastor I mentioned, deny or ignore that Jesus is the Christ of God presented by Isaiah. This week we will also learn from James about two types of faith, one that saves and one that does not. The key idea that runs throughout the three readings today is the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of God's servants.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Isaiah 50 and is one of what is known as Isaiah's "Servant Songs." The Servant Songs prove in a powerful way that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Righteous Servant, the long-awaited Messiah. As we mentioned in the introduction, some present-day scholars (especially including Jewish writers) identify the servant in these songs as the entire Nation of Israel. This is true in a certain sense and especially about the one spoken of in the opening verses of Chapter 50 just prior to today's reading. Verse one reads, "*Thus says the LORD: Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? No, because of your sins you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was put away*" (Isaiah 50:1). Clearly, the Lord is using a figure of speech in referring to the Nation who went astray from Him and was sold into captivity for their sins. However, in contrast to the servant we will read in the subsequent verses, the servant figure implied in this verse is an unfaithful one. As we will see in the reading below, the Servant beginning in verse 5 is undeniably the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

The overall preceding context of today's reading is the preparation of Judah's return from captivity at Babylon, something we know happened during the times of Nehemiah. Isaiah had also just introduced the prophecy of the future captivity under a yet to be born ruler named Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28 – 45:1). This future Persian King would be responsible for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and is also called a servant or shepherd of God (Isaiah 44:28). Isaiah prophesies about both faithful and unfaithful servants, be they Jews or Gentiles like Cyrus. This same idea of faithfulness carries into the second reading today as well as the Gospel lesson in which Jesus is the faithful Servant of God. As you read, take careful note of the characteristics of the faithful Servant.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 50:5-9 NAS95 5 The Lord GOD has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back. 6 I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. 7 For the Lord GOD helps Me, Therefore, I am not disgraced; Therefore, I have set My face like flint, And I know that I will not be ashamed. 8 He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; Who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. 9 Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me; Who is he who condemns Me? Behold, they will all wear out like a garment; The moth will eat them.*

Although the Nation of Israel sinned, God was obedient in fulfilling His promises of redemption through His Servant Son Jesus Christ. The Servant (whom we know as Jesus) was obedient in doing all that God had for Him to accomplish (v. 5). Although Jesus was condemned by the then leaders of the world, He was obedient to God and looked to His Father for His ultimate vindication. In a similar

way, we too are called to obey our Father God in accomplishing all the things He has for us to do and we will ultimately be vindicated when we meet the Lord.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study from James we read last week, but moving ahead to verse 14. The content of his teaching is the quality of true faith. Throughout the Bible, there are many examples of people possessing different qualities of faith, one that saves and one that does not. Rahab was commended for her saving faith by the author of Hebrews when he said, "By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace" (Hebrews 11:31). Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who received the two spies sent by Joshua and hid them in defiance of the King (Joshua 2:1-6). Had she not taken this bold step of faith she would have perished at the hands of the Israelites when they toppled the city. As we read from James, we will see both kinds of faith, the kind that saves and expresses itself in godly actions (Ephesians 2:10), and the kind that cannot save. It is this latter kind about which we will read later in the Gospel lesson about which Jesus said, "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels" (*Matthew 8:38).

Second Reading:

> *James 2:14-18 NAS95 14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."*

James asks a hypothetical question, essentially, "What good is a dead faith because a dead faith doesn't result in the salvation of one's soul" (v. 14). He then went on to illustrate the works that proceed from a person possessing such a dead faith. This person could say something like, "be warmed and filled" (v. 16b) to a person that is cold and hungry. There are two types of faith, that which can save and that which cannot. The faithful servant is one whose works manifest themselves into acts of service. This is a type of faith that can save, and does save a person (1 John 5:13). Although they are saved by God's grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9) this faith manifests

itself in good works (Ephesians 2:10).

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, remember how in the first reading we saw how Isaiah portrayed Jesus as the faithful Servant Who willingly surrendered Himself to the vile treatment of His tormentors. In contrast, we also saw how Isaiah in the earlier verses spoke of the unfaithfulness of the implied servant figure, the Nation of Israel who was sold into captivity for their sin. In the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus is the faithful Servant of God and how Saint Peter boldly proclaims this message even though he misunderstood the nature of God's Servant Son.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Saint Mark begins Jesus' inevitable and irreversible journey to the cross. As we saw in the pleas of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, in today's Gospel reading Jesus testifies about the difficult plan that His Father has for Him (Mark 8:31). The context of the reading is in Caesarea Philip. This is a place that I encountered during my trip to Israel that has an eerie sense about it, almost as if Jesus' conflict with Satan had somehow permeated the rocks of that place to this very day. As you read, keep in mind that the purpose of Jesus' miracles was to show the people Who He was, to bring them to repentance of their sins, and to move them to place their trust in Him for eternal life.

Gospel Reading:

The reading omitted verses 36-38 which have been included below.

> *Mark 8:27-38 NAS95 27 Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 They told Him, saying, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; but others, one of the prophets." 29 And He continued by questioning them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said to Him, "You are the Christ." 30 And He warned them to tell no one about Him. 31 And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 33 But turning around and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said,*

> *"Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." 34 And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? 37 For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 38 For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."*

For the very first time Jesus revealed His Father's plan for Him which was to offer His body as the ultimate and final sacrifice during the Passover celebration. Jesus knew that He had to fulfill the plan His father had for Him exactly, including how and when He was to die. Jesus used the term "I am" in verse 27, something which His Jewish hearers would have known was a claim of divinity. In asking them who they thought He was, Jesus was clearly identifying Himself as God, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the One Who would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. After Jesus had warned them not to tell anyone that He was the Christ (v. 30) although His miracles spoke profoundly about His nature (see John 10:25, "The works that I do in My Father's Name bear witness of Me"), He explained to His disciples "plainly" (v. 32) what was to happen to Him in Jerusalem. Note how the text says, "He **began** to teach them" (v. 31a, emphasis added) about this, because even after He rose from the dead, His disciples still didn't understand. He told his disciples to keep quiet about His identity in order to fulfil the Father's timing of His life as the Jews were already seeking to kill Him (John 5:18). We see that in verse 32 Peter, the student, took Jesus, the Teacher, aside and began to rebuke Him! Jesus identification of Himself as the Suffering Servant from Isaiah didn't accord well with Peter's view of Jesus as the conquering Messiah. Peter unwittingly spoke for Satan in attempting to change Jesus' destiny on the cross, in the same way that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13). We will say more about this below.

Peter, like many of us, was impulsive and frequently acted first and too stock of his actions later. After having spent the better part of three years, he was obviously upset that anyone would harm Jesus, especially the chief priests and scribes. He was clearly the leader of the group of twelve disciples and the first one and a representative of all twelve to whom were later given the "keys of the kingdom," meaning that He entrusted them with the dispersion of the Gospel message to the world. His main role was as a witness to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). Sometimes called the "first among equals," he played a leading role in the early church as can be seen in Acts Chapter 1 when he was the first to gather the ten remaining disciples in order to replace Judas Iscariot the traitor. Peter, whose heart was changed by the Holy Spirit, was the first of the disciples to confess Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16-18). He was called a "pillar of the church" in Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:9) and acted as the de facto spokesman of the disciples (see Matthew 15:15, 18:21, 19:27, Mark 11:21, etc.). Peter couldn't bear the thought of losing his best friend and ministry

partner for whom he had dedicated his life the past several years. Peter, like the Old Testament Prophets and Jesus, had also suffered from the constant persecution of the scribes and Pharisees, and one can only imagine his anger when Jesus told him that this nemesis would kill his Messiah!

Yes, the purposes of God had to be fulfilled through Jesus offering Himself as a Savior for our sins. Peter, who was overcome both with his passion and love of Jesus, was as Jesus said, also influenced by the Father of Lies (v. 32). The time of Jesus ministry was an era of extreme demonic activity. Almost a dozen times in the Gospels Jesus was confronted by a demon possessed person and cast it out of them (for example Matthew 9:33, Mark 7:26, Luke 4:33). Our enemy the devil seems to have a lot of capabilities, but we know for certain that Peter wasn't in any way "possessed by a demon." No, what happened in this incident was that Peter simply repeated a mantra that was implanted in the world by the father of the world (2 Corinthians 4:4), the father of lies (John 8:44), Satan, the devil himself. This lie was the Messiah would come and set up his eternal kingdom without the need for anyone to deal with their sin, either in a personal or corporal sense for all of Israel. The people of the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4) saw no need to humble themselves before God, repent of their sins, and allow God to give His life as the perfect, once for all sacrifice of sin forever (Hebrews 10:14). For a very brief instant Peter was conformed to this world, something about which Saint Paul later warned us when he said, "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your heart (Romans 12:2).

Concluding Thoughts:

In the introduction of today's lesson, I mentioned a theologically liberal preacher who studied the same text we read in Isaiah and came to a completely different conclusion regarding the identity of the figure in the song of the servant. Perhaps he was ashamed of Jesus so as not to offend his Jewish readers. As we saw in the Gospel reading, Jesus had a stern warning for those who would not confess Him as the Messiah. Jesus made a scary statement concerning this in today's Gospel reading about people who express that kind of faith. "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*" (Mark 8:38). This pastor's denial of the obvious identity of Jesus in Isaiah 50 contrasts sharply with Peter who through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit recognized and confessed Jesus as the Christ. Peter's faith is the kind about which James spoke, the kind saves, the type that expresses itself through good works.

Throughout the readings today, we saw two types of servants, the faithful ones like Jesus and His

true followers, and the unfaithful ones that God will send into permanent captivity, unlike the temporary condition suffered by the Nation of Israel. My prayer is that we will live boldly as faithful believers in the Lord Jesus by not denying Him, whether in print, in the ways that we treat others, or in the ways in which we are obedient in serving Him. What if **we** knew how and when we were going to die? How now would we then live?

Reflection Questions

1. That faithful servant is one whose life is marked by good works done as a result of a heart changed by God, however, we all fall short in various ways (Romans 3:23). One of the areas in which I have caught myself falling into a trap over and over again in my marriage (and in other relationships) is to propose a five-point plan to fix someone once they have poured out their heart to me concerning their problems. Have you ever fallen into this type of sinful behavior? In light of what you learned today from the readings, how can you through God's power counteract this in the future?

2. Peter was the first to boldly express that Jesus was the Christ (Mark 8:29), but his confession ended up leading to Jesus' rebuke when his concept of the Christ didn't align with the Father's plan for Jesus which included suffering, death, and resurrection. Discuss in what ways you too have misconceptions about Jesus in your life. In what ways do you expect Jesus to do something in a certain manner or timeframe, but find yourself frustrated when He accomplishes His plan in a contradictory manner?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 09-08-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, in the first reading, we examine the Prophet Isaiah's message regarding the future healing coming from God upon the whole sin-broken world. Then we continue the study of the Book of James in the second reading and close with the continuing study of the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus heals a deaf and mute man.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This week, in the first reading, we examine the Prophet Isaiah's message regarding the future healing coming from God upon the whole sin-broken world. This message especially resonated to the Jews who were under attack from the King of Assyria during this time.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. The historical context is during the time when King Hezekiah had made an alliance with Egypt (Isaiah 30:1-2) thereby provoking Sennacherib the King

of Assyria. Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria ultimately led to his humiliation in which he was forced to cede reparations as recorded in Second Kings. The people were very afraid of the Assyrian King because he had already conquered and taken captive the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Hezekiah's unwise decision to trust in an alliance with Egypt angered God. However, at some point he came to his senses and confessed his wrongdoing, then tried to buy peace with Sennacherib. "*King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, 'I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.' The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria* "2 Kings 18:14-16).

Equally important in the historical context is the location of the reading in the whole of Isaiah and the overall theological context. Today's reading from Chapter 35 precedes a section in Isaiah regarding the future judgment of the Edomites. This is a people group that can be taken both literally (as a region) and figuratively, as anyone (or nation) who opposes God. Edom is the nation that descended from Isaac's firstborn son, Esau. Esau was Jacob's brother and the one who claimed the promises of God and the blessing from Israel. Although Esau didn't war with the Hebrew people during the time of Jacob, his descendants became sworn enemies of the Jews. God says about the Edomites in Chapter 34, "For My sword is satiated in heaven, Behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom And upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction" (Isaiah 34:5). Although we don't know exactly how God's judgment of Edom will play out, we are told many details about the judgment of the earth which must take place before Jesus returns to rule the earth. Scripture seems to indicate that the timing of the judgment is in the distant future, during what is known as the Day of the Lord (DOL). This period of God's judgment of the seals, trumpets, and bowls as described in Revelation will be accompanied with signs in the heavens. Isaiah said "the sky will be rolled up like a scroll" (Isaiah 34:4b) just as it says in Revelation 6:14. Today's reading is a message regarding the future restoration after the terrible period of time after the DOL. As in many of the prophetic passages in the Bible, and especially in Isaiah, we can locate both near term fulfillments as well as unfulfilled events that will happen sometime in the future. In some cases we can clearly see partial fulfillments of certain passages through the first coming of Jesus, but yet it is clear that the complete fulfillment won't occur until the second coming of the Lord. This is the case with today's reading.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 35:4-7 NAS95 4 Say to those with anxious heart, "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you." 5*

> *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. 6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness And streams in the Arabah. 7 The scorched land will become a pool And the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass becomes reeds and rushes.*

The heart of the message was that God would first destroy His enemies and then restore the land. Although the message contained a message of physical healing, the prophet was also speaking metaphorically about the spiritual healing that would occur in the future when all of Israel would be saved (Romans 11:26). In terms of the historical context, Isaiah spoke to the people of Judah that were being threatened with attack from the Assyrian Empire who had already devastated their brothers in the Northern Kingdom. The Prophet provided a message of hope to the people, that ultimately God would prevail over his enemies by "com[ing] with vengeance, with terrible recompense" (v. 4d). This will lead to the salvation of the people, "He will come and save you" (v. 4f). During that time, the land shall be restored from war, all the evils of the world will be reversed, including blindness, deafness, lameness, and the inability to speak (v. 5). The desert shall be watered (v. 6c) and the hot sand shall be blessed with cool water (v. 7). The land, including the region of Edom that was destroyed by God (Isaiah 34:5) and had been turned into the haunt of jackals will be restored. The Prophet's message would have provided comfort to the people as they faced the onslaught of King Sennacherib while their own king tried to buy the country's freedom against this vast imposing army. While the people lived with the imminent threat of the Assyrians, Isaiah's message would have been a rallying cry for exclaiming the power of the one true God over their enemies.

When we look at the ways in which Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled after his time we see that Jesus quoted from this very text. The way in which this happened was while John the Baptist was in prison. He evidently began to have some doubts as to whether Jesus truly was the Messiah. Perhaps he questioned why Jesus would allow him to be imprisoned. John the Baptist sent word to Jesus from prison saying, "Are You the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?"(Matthew 11:3). Jesus answered by quoting from Isaiah. "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM" (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus said that His healing ministry was in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Later in the Gospel reading, we will see another instance of how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy from Isaiah. Like many prophecies in the Old Testament, this one was only partially fulfilled during Jesus earthly lifetime. The final fulfilment will happen when the Lord returns to establish his kingdom on earth.

The message of Isaiah for our current day includes a couple of possible application points. One, we can believe in Jesus as the Messiah and be saved from the destructive nature of sin in our own lives. No matter what we have done or what has been done to us that is sinful, Jesus the Messiah, can heal and restore the brokenness of sin. Two, when we have this type of relationship with Jesus, we can also see God the Father's heart, now, through a different lens. Instead of fearing God's wrath and punishment for sin, we can draw close to God's heart that is tender and fiercely loyal to His sons and daughters who are in distress. Romans 8:1 tells us that there is no longer any condemnation associated with those who are in Christ Jesus. So we can boldly approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). The fact that God is eager to save and embrace us should encourage and embolden us to live in light of His abiding presence in our lives.

You may wonder how things turned out for Judah. If you read further ahead in Isaiah, you can see how God worked mightily but only after Hezekiah came to his senses. Instead of leaning upon foreign alliances and gold to buy his way out, King Hezekiah eventually turned to God for deliverance, "he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth and entered the house of the LORD" (Isaiah 37:1). God answered his heartfelt plea by devastating the Assyrian army: "Then the angel of the LORD went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men arose early in the morning, behold, all of these were dead" (Isaiah 37:36).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study begun in James last week. The Book of James is a Book called the "Proverbs of the New Testament" and is filled with practical wisdom for being a Christian. This reading follows James' teaching on the basic practices of religion which included "visiting orphans and widows in their distress, and keeping oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). This James is the one who led the first Ecumenical Council recorded in Acts 15 which dealt with rebutting the false teaching that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). During this meeting, James stood up, announced a summary of the scriptural teachings on the matter (from the Old Testament), and provided the authoritative, final judgment on how the church should proceed. His teaching in the Book by his name came to the early church with the same sense of authority that he had during the proceedings of the first church council.

Note: The reading omitted verses 6 – 7 which have been included below.

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Second Reading:

> *James 2:1-5 NAS95 1 My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 2 For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3 and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," 4 have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? 5 Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?*

This passage is teaching the importance of reflecting the nature of God by treating everyone with fairness and honor. Showing favoritism in the church reflects a muddy picture of God's heart, confusing people about who God is and what He values. We are to value each person as God values them, and thus avoid the class wars and pecking orders of the world. The poor in this world have a lot to teach those who are supposedly "rich" by material standards. Instead of favoritism dictating our treatment of people, God's love for all should level the playing field. We can now approach others (rich or poor) with a sense of humility, giving them honor as image bearers of God.

James provides an excellent warning about how God hates pride (Proverbs 8:13) and desires for unity in the Church (John 17). If you think about it, the higher a person is, the further they have to fall! James' lesson closely parallels the Parable of the Wedding Feast:

7 And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table, saying to them, 8 "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this man,' and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. 10 But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Lu 14:7-11)

In the parable, the central truth is Jesus' message regarding the sinfulness of pride as well as a call to servanthood. In reality, using the illustration of the feast, the proudest person in the room may be the one collecting the food trays after the meal! Only God truly knows the heart (1 Corinthians 2:11), although wealth and power are often accompanied with pride. In this illustration, Jesus is calling us to reflect upon the times in which we have positioned ourselves "at the head of the table," or when we have learned from the mistakes of others in positions of power.

As a college professor who taught in various state prisons for a half dozen years, one of the primary lessons I learned was to avoid rushing to judgment of a person based upon their appearance. Prison had a way of leveling the class differences because although everyone dressed uniformly, between hairstyles, tattoos (and scars) the students had ways of making themselves appear differently. Yet even with the students wearing the same uniforms over the course of the class, it would become obvious that there was a "pecking order" among them. Some, like the rich man, "sat" in positions of power, regardless of the location of their physical desk in the classroom. Others were subservient to the leadership positions among the students which became obvious to me over the course of the semester, but which the students already knew. Places of power don't always mean sitting at the head of the table.

It is instrumental to have a proper understanding of the point that James and Jesus were getting at in order to apply these lessons to our lives. The meaning that they had in mind is best illustrated by Psalm 73. Let's read that entire text and meditate upon it before moving onto the Gospel lesson.

> *Psalms 73:1-28 NAS95 1 <<A Psalm of Asaph.>> Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart! 2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat. 5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; The garment of violence covers them. 7 Their eye bulges from fatness; The imaginations of their heart run riot. 8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; They speak from on high. 9 They have set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue parades through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return to this place, And waters of abundance are drunk by them. 11 They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. 13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence; 14 For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. 16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight 17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end. 18 Surely You set them in*

> *slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form. 21 When my heart was embittered And I was pierced within, 22 Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. 28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Your works.*

Although the people who are rich in faith may suffer during this lifetime, those that are only rich in material things and full of pride will suffer eternal destruction.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading continues from Mark that we looked at last week. This week the context is Jesus' teaching in the Gentile region of the Decapolis to the east of the Jordan. Today's reading follows the healing of a Gentile in the region of Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24) when Jesus cast out a demon from the Syrophoenician woman's daughter (Mark 7:24-30). Interestingly, the Decapolis was the same region in which Jesus was asked to leave after healing the man possessed by a legion of demons. Once the demons left the out of control man, they entered a herd of 2000 pigs, which caused them to run off a cliff into the Sea of Galilee and be destroyed. When the owners found out about this "they began to implore Him to leave their region" (Mark 5:17). Nonetheless, Jesus returned there and resumed His healing ministry. Perhaps this was because the formerly demon possessed man whom He healed went and told many others in that region about Jesus (Mark 4:20).

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 7:31-37 NAS95 31 Again He went out from the region of Tyre, and came through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, within the region of Decapolis. 32 They brought to Him one who was deaf and spoke with difficulty, and they implored Him to lay His hand on him. 33 Jesus took him aside from the crowd, by himself, and put His fingers into his ears, and after spitting, He*

> *touched his tongue with the saliva; 34 and looking up to heaven with a deep sigh, He said to him, "Ephphatha!" that is, "Be opened!" 35 And his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was removed, and he began speaking plainly. 36 And He gave them orders not to tell anyone; but the more He ordered them, the more widely they continued to proclaim it. 37 They were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things well; He makes even the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

He took a very long and circuitous route to get to the Decapolis by going from Tyre through Sidon and then back to the Decapolis (v. 31). We are not told the reason why he would have taken this route and the possible many months it would have required. Despite them having earlier asked Jesus to leave their region someone brought a man to Him for healing. Jesus separated the man from the crowd then proceeded to heal him. Jesus used two physical signs to manifest the healing given to Him by His Father God. First, he put his fingers into the man's ears, and then placed His own saliva on the man's tongue (v. 33). Evidently, he did this to accommodate the others who were watching ("they" in v. 37). Jesus looked up to heaven and sighed showing His reliance upon God the Father as well as His compassion for the man's condition brought on by the fallen world. Next, the first thing Jesus told them including the man whose speech was restored was to keep silent! Jesus knew that His time had not yet come (John 7:6) and having these people broadcast about Him wouldn't serve the timing of the perfect plan the Father had for Him. Another perspective is that His statement to keep quiet had more to do with His disciples than about the Gentiles who were present during the healing. As we mentioned in the first reading, the prophets like Isaiah used physical blindness and deafness as a metaphor for the people's spiritual condition. At this point Jesus' own disciples didn't understand the spiritual significance of all that was going on because in the very next chapter He told them, "Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR?" (Mark 8:17c – 18b). Jesus, knowing that by asking the Gentiles to keep quiet may stir them on to proclaim the healing that much more, may have been making a statement to His disciples about their unbelief. This, along with the fact that the disciples would have been familiar with the Old Testament metaphor of blindness and that Jesus opened the eyes of a blind man lends more credence to this interpretation. Jesus is in effect telling His disciples that He can open the eyes of the blind, but they were still spiritually blind to many of the realities of His nature. Although Peter soon afterwards confessed that Jesus is the Christ (Matthew 16:16), all of them had a lot to learn about Jesus – even after He rose from the dead.

There are many applications of Jesus message for our lives today, here are a few:

- Jesus' healing of the blind man's physical ailments reminds us of the need for everyone's need

for a spiritual birth. Spiritual blindness is the primary condition that vexes humanity today, the only unforgivable sin (Mark 3:22-30). In John's Gospel Jesus said that "unless a person is born from above they will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3). Saint Paul said that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and "the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Paul continued by saying, "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). The Scripture is clear that "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). We cannot earn this free gift but must accept it in faith. "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. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

- If we desire to be like Jesus, we too can be drawn to minister to the handicapped. Considering what we learned from James, the "handicapped" aren't necessarily just the people with obvious physical issues. Instead, we can pray to consider ministering to those who are marginalized in our society.

- As we learned in the reading from Isaiah, if we and others for whom we care are struggling with handicaps, remember how the prophetic messages in the Bible point us to the perfect healing we will one day receive with the Lord Jesus. For some, this may mean experiencing physical death and meeting Jesus in heaven (John 14:3).

- We too can be astonished that Jesus does all things well (v. 37a,b)! Jesus lived a perfect life and we can be changed by how He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

Reflection Questions

1. Develop a list of some categories of people who are marginalized in our society. Second, ask God in what ways you can be praying for specific people that you know fall into this category. Ask God to show you His will regarding ways in which you could minister to one of these people before the end

of the year.

2. Read John 14:1-3 and answer the question that follows.

John 14:1-3 NAS95 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.

A. How does knowing that Jesus is 1. Going to prepare a place for you, and 2. Going to meet you when you get there, help you to face the handicaps you are experiencing in your life today?

B. Especially in light of how God has helped you with any "handicaps," would you consider sharing your testimony with the fellow readers of Mass Notes? If so, please send me your testimony or upload it in the form provided on the web site.

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a study of a reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses pours out his heart to the Israelites just before they were to begin their final conquest and enter the Promised Land. Moses cautions the people not to add to or take from the Law but to just simply follow it. Second, we look at a reading from the Book of James, said to be "the Proverbs" of the New Testament. Then we close with the Gospel reading from Saint Mark in which Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees for doing exactly what Moses told the people not to do by creating religious traditions, which they held above the Mosaic Law. For the application we will address the tendency toward formulaic religion and how God uses hardship to accomplish His purposes.

Do you believe that if you obey the government, pretty much keep the Ten Commandments and go to church every week that God will reward you with a life filled with some level of prosperity and good health? What if you sensed and were obedient to a call from God to uproot your life in order to engage in missions? Would you then be upset if things didn't turn out perfectly for you in your new life? I know a man named Dave that studied hard to become a missionary and moved to France with his wife to reach people for Jesus in this spiritually dark but civilized nation. He worked there for many years, had a good degree of success in his ministry and followed biblical teaching in all that he did. However, after being in France several decades, his health began to decline. As the months went by, his condition continued to worsen and at some point, he was told that he would need a liver transplant or he would die. You may ask, how could God allow this life-threatening condition in his

life which threatened to end his ministry? How could God allow this situation in his life when he had sacrificed so much to move there, was faithful in his following the Bible, and was obedient in every way to the laws of his adopted nation? Later in this lesson you will hear what happened to Dave.

According to Scripture God allows challenges in the lives of believers which goes against what is known in our times as "health and wealth" or the prosperity gospel. This week we are going to see in the Gospel reading how Jesus confronted the false teachings occurring during His ministry from a Jewish religious group called the Pharisees. These were a sect that taught, in effect, salvation by works and held some of the same false beliefs as the modern prosperity gospel preachers of today.

It would be easy to misread the first reading if we have this formulaic or prosperity gospel in mind. The formula goes like this: I am obedient to God's commands, then He has to give me the circumstances in life that I think I deserve. The problem behind this formula is that it lacks the relational underpinning that God desires for us. We obey Him out of our own effort and then feel justified in our sense of entitlement. We will need to read the Old Testament through the eyes of relationship with God now made possible through grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, a word that means literally "second law." The Book begins with a chronicle of the events of the Hebrew people in the period just after the wilderness wanderings. Because of the people's disobedience they were forbidden from entering the Promised Land and spent thirty-eight years wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses. During this time God revealed the Law to Moses and began the Levitical Priesthood with his brother Aaron as the first high priest. At the end of these thirty-eight years, God prompted Moses to lead military campaigns against the two regional leaders on the "other side" (meaning the east) of the Jordan River. The Hebrew army soundly defeated both King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. According to this Scripture, the Hebrews "captured all [their] cities at that time and devoted to destruction every city, men, women and children. We left no survivors. Only the livestock we took as spoil for ourselves with the plunder of the cities we captured" (Deuteronomy 2:34-35). These events occurred over the final two years, which closed out the full forty years of wandering in the desert outside of God's Promised Land (to the west of the Jordan).

Even more so than in previous readings in order to glean the proper meaning from the passages that

follow, it is necessary to clearly understand the context. Reflect upon each of the following points that will help to lead you to the proper contextual understanding of today's lesson.

- God does not change (Malachi 3:6, James 1:17), but He does change the terms through which He deals with His people according to His covenants. There are five covenants in the Old Testament Bible.

  I. First was the Noahic (pronounced "no aye ick") Covenant spoken of in Genesis Chapter 9 in which God promised never to destroy the earth again with a flood. The New Testament records that instead the earth will be renewed by fire (2 Peter 3:7).

  II. The second covenant was the Abrahamic Covenant found in Genesis Chapter 12. In this, God promised that Israel would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2), that they would be led to the Promised Land (v. 1), and that through Israel the entire world would be blessed (v. 3). These unconditional promises will be fulfilled through the Nation of Israel, somehow, in the future.

  III. The third covenant was the Mosaic Covenant through which God introduced the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), and the context of the first reading today. The promises of this Covenant were conditioned upon the people's obedience to the Law, something that only Jesus could fulfill. The Law was clear and exact, unlike the religious traditions that were derived from it over the centuries (as we will read about in the Gospel lesson). Moses spent forty years teaching the people the Law, and they spent forty years breaking it! Point of Fact: Had I lived during that time I wouldn't have done any better than they did.

  IV. The forth covenant was the Davidic Covenant in which God promised that David and his descendants would rule over the House of Israel forever. This covenant was and will be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who is of David's kingly line of Judah.

  IV. The last covenant of the Old Testament (and the entire Bible) was the New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31. God promised in the New Covenant that He would forgive the sins of His people (Jeremiah 31:34b), and give them new hearts with a desire to follow Him (v. 34). The New Covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the Person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gives all believers a new heart through sending His Holy Spirit to live inside us (John 7:38-39, 2 Corinthians 5:17). This Covenant is the terms through which God deals with us as believers today.

- God's plan of salvation for people has never changed, whether in the Old or New Testaments, although God has revealed His plan more clearly through the revelation of Jesus Christ (see

Colossians 1:26 and Hebrews 1:1). Everyone is saved by faith in God's Savior whether it was Jews in the Old Testament, Jews in the New Testament, or Gentiles during either of the Testaments. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God is clear that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is a rejection of His only provision for the forgiveness of sin.

Finally, this is the key point that we need to remember as we study the first reading showing the sinful behavior of the Jews and how Jesus confronted the false teachings of the Pharisees in the Gospel lesson:

- God assesses different short-term penalties for sin according to each era and covenant. For example, before the Noahic Covenant when Cain killed Abel, God dealt immediately with this sin by putting a mark on Cain, exiling him to a foreign land, and causing him to tirelessly till unfruitful soil (Genesis 4:12-15). As a second example, in the first reading today we will see Moses' mention of an instance in which God acted quickly and harshly to judge sin among the Jewish exiles. Later during the time of the Exodus which is the context of the first reading, God ruled His people as a "theocratic kingdom." During this time Moses, his successor Joshua (and later the prophets and King David) received direct guidance from God. During the "theocratic kingdom" God levied heavy consequences upon those who broke the Law. In John's Gospel Jesus used the metaphor of God's pruning in the life of a believer in order to bring about more fruit (John 15:2). God's pruning in the context of the theocratic kingdom may have meant sudden death for the disobedient Jew, whether it came from God or as a result of capital punishment levied by the Israelite priests (and later Kings).

In our era, God operates according to the New Covenant in which he prunes believers during their earthly lives (John 15:2) while storing up His judgement for unbelievers largely until the end of their lives (John 15:6, "cast into the fire and burned"). Even during the Old Testament times God revealed His grace to the unbelieving world by lavishing His material blessings upon them, although their eternal destination was hell. This is very clear from both Psalm 37 and Psalm 73. Lest we think that God doesn't immediately judge sin in some cases, we must remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in the Book of Acts (Acts 5:1-11), as well as Saint Paul's teaching about some being sick and some have died because of their unholy behavior in the love feast and communion meal (1

Corinthians 11:30).

Now, with this context in mind, let's move to today's reading which is an address by Moses to the people as he prepares to appoint Joshua his successor (3:28) who would soon lead the people into the new land. Although Moses himself was forbidden by God to enter (Deuteronomy 3:23-26), God did allow him to travel to the top of Mount Pisgah to see a divine vision of the land just before his death (3:27).

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 4:1-8 NAS95 1 "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 2 You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. 3 Your eyes have seen what the LORD has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the LORD your God has destroyed them from among you. 4 But you who held fast to the LORD your God are alive today, every one of you. 5 See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 6 So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? 8 Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"*

Moses urged the people to follow the Levitical Law without adding to it or taking from it (v. 2) so that they may "live and go in and take possession of the land" being given by God to them (v. 1). We will see later in the Gospel reading that the people didn't heed God's warning not to add to the law. Interestingly, God repeated this admonition in the very last Book of the New Testament not to add to or take from the Scriptures (Revelation 22:18). God's marching orders were for the people to just do what He has clearly told them through the Law delivered to Moses. Twice in this reading Moses tells the people to keep the commandments of the Law (v. 1, v. 2). Keeping the Law in the context of the reading does bring with it the promise of material blessing because God had promised the people entrance to the Promised Land. The recipients of the blessing were the minority of those in the Exodus, those who were still alive and the ones whom had "held fast to the LORD" (v. 4). If God

killed a person because of their sin, then obviously, they didn't receive the blessings of the Promised Land. As we noted in the introduction, the consequences of disobedience during the theocratic kingdom could be severe and immediate. Beginning in verse 3 Moses recounted what God did to the disobedient people as recorded in the Book of Numbers. The people had become immersed in the worship of the god "Baal of Peor" (Numbers 25:5). Here the Book of Numbers says, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel'" (Numbers 25:4). A plague followed in which 24,000 people died (Numbers 25:9). This was God's way of purging the evil in order to protect the integrity of those who were seeking to follow God with a pure heart.

Another point from the reading was that God had established the Nation of Israel as a light to everyone in the world. God's "chosen people" were not chosen just for their own sake, but for the salvation of all people groups through their testimony of God's greatness (see also John 4:22). Moses addressed the people just before they were to begin the final conquest(s) to claim the land, saying, "So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the **sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes** and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (v. 6, emphasis added). The Jews whose hearts were pointed towards the worship of the true God expressed their beliefs through the observance of the Law. The Jews' unique lifestyle served as God's showplace to the Gentile nations surrounding them. Their unique civil, moral, and ceremonial Laws were designed by God as a herald to the idolatrous people of the world. This was especially true when the Jews were dispersed around the world during the various captivities that God allowed throughout history, a pattern which continues to this very day. As Christians, we are called by God in a way similar to be like the Jew, living in a peculiar way, heralding the good news of God's grace and shining biblical light to our sin darkened world (Matthew 5:14, Ephesians 5:8). This ministry isn't just reserved for vocational works like my missionary friend Dave in France.

As we transition to the second reading, we will see some practical ways in which we are believers in Jesus Christ can live our lives as a beacon shining on the pathway for people to find God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of James, a letter often called the "Proverbs of the New Testament." James is a Book filled with practical wisdom and the application of godly principles drawn from throughout Scripture. The message woven into the entire book of James is the principle stated by Jesus, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). In a

letter such as written by James, the literary context (knowing the verses before and after the reading, and the flow of the author's thought) is very important for understanding the original author's intent. In the reading today, the verse immediately prior to the reading was omitted (verse 16). Once that is included there is a nice connection created between the first reading and the Gospel lesson we will look at later.

Second Reading:

> *James 1:16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 1:17-27 17 Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18 In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. 19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

James cautioned the people to "not be deceived" (v. 16), but about what? His caution was to not be deceived about the source of good things. The enemy subtly tries to convince us that God's gifts are not good or that good can come from any other source besides God. The source of every authentic blessing is God (v. 17). He encourages them by pointing out that they are the first fruits of the future believers (v. 18). This is much like the Jews we saw in the first reading who were uniquely commissioned by God as a light to the nations.

You'll notice that James called the people "my beloved brethren" twice in the first four verses to give a loving context of his more confrontational statements in this passage. He gets to the heart of the matter by hitting his readers square between the eyes with teaching on the danger of the tongue (v.

19, v. 26, also repeated in chapter 3), and the falseness of believers who profess one thing, but live another way. In God's economy, there is no such thing as not "living up" to our beliefs. Instead, our lifestyle and choices are merely reflecting our true beliefs. Basic religion, James says, is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 27). While not everyone has a direct ministry to orphans and widows, James is highlighting the need for us to express our religion in practical acts of service to the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40). The orphans and widows of his day would have been those who are marginalized by society, vulnerable to exploitation and overlooked because of their inability to reward those who serve them. Serving those who cannot give you any "kick back" helps to ensure that our motives are pure.

In the closing verse James said to "keep oneself unstained by the world." This is an important admonition that, if heeded daily, could help all of us live a more abundant life in the Lord. This is akin to "being in the world, but not of it" (Matthew 17:14-16), which allows us to be a witness to those who do not know the Lord as we live with a different mindset. The Book of James provides many such godly proverbs which can help us to live fully surrendered lives for Jesus. In the first reading we saw where Moses called the people to obey the Law of God. James calls people to obey not only the teachings of Jesus but also the spirit of the New Covenant. He also provides additional instruction in practical ways to implement this new relationship with God. We don't have to be motivated by guilt or shame as we consider serving God. When we truly listen to the Holy Spirit, Who is the life giving force empowering us to perform things including (and exceeding) "basic religion," He teaches us how to follow through with our particular race to run (Hebrews 12:1). In this way we look to fulfill not just the letter of the law, but we truly start to see how to be God's hands and feet in the world, thus fulfilling the spirit of His ways. This contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law connects us to the Gospel lesson, where we will see Jesus' teaching against the falsehoods taught by the Pharisees who embraced the letter of the Law but disregarded the spirit of the Law altogether.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading is, pardon the pun, sandwiched between Jesus' feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:30-34) and His feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:1-10). Just prior to the events in the reading today, Jesus had walked on the water (Mark 6:48) and healed many sick people in the lakeside community of Gennesaret (Mark 6:53-56).

Gospel Reading:

Mark 7:1-23 NAS95 1 The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem, 2 and had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; 4 and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.) 5 The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" 6 And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. 7 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.' 8 "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." 9 He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; 11 but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' 12 you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." 14 After He called the crowd to Him again, He began saying to them, "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. 16 "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." 17 When he had left the crowd and entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. 18 And He said to them, "Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, 19 because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?" (Thus He declared all foods clean.) 20 And He was saying, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, 22 deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. 23 "All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

The scribes and Pharisees formed their own flavor of "Deuteronomy," or second law, not heeding Moses' call we read about in the first reading. As James warned, they were deceived about even doing the works of the Law regarding basic religion including the honoring of the parents, a clear commandment of God (Exodus 20:12). The behaviors associated with basic religion were the things that the Pharisees consciously chose not to do! Because the scribes and Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day, it was vitally important for Jesus to point out the hypocrisy of their ways and to warn people against their bad influence.

There were a few things in this passage that the religious leaders did that were opposing true heart religion. The first was their insistence on having pure hands, but neglecting to have a pure heart. The second was that they had contrived a religious practice that provided a means to neglect financial assistance to their parents by saying those resources were instead given to God ("Corban," v. 11). The scribes' and Pharisees' "traditions" did in fact trump the first Law of God, that given by Moses and taught throughout the first five Books of the Bible. Jesus explained that what defiles a person is not what goes into their body, but it is what comes out of their heart. The uncleanness is already a part of us, it just takes the right variables to have it come out and show itself. The sin-sickness of the human heart is the issue that Jesus wanted them to see, so that they might see turn to Him for healing as the soul physician (Luke 5:31).

The big idea in the reading is the difference between following human traditions and dead religion versus possessing a life-giving relationship with the lover of a believer's soul through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were teaching a false message of salvation by works. Their non-gospel would accord well with the "health and wealth" teachers of today or the tendency to reduce God down to a formula. Either way, these false messages set us up to expect God to act in certain ways based on our good behavior and subtly demand that He hold up His end of the "bargain." Unfortunately, this is a misguided understanding of how to relate to God.

In the opening I mentioned the story of a missionary who walked with God in every way but still experienced tremendous difficulties. As a result of some excellent medical care he was able to receive the liver transplant that he needed to sustain his life. He has recovered and is continuing to serve overseas even in light of the fact that he will remain on rejection drugs and suffer from their side effects for the rest of his life.

I met with Dave recently to discuss what he has learned so far through his experiences. He told me that one of the things that really sustained him was when he called together a group of leaders from his church who prayed over him and anointed him with oil in obedience to what James wrote, "Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Dave said that this really helped him to turn the matter over to God. Second, the church came around him and offered excellent prayer support during his most difficult time. He told me that many people reached out to him and told them that they were praying for him. These things gave him confidence that regardless of what happened it would all be for the glory of God. Interestingly, some of the French people told him everything would turn out okay because, "he was a Christian." These sentiments provided Dave with many teachable moments in which he was able to explain to the people that God allows hardships in the lives of Christians and perhaps even more so than those who don't believe. He knew that

everything ultimately would turn out okay, but that believing in God did not guarantee a good and long-lived life.

As Christians just because we do everything right doesn't mean that we will be blessed in the earthly sense in which we might expect, including material blessings and good health. Instead, God allows challenges in our lives to lead us to a fuller relationship with Him. Our Christian lives are not like baking a cake. We can't just put together the exact right ingredients using a measured formula and follow the recipe exactly and have the cake turn out perfectly well each and every time. Sometimes God throws a monkey wrench into our plans in order to achieve His purposes. What's more, we may not even know or understand these purposes during out natural lifetimes. Unlike the Pharisees who taught salvation by works and outward obedience to their own set of laws, God calls us to walk in faith alone while behaving in ways as directed by the Holy Spirit. This does include closely understanding the biblical principles taught in the New Testament and the Ten Commandments of the Old. But we should not live our lives "formulaically," doing things for God and expecting Him to "bless" us on our terms. He will surely bless us, but His definition of blessing is a lot broader than our limited perspective. May we learn to walk by faith and not our feelings or our sight.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading James said, *27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27)*. This admonition can weigh heavy on the minds of some Christians because they don't often find themselves busy visiting orphans and widows in distress.

A. In what ways do you obey the spirit of James' calling through the activities that you do engage in for God.

B. In what ways can you create connections in your life between the first part of verse 27 (Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress) and the last part (keep oneself unstained by the world)? List at least two ways in which you do.

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

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

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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-25-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass. This week the readings focus upon the theme of God calling people to walk in a personal relationship with Him. In the first reading from Joshua, we see a challenge issued by God to forsake the false gods the people's ancestors served. In the second reading, Saint Paul teaches about the relationship between man and his wife, and the mystery of how this parallels that between the Father and the Son. In the Gospel lesson, we study a story where

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Jesus' followers came to a point of decision concerning His identity as God in the flesh, the promised Messiah, the nature of whom they misunderstood.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Joshua who was the successor to Moses after the Exodus and the one who led the Hebrew people across the Jordan after Moses' death. The reading today provides an overview of the monumental charge from Joshua to serve the One true God.

First Reading:

> *Joshua 24:1-18 NAS95 1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. 2 Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. 3 'Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him through all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac. 4 'To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and to Esau I gave Mount Seir to possess it; but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. 5 'Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt by what I did in its midst; and afterward I brought you out. 6 'I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and Egypt pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. 7 'But when they cried out to the LORD, He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and brought the sea upon them and covered them; and your own eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness for a long time. 8 'Then I brought you into the land of the Amorites who lived beyond the Jordan, and they fought with you; and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land when I destroyed them before you. 9 'Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel, and he sent and summoned Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. 10 'But I was not willing to listen to Balaam. So he had to bless you, and I delivered you from his hand. 11 'You crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho; and the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Girgashite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Thus I gave them into your hand. 12 'Then I sent the hornet before you*

> *and it drove out the two kings of the Amorites from before you, but not by your sword or your bow. 13 'I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.' 14 "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 "If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." 16 The people answered and said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; 17 for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and who did these great signs in our sight and preserved us through all the way in which we went and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. 18 "The LORD drove out from before us all the peoples, even the Amorites who lived in the land. We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God."*

After forty years of wandering in the desert under the leadership of Moses, the people who were still alive migrated across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Upon entering the land, they encountered many obstacles the foremost of which was their immersion into a culture of idolatry which wasn't too different from that which plagued Abraham's father Terah (v. 2). Joshua presented to them the heart of the matter by saying, "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living" or the One true God (v. 15). This was God's call to the people for a relationship with Him, with the terms of this relationship being to serve Him alone and not the gods of the surrounding nations. The people answered that they would indeed serve the Lord God and not the gods of the Amorites.

We know from reading the rest of the Scriptures how short-lived the Hebrew's promise was not to serve other gods and in effect creating a division between the true followers of God and the rest of the people. Because of their disobedience, God later sent foreign nations to invade their land including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and finally the Romans. Joshua was in the first camp, saying "but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (v. 15). As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, Jesus confronts the people with a similar decision. Will they follow Him, or instead follow their religious traditions? Will they follow the Father God, or their father the devil? Will they enter by the narrow road, Jesus, or follow the broad road to destruction (Matthew 7:13)?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Ephesians 5. The context leading up to this passage is a treatise on how Christians should relate to one another. Saint Paul's teaching then zeros in on the model of submission between a husband and his wife, linking this as a reflection of the relationship between God the Son and God the Father, as well the church and Christ.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 5:21-33 NAS95 21 and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. 22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. 28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30 because we are members of His body. 31 FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. 32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.*

The big idea in the reading is the nature of the relationship that exists between the believer and God. In the same way that the Jews in the first reading had a decision to make regarding their spiritual direction, all believers, not just Christian husbands and wives, have to come to grips with their personal relationship to God and how He calls them to live out this relationship with Him. Paul opens the reading by saying that everyone (married, unmarried, widows, and widowers) must "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (v. 21). This is the foundational concept upon which he builds his explanation of biblical submission between and woman and her husband, which parallels the mysterious relationship that exists between Jesus and the Father (v. 32). Because "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28), we too are to serve others in mutual submission to God ("in the fear of Christ," v. 21). This includes not only wives serving their husbands, but husbands serving their wives and everyone serving each other in the church family. For Paul said in 1 Corinthians, "But now there are many members, but one body" (1 Corinthians 12:21).

Continuing upon the relational concept in the reading, Paul described how the husband is the visible leader of the family by using the word translated "head" (v. 23), which in the original Greek connoted "something that can be seen and taken a hold of." The idea is that the wife is to voluntarily place herself under the leadership of her husband. In the same way that Jesus is equal to God the Father but with different in His role, so the wife is equal in status to her husband, but in a different. Jesus' submission to the Father does not make Him inferior (Philippians 2:6-11), only obedient. So, too, the wife's submission to her husband in the Lord does not make her inferior to her husband, but it does allow her to be obedient to God. This model of the harmonious union between one man and one woman goes all the way back to the Book of Genesis: "FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH" (v. 31). The unity between the man and the woman in marriage parallels the mysterious relationship between Christ and the church (v. 32). The Bible is clear that both the man and woman are called to be in mutual submission to God, while the woman is to submit to her husband and the man to God as the final authority. The man is called by God to be the visible ruler of the family by first separating himself from the headship of his own father (v. 31). This is the man's conscious point of decision to leave his earthly father and join with his wife in a new relationship that leads to unity under his Father God. It's as if God tells the man, choose whom you will serve.

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see how Jesus' teaching of the crowds resulted in their coming to their own point of decision regarding whom they would serve.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's reading from John marks an important point in his Gospel concerning a point of decision and division. The reading contains the famous John 6:66 passage, the numbering of which brings with it the idea of the mark of the Antichrist, the great divider who is to come in the future who will separate the true believers from among everyone in the world. The concept comes from the Book of Revelation. *"16 And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, 17 and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. 18 Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six"* (Revelation 13:16-18). In the End Times, the people will be given one final choice regarding who they will serve. At this point, God will make a clear division between the followers of God and the only other choice, the followers of the AntiChrist. In the Gospel reading, Jesus' teaching reaches a similar climax in which Jesus calls the people to a personal relationship with Him. Although they are not outright called to decide to which camp they belong, a clear division occurs beginning in John

6:66 which begins the separation of the wheat and the chaff (Matthew 3:12). God uses these moments of decision to reveal His true followers such as the occasion in which Saint Paul stated, "For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Gospel Reading:

> *John 6:60-69 NAS95 60 Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" 61 But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble? 62 What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. 65 And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." 66 As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. 67 So Jesus said to the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" 68 Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. 69 We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."*

This story in John marked the beginning of several such points of decision in which the people were challenged to choose between the ways of God by following Jesus or the ways of man by following a false religion and their own traditions. In this reading, the people came to the point of decision when they had heard Jesus' prior statements about Him being the "bread which came down from heaven" (John 6:58). The conflict that the people had with Jesus that caused their grumbling (John 6:43) was that they were familiar with Jesus' father Joseph and also his mother (John 6:42). Jesus was calling Himself God, and since they knew his earthly parents, they reasoned that He could not be God. The people also misunderstood the nature of the Messiah because just a few verses later they said, "However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from" (John 7:27). This point of division continued into the group of His twelve disciples, for Jesus knew that one of them (Judas) had already separated himself from Him. The grumbling of the larger group of disciples then resulted in a separation of the true followers of God and everyone else. As this separation occurred, Jesus presented to the twelve a challenge causing Peter to take a stand for Jesus, affirming everything that Jesus had been saying about Himself. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God" (vv. 68-69).

This passage teaches us that belief in Jesus is the way to eternal life. Some of the Jews were offended that Jesus, a mere man in their eyes, would claim to be God. However, if He was the Messiah, then His demand for their belief and loyalty was justified. In some sense, everyone has to come to terms with Jesus' claim to be the only way to eternal life. Some will be like the offended Jews, who stumbled over what they saw as far-fetched claims and rejected Jesus' lordship over their lives. But others respond like Peter and say: "Lord" (which is a good way to start a sentence when you are talking to God in the flesh). . . "You have the words of eternal life" (vv. 68-69). May we continue to believe in Christ as Lord and let Him work in us the type of life that leads to eternity with the Father.

One day while I was driving, I happened upon a man walking in the afternoon along the road who seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. He was wearing black wingtip shoes, which kind of stuck out to me. I had never seen this particular man before. My spirit prompted me to pull beside him and offer him a ride, which he gladly accepted. He told me that his bicycle had broken down and that he was on his way to work at the local supermarket. I encountered this man several times over the course of the next few months and each time he presented himself in such a kind, godly way that I actually began to think that he was an angel. As he found out more about my faith, he began to praise and glorify God for all that He had done in my life. Perhaps it was because I didn't know him very well, but each time we met I sensed his close relationship with God. It also helped that his real name was Angelo! It wasn't until I met his wife that I finally understood he really was just a man (see Matthew 22:30).

After several encounters with Angelo, it really got me thinking about how **I** come across to the random people that I meet. Does my public persona match how I come across to people personally? How about my persona on Facebook; does it match what I truly believe? Considering Facebook, it seems to me to be okay to post that you are attending a Saturday afternoon wine tasting session; however, it is problematic when all that a person posts is about food and wine.

Like Angelo, when people meet us we should exhibit the markings of a follower of Jesus Christ. Which path are you **continuing** to choose in your daily walk with God? Joshua said in the first reading, "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD," "choose for yourselves today whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:14, 15b). Paul said in the second reading to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 51), a behavior which can only be done through the empowerment of God's Holy Spirit as a new creation in Christ. Finally, Jesus said, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" (John 6:67b). Each day we have to choose the forsake "Egypt" and choose the pathway to walk with God. Although we make certain bad choices at times that

dishonor God, the Scripture says that "if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Reflection Questions

1. What have been some of the turning points in your life, especially as you consider your relationship with God? How have you turned from being offended by Christ's radical call on your life to a place of surrender and submission to His lordship? Are there areas of your life that you are still wrestling for control? How might these passages help you to surrender anew to His lordship?

2. If someone watched your life, choices and attitudes, to whom or what would they attribute your devotion, worship and loyalty? What things would they see to show them that you are choosing this day (and every day) to serve the Lord? What things would give a conflicted and confusing message to them of your heart's true home?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 08-18-2024

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

The Book of Psalms provides us with an insight concerning wisdom. Psalm 119:102-104 says:

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I have not turned aside from Your ordinances, For You Yourself have taught me. How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! From Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way.

First Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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Second Reading:

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

The "therefore" refers to the fact that as believers in the Lord Jesus we are "children of the light" (Ephesians 5:8b-c) who were formerly in darkness (v. 8a). Since we are children of the light, we are to produce fruit in keeping with the light, "for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth" (v. 9). Though we live in evil times (days, v. 16b) we are called as believers to be good stewards of the light that we have through our knowledge of God's word in the Bible. Our understanding of the Bible is how we know God's will (v. 17b). We must let worldly things like wine get in the way of our walking in the truth of the Lord (v. 18), for being drunk is the behavior of the sin darkened unbelievers. One of the ways in which we can express our love for God and also to grow in the knowledge of Him is through "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (v. 19). God also calls us to be thankful for the things that God has bestowed upon us (v. 20).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *John 6:51-58 NAS95 51 "I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is*

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

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

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

As Jesus continued His teaching, He began to move deeply in the hearts of the crowd causing them to move closer to the point of decision that we will see next week in John 6:66. In the reading today, Jesus once again used the "I am" phrase, something which His hearers would have understood as a claim to divinity. Jesus told the crowd at least one year before His final Passover meal at what we call the "Last Supper" that it wasn't the bread that would save them, but rather their belief in Him. The manna in the Exodus was something created divinely by God which fell from the sky at night for the Hebrews to collect each day (except on the Sabbath). Even though this special "bread" came directly from God, those that ate this physical provision from God, still died physically (v. 58b). In

contrast, those that "feed" upon Jesus are the ones that believe in Him as the Messiah, which is the only way to eternal life (John 14:6). If we read a few verses later in this section, Jesus explained the spiritual analogy He used by calling Himself the bread of God. He said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life" (John 6:63). The people misunderstood His spiritual metaphor and stumbled upon His identity as the one and only Messiah of God.

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Describe in what ways Jesus was truly wisdom personified, taking into account the relationship between the words of Jesus in the Bible and the person of Jesus?

2. The Gospel reading followed a series of miracles that Jesus performed for the crowd including the multiplying of the loaves and fishes. Yet we know that many of the people in the crowd did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah (John 6:66). What miracles from Jesus have you experienced in your

own life? Why are your experiences different from the people in the Gospel narrative?