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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 01-05-2020



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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

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

Second Reading:

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

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

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted (Romans 11:17) into the people of God through the Church. It is important to understand, at least from a high level, Paul's background while we discuss this mystery which was revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who from all accounts would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strictly Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness

of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v.2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v.3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for November 2, 2013. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to

bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

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

follow His revelation about Jesus and when we do our response is joy, worship and giving.

Reflection Questions

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

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



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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we see how God protected the holy family of Jesus and how this reveals God's love and concern for us in our own Christian lives.

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

1SIR 3:2-6, 12-14

God sets a father in honor over his children;

a mother's authority he confirms over her sons.

Whoever honors his father atones for sins,

and preserves himself from them.

When he prays, he is heard;

he stores up riches who reveres his mother.

Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children,

and, when he prays, is heard.

Whoever reveres his father will live a long life;

he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother.

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

grieve him not as long as he lives.

Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him;

revile him not all the days of his life;

kindness to a father will not be forgotten,

firmly planted against the debt of your sins

—a house raised in justice to you.

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

Introduction to the Second Reading

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

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

Second Reading:

> *Colossians 3:12-21 NAS95 12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. 18 Wives, be subject to your*

> *husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. 20 Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart.*

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

Omitted Verses (16-18):

16 Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. 17 Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: 18 "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."

*19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord *appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, 20 "Get up, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel; for those who sought the Child's life are dead." 21 So Joseph got up, took the Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Then after being warned by God in a dream, he left for the regions of Galilee, 23 and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene."*

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

The big ideas in the reading is how God sovereignly protected Jesus, how He used his angelic beings to guide and direct Jesus' earthly parents, and the extent to which the evil rulers of the age attempted to exterminate Messiah Jesus. No plans of God could be foiled in bringing about Jesus as the supreme sacrifice for the people sin. Joseph and Mary obediently followed the directions given to them by God through angels and dreams. Finally, ever last bit of prophecy written about Jesus in the Old Testament was fulfilled.

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

2. Will you commit to telling someone your story about God protected you or someone else?

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



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

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

John the Baptist's pronouncement of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

Isaiah revealed some important truths about the source of the Messiah, the nature of the Messiah, and the nature of his future "millennial" kingdom on earth. Isaiah said that Jesus would come from the line of Jesse (v.1), who was King David's father. He said that He would possess the "Spirit of the

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

> *4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; 6 that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO THEE AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO THY NAME." 10 And again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." 11 And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." 12 And again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." (Romans 15:4-12)*

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!'" 4 Now John himself had a garment of camel's hair, and a leather belt about his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea, and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance; 9 and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 And the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 And His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:1-12)*

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

   7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. 8 Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Be hospitable to one another without complaint. 10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the

> *manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:7-11)*

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

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The Bible teaches throughout both the Old and New

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

> *1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.*
>
> *Omitted Verses:*
>
> *3 You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children*

> *to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." Malachi 4:1-6 NASB (Malachi 3:19-24 in the Lectionary).*

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

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

in a machine shop.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." 7 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" 8 And He said, "See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is near'. Do not go after them. 9 When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." 10 Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, 11 and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. 16 But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, 17 and you will be hated by all because of My name. 18 Yet not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:5-19*

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

period, according to Jesus, will include, 1. The appearance of false Christs (v.8), 2. Wars, earthquakes, and famines all over the earth (vv. 9-11), and 3. Persecution of believers for Jesus' name (vv. 13-19.

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

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you almost faced the Lord? Were you a believer in the Lord Jesus when this happened? If you were, did the event lead you to a closer walk with Jesus? In what ways was it possible that this event was a means of God's judgment in such a way as to draw you closer to Him?

2. In our modern age we have often compartmentalized our lives thinking that worship belongs to Sunday while work is a Monday to Friday kind of thing. Have you ever considered your work as a form of worship? As we saw in the second reading, Saint Paul calls us to emulate his godly behavior in working without being a burden on others while continuing to serve without an expectation of reward. In what ways can you reconsider your work life as worship? How would taking on this new mindset help you to A. Relate to others at your workplace, B. Have a more

accurate view of your service to God even if you are not engaged in full time ministry?

Going Deeper

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

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I made a turn on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board which sent it flying one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile that same large wave crashed on top of me with my sail! I let loose of the sail and soon realized that I was drowning. I quickly noticed that I was unable to float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves and soon got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air in between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray. As I continued fighting I had a strange realization and began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real, and is difficult to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me. Yet I continued to fight and pray.

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

My story ended well. Somehow, I came to realize that if I pulled on my wet suit, I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. Against all odds I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot long mast with a flag attached. Between the huge waves I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my

board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and eventually someone riding a jet ski spotted me and came over and yanked me out of the water. As I walked back up the beach, I praised God, and someone offered me a ride in their truck so I could hurry back to tell my brother the amazing story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition. Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario I had my first meal as a truly "born from above" man.

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

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about how believers can be comforted

through hard times as well as some insights into God's eternal kingdom he has prepared for us. We see that in the first reading from the Apocryphal book of Second Maccabees, then again in 2 Thessalonians.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

It happened that seven brothers with their mother were arrested

and tortured with whips and scourges by the king,

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

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

"What do you expect to achieve by questioning us?

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

At the point of death he said:

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

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

It is for his laws that we are dying."

After him the third suffered their cruel sport.

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

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

"It was from Heaven that I received these;

for the sake of his laws I disdain them;

from him I hope to receive them again."

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

because he regarded his sufferings as nothing.

After he had died,

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

When he was near death, he said,

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

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

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

2 MC 7:1-2, 9-14

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

times of suffering.

Second Reading:

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Luke chapter 20 and provides some very important insights into to the nature of God's eternal kingdom. Let me provide some historical background to help you to understand Luke's message. First, although the concept may seem strange to us today, the Sadducees argument related to the Jewish legal concept known as Levirate Marriage found in Deuteronomy 25:5. "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her." The

usefulness of Levirate Marriage in that society was something that we saw wonderfully displayed in the life of Ruth found in the Old Testament Book of the same name. Boaz, said, "Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birth place; you are witnesses today" (Ru 4:10). Levirate Marriage provided an important means of insuring the continuance of a family line. Ruth's marriage to Boaz was ***extremely*** important to God because it was through Ruth that Jesus was born! "Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse" (Mt 1:5).

Second, The Sadducees were an interesting bunch of legalistic Jewish believers who held the majority power in the religious court authority called the Sanhedrin in First Century Israel. They held different beliefs than the other group called the Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in the afterlife, and only held the first five Books of the Bible to be authoritative. This last thing led them to hold some unusual beliefs since they didn't have the benefit of the vast array of historical or prophetic Books in the Old Testament Bible through which to properly interpret the Jewish Law. With this background in mind let's take a deeper look at the Gospel text.

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

- Marriage is a valid paradigm for this age but not in the one to come.
- In order to receive eternal life, one must be considered worthy. How does one become worthy of life after death? He states they must be "sons of God" (v.36). How does one become a son on God? Jesus said in the Gospel of John, Chapter 20:31-32, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this Book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30-31). Also, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live even if he dies" (John 11:25).
- We will not experience death in the life to come. There we will be like angels in that we no

longer will have the capacity to die. We will be eternal, and in that regard, will be like God. "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1John 3:2).

- Sons of God are the sons of the resurrection. God's resurrection life lives in us, making us like Him. The Apostle Peter said, "For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (2 Peter 1:4).
- Jesus pointed to the Old Testament Pentateuch, which was the only piece of the Bible in which the Sadducees believed, to prove His point about the resurrection. Jesus said that since Moses used the present tense in describing the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this proved from the Sadducees own Holy Scriptures that there is life after death on earth. Checkmate, game over!

Gospel Reading:

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

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

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to

> *be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:13-19)*

Even though the Sadducees only believed that they would go around once in life, they believed in the biblical truths from the Old Testament Pentateuch. Jesus showed them that they were responsible for their actions in this life. Jesus graciously taught them through their own Scriptures that their eternal destiny was a direct result of their choices made during their lives. They were responsible for paying careful attention to the walk with God. Jesus said, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). Believers are transformed through the resurrection into a "world" that is also transformed, a place where sin no longer exists and God will walk among us. As believers, we can look forward to eternal life with God through the promises made by Jesus that "we are saved by grace through faith and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

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

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



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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Wisdom.

> *Before the LORD the whole universe is as a grain from a balance*
>
> *or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth.*
>
> *But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things;*
>
> *and you overlook people's sins that they may repent.*
>
> *For you love all things that are*
>
> *and loathe nothing that you have made;*

for what you hated, you would not have fashioned.

And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it;

or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you?

But you spare all things, because they are yours,

O LORD and lover of souls,

for your imperishable spirit is in all things!

Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little,

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

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

Wisdom WIS 11:22-12:2

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

It was a very windy midsummer day in northern Michigan as I raced my windsurf board across the Straits of Mackinaw on my way back from Mackinaw Island, Michigan. Earlier, I sailed between the towers of the mighty Mackinaw Bridge and then returned to the shore of Lake Huron to make a few adjustments on my sail. Next, I sailed seven miles across the Straits to Mackinaw Island and was on my way back towards the campground where we were staying. At this point the wind began calming and shifting in a direction that was going to make it very difficult to return to the spot from where I had launched. Eventually I made it back to the sandy shore on Lake Huron, but was a few miles down from where I launched. I walked up the hill, borrowed a cell phone from someone, and called my wife to pick me up. I heard a strange silence on the other end and she said, "You're alive!" As it turned out someone had given some bad information to the police who then called the Coast Guard

thinking that I had gone down somewhere in the Straits. This led to a series of cascading events including a large manhunt with a helicopter, rescue divers, and local police operating from a command center in a marina in Mackinaw City. Evidently, a fellow camper had been watching me from the shore and at some point, she couldn't locate me. She then proceeded to tell one of the authorities at the campground who then called the police. The police then alerted the Coast Guard and the manhunt was on! The whole affair began by one piece of bad information. [*If you are interested you can read the story online here:*

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

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

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

Second Reading:

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

> *that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (2 THES 1:11-2: 12 NIV)*

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

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

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

> *John 3:16-21 NIV 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke 23:32-43 NIV 32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals– one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 35 The

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John 3:3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless

> *he is born again."*

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-27-2019

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

First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

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

nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds,

judges justly and affirms the right,

and the Lord will not delay.

SIR 35:12-14, 16-18

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Skipped verses (9-15): Personal Remarks

9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

> *16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

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

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

Although verses 9-15 are skipped in the Mass Reading, they are important for establishing Paul as a real person with real relationships, in real messes, expressing real faith. The application for us is that we can be encouraged to know that real Christians have real struggles with circumstances and people that our out of our control, but are very much still under God's control.

The last section tells how Paul got through his struggles and the open opposition he felt against the

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

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Then the terror hit me. I had forgotten to cancel my flight plan with air traffic control! As I frantically called air control on my cell phone I knew that I was in a lot of trouble. I knew that since this was a flight performed under instrument flight regulations that once I did not report on the ground after a few minutes of signing off from the in-flight air traffic control that search and rescue procedures would have been initiated immediately. The flight service station answered on the first ring and I explained that I had made a huge mistake and had forgotten to cancel my flight plan. In

my state of utter shock, I begged for forgiveness and prayed at the same time. The controller explained that the sheriff had indeed been called and had launched a search for the plane. The first place that they looked was in the aircraft parking area where they had already located my plane safely tied down. I knew that I deserved punishment since the typical response to such an infraction would be at a minimum the suspension of my license for a period along with a hefty fine. But the controller said, "Never mind, it's OK. We are just glad that you are safe. Have a good evening." [If you are interested in reading the whole story, I wrote about it **here**.]

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

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

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

Gospel Reading:

> *9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*
>
> *14 I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 18:9-14 NIV*

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

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

One of the defining doctrines of the New Testament is justification by faith and not by works. The topic of justification is found this in verse 14, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home *justified* before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The key word is "justified." This word in the New Testament is a legal term that means "a declaration of one to be innocent or just." A way to remember the biblical application of the word "justified" is the phrase, "Just as if I'd never sinned." When a person is declared just in the eyes of God, they are considered righteous such that they don't receive their rightful *penalty* for their sin. The source of a believer's righteousness is foreign, which means that it doesn't come from any of their own works or self-perceived goodness. God's righteousness can only come through the gateway of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. God has declared the

universality of sin. Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He explained further in Romans that the proper payment for a life of sin was death, meaning eternal separation from God. However, with this bad news he also brought good news, literally the word in the New Testament translated as "Gospel." "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Paul explains that faith in Jesus is the mechanism through which the gift of eternal life is imparted to the believer. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Good works are important in serving the Lord and provide evidence of salvation, but they are not the *source* of our justification. Righteous standing before God can only be granted by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

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

Reflection Questions

1. Justification through faith in God's grace is an important concept. Summarize your understanding of what justification means, why it is necessary for salvation and how one can be assured of their just standing before the LORD.

2. If you recognize that you, like the Pharisee, have been trusting in your good works to get you into right standing before God, take a moment and confess this wrong attitude in your heart to the LORD. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleans us from all unrighteousness."

3. Review the bullet points about biblical Christianity from the discussion on the second reading. Which of the points address a specific question, concern or fear of your life? How does this truth provide you with comfort, hope or direction?

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4. In what real relationships and real messes are you finding it hard to exercise real faith? How can Paul's example of fighting the good fight, longing for the appearing of the Lord, and forgiving those who hurt him be an inspiration for you? Take a moment and talk to the Lord about your situation. Ask him to stand by your side and give you strength, so that you too might say—"To him be glory for ever and ever"!

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

> *had been immediately healed. 48 And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." (Luke 8:43-48 NASB)*

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

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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The woman in Luke 8 was a person who turned to Jesus in faith. Another great person of faith in the Bible was Moses. The Scripture says that he, "chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Hebrews 11:25). Let's move to the first reading to see an instance of how this godly man prevailed through a close walk with God in prayer. The context was a battle with the Amalekites just after God's provision of manna for food and water from a rock in the Wilderness of Sin, an appropriate title for the way the people had been behaving! "Why now have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst" (v. 3)? Did the Hebrew exiles really believe that God didn't know that they needed water to drink and for their animals?

First Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 18:1-8 NIV 1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" 6 And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"*

Let us back up a bit and briefly look at how Jesus taught using parables. His method for teaching through this genre was to provide a simple story in order to illustrate a significant spiritual truth. We have to be careful to try to make a parable "walk on all fours." Instead, our objective must be to search for the single intended meaning. There may be multiple applications in our lives with the single meaning gleaned from the parable. In this particular story, Jesus made it very easy for us in that he stated the spiritual meaning before he told the story. "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable

to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (v.1). Jesus call was to be persistent in prayer while waiting on God's timing. The theological application of this spiritual truth was that God is faithful by teaching us the necessity of prayer.

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

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

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

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

> that God has called us to use our talents and ingenuity in order to lead people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Pray and ask God to energize your prayer life through the use of your time, talents, and materials possessions. This includes using our technological devices like smart phones and computers.

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

Reflection Questions

1. Ask God to reveal to you the spiritually lost people in your life. Who are the lost causes in your life whom only God could change? Write down their names and as God leads pray for them like the persistent widow.
2. We said that prayer and reading of the Bible are the two main ways in which we communicate with God. What are some others ways that God communicates with us?

Going Deeper:

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

Recommended Readings on Prayer:

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

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

"Prayer" by Ole Hallesby (Augsburg, 1994)

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-13-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The week in the Gospel reading we will discuss the topic of faith through the story of the ten lepers Jesus healed on His way through Samaria. This week I include in the addendum to the story some teaching on how to find God's will.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading today is from the Book of Second Kings and is the story of the foreign warrior Naaman's miraculous healing from leprosy. Leprosy is a disfiguring and possibly fatal skin disease that plagued the ancient world. The cause was only discovered in the late 1800's as certain bacteria. A cure was developed after 1940 and subsequent resistant to the treatment required the development of new therapies that only became available in the 1980's. The Jewish Law contains very detailed procedures (Leviticus 13 and 14) for dealing with those afflicted or possibly afflicted with leprosy. A portion of Leviticus 13 is as follows.

> *Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests. And the priest shall look at the mark on the skin of the body, and if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is an infection of*

> *leprosy; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the bright spot is white on the skin of his body, and it does not appear to be deeper than the skin, and the hair on it has not turned white, then the priest shall isolate him who has the infection for seven days. And the priest shall look at him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the infection has not changed, and the infection has not spread on the skin, then the priest shall isolate him for seven more days." (Leviticus 13:1-5 NASB)*

The text continues for many verses. It is very significant that nowhere in this chapter or anywhere in the Bible does it say that leprosy could be treated or cured outside of a miracle. Once it was determined a person had leprosy, they were pronounced unclean. "And the priest shall look, and if the scab has spread on the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprosy" (v.8). Once the pronouncement of being unclean was made another whole set of Laws kicked in. They would have been considered ceremonially unclean but also physically unclean and as such would have been subject to quarantine which meant that they would have to live outside of the city. Lepers were required to live alone and announce to everyone, "Unclean! Unclean!" (v. 46) while they were still at a distance. Some lepers in Syria were evidently treated differently as we will see in the case of Naaman in the first reading today from 2 Kings. Naaman, perhaps because of his position as a valiant warrior, wasn't quarantined and forced to live outside the city gate.

Since today's reading is the climax of the story, here are the events leading up to that point. "Now Naaman, captain of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man with his master, and highly respected, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man was also a valiant warrior, but he was a leper" (2 Kings 5:1). The context is that Naaman was instructed by the Prophet Elisha, a renowned man of God, to go and wash seven times in the Jordan for the purpose of being cured of his leprosy. The whole idea of the healing began through the plea of a little Israeli girl that had been taken captive and had become a servant to Naaman's wife. This little girl, someone who was on the bottom rung of the social ladder, told her master about Elisha and that he could cure his leprosy. "And she said to her mistress, 'I wish that my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! Then he would cure him of his leprosy.'"(v. 3). This little Israeli child believed that Elisha could heal her master's husband Naaman. Next the King of Aram sent a letter along with a large sum of money to the King of Israel King Jehoram, and he made the arrangements for Elisha to intervene on Naaman's behalf.

Now, let's read the first reading for today which is the story of the healing of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:14-17.

First Reading:

> *2 Kings 5:14-17 NASB 14 So he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child and he was clean. 15 When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, "Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now." 16 But he said, "As the Lord lives, before whom I stand, I will take nothing." And he urged him to take it, but he refused. 17 Naaman said, "If not, please let your servant at least be given two mules' load of earth; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering nor will he sacrifice to other gods, but to the Lord.*

It is likely that Naaman expected something of a royal treatment when he arrived in Israel for his healing appointment since he came with a large sum of money and a letter from a very important foreign king. Perhaps he expected a religious ceremony with the waving of hands, pronouncements made to a god, animal sacrifices and whatever else would have been the norm back in Aram. Naaman was likely very surprised when he was instructed to go wash in the swirling, swift waters of the Jordan. "What good would that do," he may have thought. Nevertheless, he responded in faith and began the baptismal process as instructed by Elisha. One dip, two dips, three, four. On he went. He could have stopped at that point but being a warrior, he was probably good at following instruction. Five, six, and finally seven. Whoosh, he came up out of the water and was healed! Naaman responded in faith by following Elisha's instructions and God provided the miracle of healing.

The New Testament says in the Book of First John:

14 And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. 15 And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him (1 John 5:14-15).

Meditate upon this for a moment. If we ask anything according to God's will He hears, and we may have confidence that our prayer will be answered. God's answer may be yes, no, or wait. But we, like Elisha, and even a person outside of the Jewish race like Naaman, may have faith that our prayers will be answered. However, how do *we* know God's will? We will examine that in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's study.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from 2 Timothy 2:8-13 in which we find a call to walk in faith. Paul continues his instructions to young Timothy concerning critical matters of the Christian faith.

Second Reading:

> *2 Timothy 2:8-13 NASB 8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. 10 For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. 11 It is a trustworthy statement:*
>
> *For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; 12 If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*

The "trustworthy statement" at the end was the basis for a hymn in the early church and is a an excellent verse which to memorize. "For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; 12 If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." The statement is in the form of a series of cause and effect phrases:

If we died with him, meaning that we are born from above spiritually (John 3:3) through belief in Jesus, **then** we participate in the life of Jesus through his Holy Spirit living in us.

If we endure **then** we reign with him. This has the sense of "already, not yet." We enter the kingdom of heaven through belief and are born from above as found in John 3:3, "You must be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven." Therefore, in a sense we reign as a believer on earth. Yet we will reign with Jesus in the future when we go to heaven, this is the sense of "not yet."

If we deny him **then** he will deny us, meaning that we are free to reject his free gift of eternal life (Ephesians 2:8-9).

If we are faithless **then** Jesus remains faithful because it is a logical impossibility for Him to neglect someone who belongs to him.

The big idea in this text is that perseverance isn't an option but is a quality of a true believer.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context and background of the reading from Luke 17 is that that Jesus was traveling through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. Along the way, he encountered a group of ten lepers and at least one of them was a Samaritan. There are two cultural conflicts in this story that would have created tension in the minds of the Jewish disciples of Jesus. First, there is the whole issue of leprosy as we discussed in 2 Kings. Second, there is the issue of the Samaritan race. These were inhabitants in the

region of the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. This mixed race consisted of two groups; the first was foreign immigrants brought there from the Assyrian empire after the deportation of the Jews to Assyria in 722 BC. The second group was those Jews left behind during that Assyrian invasion. Over the centuries, these groups intermarried in defiance of the Jewish Law and adopted their own unique worship practices. The Samaritans were considered "half breeds" and therefore unclean according to Jewish Law. They had 800 years to develop aberrant theology. Jews that needed to journey through this region would often go many miles out of their way to avoid them.

Gospel Reading:

> *11 While He was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As He entered a village, ten leprous men who stood at a distance met Him; 13 and they raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" 14 When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they were going, they were cleansed. 15 Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God with a loud voice, 16 and he fell on his face at His feet, giving thanks to Him. And he was a Samaritan. 17 Then Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? 18 Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19 And He said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has made you well." Luke 17:11-19 NASB*

It seems that this group of lepers had heard about Jesus' miraculous ability to heal. The ten men set out with some amount of faith that they would be healed because as we saw in the Law they could only present themselves to the priests *after* they had been healed. Next, the men were healed as they walked on their way to wherever the priests were located. At least one of them was a Samaritan, considered a half-breed and unclean by the Jews. A person with leprosy would have been on the lowest rung of the social scale and a Samaritan man with leprosy on the absolute bottom. It seems possible that the other nine men were more concerned about restoration of their social standing in the community and keeping the Jewish Law than in returning to thank Jesus for the miracle. The officials in the synagogue would have been very surprised to meet ten men who had been healed from leprosy. Even though the Law contained provisions for the procedures to be taken in such a case it's almost certain that none of the priests would have encountered anyone that had ever been healed from that awful disease.

However, one man, a Samaritan, turned back to thank Jesus. It's very likely, as in the other cases of Jesus healing people, that Jesus healed more than just this man's physical condition. This person seems to have received salvation and healing, evidenced by his "glorifying God with a loud voice" (v. 15c). His natural response to this gift that he knew could only have come from God was to praise Him! This is what set him apart from the other nine. He evidently had no other choice than to turn

around and praise God for this mighty miracle. His heart and his body had been healed and his natural reaction was praise.

There are three key points of this Gospel teaching. First, Jesus isn't a respecter of persons, he offers saving faith to anyone from any race or position of life, even those at the very lowest position on the social scale like the Samaritan lepers. Second, if we expect God to act, we must ask in faith and then walk according to God's instructions. For us, God's instructions are primarily contained in His Word, the Bible. We should only trust our conscience if it aligns with the will of God revealed in biblical absolutes and principles. We may obtain verification of our intended decision through godly counsel. Finally, we are called to consider all that God has done for us and to praise Him! Our rightful response any time we consider all that God has provided for us should be praise. The outward manifestation of the inward reality of faith is glorifying God.

Reflection Questions

1. Consider this key point: Jesus offers saving faith to everyone.

    A. If we are going to live like Jesus, consider the society and socioeconomic strata of the region where you live. What are two groups of people that are on the lowest rung of society, the Samaritan lepers of the age?

    B. While I was in middle school, I succumbed to peer pressure, looked down upon and said mean things to a certain unattractive, poor girl in our class. I began to call her names without regard to her feelings. At some point, our paths diverged, and I moved on with my life of college and a new career as an engineer. In my middle thirties God began working on my heart to look up this woman and apologize to her. With the advent of the Internet, the task was quite easy so I connected with her on Facebook and begged for her forgiveness. I was pleased to find out that she was a Christian and was willing to forgive me! As I looked back, I wish that I had the insight to "adopt" this woman as my friend. After thinking about her, I issued this challenge to my nephew. I challenged him to think about some unfortunate classmate that he had been looking down on, picking on, or others were doing such things. I asked him to set down his pride and come alongside that person as a friend.

Is there someone that needs you as a friend?

2. Consider this key point: If we expect God to act, we must act in faith and the walk according to God's instructions.

    A. In what areas of your life and you being called to exercise faith?

    B. What biblical instructions do you need to obey in order to walk in faith?

3. Consider this key point: Praise is the outward manifestation of the inward reality of faith.

A. Make a list of some of the way in which God has worked on your behalf.

B. Thank Him for these things and share your praise with others.

Going Deeper

It was a dark, moonless night as I looked around my campsite out in the middle of a forest in an area known to have a decent population of bears. I had driven up to the north country to get away from the city in order to come to an important decision about a sense that God was calling me into ministry. How could I make this life changing decision in light of all of the obstacles that I faced?

Back in 2004, I sensed that God was placing a calling upon my life to enter the ministry. I began a period of intense prayer and fasting. The Bible was full of biblical principles which I seemed to meet (see 1 Timothy 3) that I found through my own Bible study and the reading of the book "Decision Making and the Will of God" by Maxson and Friesen (which I recommend). Though the biblical principles were clear regarding this I met with several Christian men with whom I had been close to over the recent years. They agreed to pray about it and counsel me. God had been orchestrating my circumstances by bringing a clear exit to me at my work. The company at which I worked had just lost a major contract and was being forced to cut back. After much debate and prayer, I decided to make some applications at various seminaries in the region. I continued in prayer and fasting, and was accepted at two seminaries. Then the day came to make a decision. I wish I could say that I had the peace of God in my life at that point, but I was pretty entangled in the world. I owned a house in a large city and an airplane that I needed to sell. Going to seminary meant moving to a different state several hundred miles away. In desperation, I packed up my truck and headed out to camp in the forest a couple of hundred miles north, completely away from civilization. It was a moonless, overcast night and if I didn't have a flashlight I could have easily become separated from my campsite if I wandered away very far. The threat of running into a bear was running through my mind as well. As I sat around my campfire that night without all of the distractions of the city, I came to an amazing realization. The door was open either way; the decision was up to me! At that point, I just weighed my options and decided on the most prudent course of action. Once I made up my mind doors began opening and I began to sense that I was walking in God's will. *I had the peace of God after studying the counsel of God, listening to the people of God and the circumstances from God*.

Here are some general principles for finding God's will.* These boil down to studying the counsel of God found in the Bible (absolutes and principles), seeking feedback from the people of God, and finally, discerning the circumstances from God that leads to the peace of God.

1. First, study the Bible and determine if any **biblical absolutes** apply regarding your decision. This would include things like do not lie, kill, steal, or commit adultery. If the insight you were seeking from God was regarding whether you should burn a copy of a music CD for a friend,

there is a clear biblical absolute prohibiting this action (i.e. do not steal).

2. Second, study the Bible and locate any **biblical principles** that cast light upon your decision. This includes things such as God's calling to fulfill the Great Commission by witnessing to nonbelievers and "discipling" believers (Matthew 28:16-20). An example in this second category could deal with a decision to break away from a healthy group of believers because of conviction or some sin in our life. This would result in us becoming more of a lone wolf Christian in contradiction to a principle in the Bible not to forsake the assembling of ourselves (Hebrews 10:25).
3. The third step in determining God's will is often the consideration of **godly counsel**, the people of God. Have you been willing to meet with another believer and subject yourself to their evaluation of the matter under consideration? Perhaps you would consider taking up the matter with a parish counsel of other spiritual body of elders to help you to determine God's will concerning a certain matter.
4. The final step in the decision-making process is the **confirmation and peace of God**. Although this is not a hard and fast rule, the peace of God generally comes only after the consideration of two things, personal circumstances and godly counsel.

[*Adapted from resources found at Discipleship Tape Ministries (dtm.org).]

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-06-2019

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



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn from Habakkuk how the people can God can persevere through suffering. We learn about the importance of using our spiritual gifts and the spreading the true doctrine of God in the second reading. In the Gospel lesson we study three short lessons from Jesus on discipleship.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Habakkuk, like Amos that we looked at last week, was a minor prophet, meaning his writings were shorter than the ones who are called the major prophets. The overall theme of the book is how the people of God are to persist during their suffering by focusing upon Him. He wrote a bit later than Amos, in the late seventh century BC (610 – 605 BC). This was after the Assyrians had already taken the Northern Kingdom of Israel into captivity in 722 BC and just before the Southern Kingdom first fell to the Babylonians in three waves beginning in 605 BC. The context is very important to understand because the Babylonian army was soon to begin their conquest of Jerusalem, the holy city of the southern kingdom of Judah. The prophet cried out to God, "How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save" (Habakkuk 1:2). The Book records God's answer to his plea.

First Reading:

> *Habakkuk 1:2-3 NAS95 2 How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save. 3 Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises.*

> *2:2-4 2 Then the LORD answered me and said, "Record the vision And inscribe it on tablets, That the one who reads it may run. 3 For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. 4 Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith."*

In chapter 2 verse 4 of Habakkuk stated a very important principle for believers. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith." Other versions state this more clearly, such as the NIV which reads, "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright– but the righteous will live by his faith." Here we see that one key characteristic of a disciple of God is having faith in Him. Righteous living depends upon faith, but faith must have an object. If our faith is placed in our perceived goodness, good works we do for the church, or anything other than God we are "puffed up and our desires are not upright."

Here is an illustration about the importance of placing our faith in the correct object, God. If our mother asked us to go to the store and buy a gallon, she may be very surprised if we returned with a gallon of cod liver oil when she actually desired skim milk! It is very important to have the correct object of faith.

Later in Habakkuk, we found the object of Habakkuk's faith. "The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights (Hab 3:19a,b NIV). Habakkuk's call was to the people of Israel to repent of their sin and return to God, the only true source of possible deliverance from their impending tragedy of invasion by Babylon. That calling is just as appropriate today as it was to Israel. The righteous shall live by faith in God and not by faith in anything else including money, success, or good works. For we are saved by grace through faith and not of ourselves, it is a gift of God, not of works, less any person should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We are often not able to understand what God is up to during the times that He allows trouble in our lives. Habakkuk's call to God regarding why He allowed such terrible hardships to happen to the people of God is as important to his readers as it is to those in our day. When we suffer without seeing any obvious purpose or reason we too ask God, why? God answer to us is, "*But the righteous will live by his faith*" (Habakkuk 2:4c). We are called to live by faith in God's plan, faith that God will work out all things for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

As I write this I am preparing to travel to the Detroit area to the funeral of friend who died at middle age. Over and over I have asked what I could have done to have prevented his death. I pray that somehow God will use this experience to draw me and others closer to Him, and that I would have

the boldness to share the love of Jesus Christ with others through this tragedy. The person who died is on that has been on my BLL (big long list) for many years. I carry an especially large burden with the passing of each on this list What helps me get through it is the half dozen or so people *formerly* on the list who are now walking with God in faith. Through it all the message of Habakkuk rings true, "the righteous will live by his faith."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of Second Timothy. The theme of this section is Paul's calling to young Timothy to continue his bold service of the Lord in spite of tribulation. This is similar to what we learned from the first reading in Habakkuk.

Second Reading:

> *6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. 8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life– not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. 12 That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. 13 What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:6-13 NIV)*

Paul reminded Timothy to use the spiritual gifts given to him by God during his ordination service (v. 6, "laying on of my hands"). He said in verse 13, "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." The caution to adhere to a pattern of sound teaching is a frequent admonition made by Paul and other New Testament writers. Doctrine is important especially as we will see in the Gospel lesson today because teaching false doctrine leads others away from the true faith in Jesus. Such a practice, knowingly or not, will lead to a much greater condemnation for non-believers engaged in such practices. This leads us to the Gospel lesson for today from Saint Matthew.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Though the Gospel lesson today only covered chapter 17 verses 5 – 10 we will cover the entire

section from verses 1 -10 in order to take into account the context.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 JESUS SAID TO his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. 2 It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. 3 So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. 4 If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." 5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. 7Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? 8 Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? 9 Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10 So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' " (Luke 17:1-10 NIV)*

This section of Luke contains teaching related to the topic of discipleship. It consists of three short lessons and concludes with a parable. In the first lesson, we see an admonition by Jesus about the seriousness of sin, especially for the person that *causes* people to sin. Jesus is saying that sin is serious enough that we should be willing to take drastic actions to overcome temptation. Any teenage boy can attest to the fact that girly magazines are an especially powerful attraction when hormones and raging. However, what Jesus is saying here is that the person that causes others to sin, in this case the publisher of the pornographic magazine, will receive greater condemnation. The parallel section in in Matthew adds this verse, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (Mt 18:7 NIV). Next, Jesus continues with a second lesson. Here we find that having a willingness to forgive is a second key characteristic of being a disciple of Jesus. Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." That was a hard saying for His disciples because their answer is to ask Him to increase their faith. Forgiveness can be a hard thing to do. The call to forgiveness is evident in our Lord's Prayer recited every week in Mass found in Matthew Chapter 6. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15). Paul said in Ephesians 4:32, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Jesus commands us to forgive others because he forgave us. The call to forgive others is a key characteristic of a believer and is a frequent topic throughout the New

Testament.

Jesus third lesson is about faith, something that we found in the first reading from Habakkuk. After Jesus spoke about the need to forgive, the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus then said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." His use of a mustard seed is significant since it was one of the smallest seeds with which his disciples would have been familiar. Jesus' statement meant that even having the smallest faith was of extremely high value. If we plant a seed and water it this tiny object may sprout regardless of how much faith we put in this happening. The seed comes from God and His concern is about *how* we use it. God doesn't call everyone to be spiritual giants, He just asks us to use our small faith for His purposes. As we saw in Habakkuk, the just shall live even by their tiny amount of faith the size of a mustard seed. Even such a small faith may move mountains.

Next, Jesus moved onto a parable, as He has done throughout this section of Luke. This parable was about a master to whom he posed a hypothetical question about his servant. "Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do?" The message was clear. *As disciples of Jesus, we must serve without strings attached*. Our obedience is not a matter of merit but of responsive duty, though God does honor our Christian service. Although we will be rewarded in heaven for our obedience to God, He calls us to obey Him now, as a servant is called to obey his master. The servant will be rewarded, "after that you may eat and drink (v. 8)," but a servant's work is a duty that does not earn them special merit with their master. God is a faithful Master Who will honor us for our service. When we make "sacrifices" in order to obey God, we should not pat ourselves on the back or look for special paybacks from God. We are merely living in light of the new life He has given us in Christ.

Some years back something very interesting happened at a church dinner that helped me to gain some insights into these passages. For this event since our name fell in a certain range, we were supposed to bring a large dessert. My wife baked up one of her most amazing treats, peach berry cobbler with a dish of freshly made whipped cream. I dropped Christy off at the door of the church and she carried the still hot cobbler downstairs along with the dish of whipped cream. When we got inside the organizers told her to find a table that did already have a dessert and just place it there. Frankly, I was concerned that we would not get any of this lovely treat but began resigning myself to the fact that we would not be able to enjoy any of the delicious delicacy. My wife set out to find a table without a dessert but was unable to find a table that did not already have a dessert. Next, I told her to just place the dessert on *our* table and get on with the dinner as I turned away to speak to someone behind me. As we were milling about trying to decide what to do, I suddenly heard a loud crash. As I turned around, I saw that the delicious cobbler had splattered all over the floor! I was shocked and just stood there in disbelief for a minute as our hosts began rushing around trying to figure out how to clean up the mess on the floor. I didn't have any cobbler that night!

As we went through the dinner and the service that followed, I reflected on the intentions of my heart during this event. My wife's motives were pure; she wanted to bring the very best dessert possible for *whoever* received it. Mine were not so pure; I intended all along to save some for myself. God evidently had other intentions by showing me a lesson in allowing the eventual disaster. *Serve God with a pure heart without strings attached and He will honor you*.

Reflection Questions

1. The mustard seed, though it is one of the smallest seeds, can with proper soil and watering, sprout and grow into a large bush whether or not we have faith that it will grow or not. It's specially designed by God to do just that. Read Hebrews 12:2 and Ephesians 2:8-9 below.

   Eph 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith– and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God–not by works, so that no one can boast.

   Heb 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Who provides the seed of faith for which you are called to sow to produce God's fruit in the Kingdom?

2. Refer to your answer above. With the source or your faith determined, how can your faith be improved, enlarged or expanded? Considering its source, is it productive for us to feel guilty if we don't have "enough faith"? What would be a more appropriate response?

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