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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 03-24-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the Book of Exodus where we will see Moses follow God's instruction to bring water from a rock. Then we move to Romans Chapter 5 where we will discover Saint Paul's explanation of how Christians are justified by faith alone. Then we study an amazing encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Exodus Chapter 17. The context of the passage was a few months after Moses guided the Hebrew nation out of Egypt where they had been subject to slavery for 400 years after Joseph's reign with the Pharaoh. God had provided them with manna some months earlier (Exodus 16:14). They had just left the Wilderness of Sin and had camped at a place called Rephidim after camping at other places along the way. This was right before the Amalekites attacked the defenseless Hebrews at that location (Exodus 17:8-16). We included the first two verses in order to add context for you while you read.

First Reading:

> *1 Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. 2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that*

> *we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." 5 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:1-7)*

Moses said that the congregation of Israel journeyed "by stages," meaning that they made other stops along the way. Numbers Chapter 33 said that they made three stops between the Wilderness of Sin and Rephidim (Numbers 33:12-14) indicating that these in between campsites may have been less eventful than what happened here. Here Moses encountered serious opposition, to the point that he was concerned that if the conflict wasn't resolved the people would stone him (v.4c). It was so significant that Moses even named the place Massah and Meribah after the conflict (v.7), words which mean

"testing" and "contending." The people commanded Moses to give them water for them to drink along with their animals (vv. 2-3). The significant point is that rather than pray to God themselves to ask for water, the people "quarreled" with Moses, who was their obvious intercessor between them and God (v.2). Moses asked the question, "Why do you test the LORD?" (v. 2e). A clue to what the people meant by this can be found in verse 7: "He named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the LORD among us, or not?'" What happened was that they doubted that God was still watching over them to provide for them. This is amazing because God had just delivered them from the army of the Egyptians just a few months earlier, and was guiding them in their journeys through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21)! How soon they forgot about God's divine deliverance of them from their slavery in Egypt, His supernatural parting of the Red Sea and His subsequent visible leadership on their journey!

As the story continued, Moses interceded in prayer on behalf of the people, something that he did very frequently as Moses was one of the most prayerful people in the Bible. Moses' prayer was something which shouldn't be taken for granted, as he evidently prayed so hard and so long for the people in the subsequent battle against the Amelekites that men had to hold his arms up (Exodus 17:12). God could have just provided water immediately upon Moses' request, but instead He

answered Moses' prayer in a way that revealed Moses' authority as a leader of the people along with the elders.

The truth that emerges from the text is that everyone has access to God's miraculous provision through prayer without the need for an intercessor. Moses was their intercessor between them and God, and theologically was what is called a "type of Christ" meaning that he was a person that prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ. As believers in the risen Lord Jesus, we have direct access to God's miraculous powers through prayer, and our Intercessor lives in our hearts through God the Holy Spirit. When we face difficult challenges in life, God calls us to turn to Him in prayer, as well as to ask others to pray on our behalf, as Moses did for the Hebrew Nation. The Hebrew people turned to Moses to pray for them instead of the God that they could see in the pillars. God calls us to turn to the God that we can't see. James said in the New Testament Book by his name, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). The Book of Hebrews says, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). The Apostle John in 1 John 5 said the following:

> *13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 14 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 5:13-15)*

We can rest in the fact that God receives our prayers *faster* than the speed of light. Although we don't always agree with the outcome or the timing of God's answer, we can have peace that God works on our behalf for our own good (Romans 8:28) regardless of our feelings.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Chapter 5 in the Book of Romans. In the previous chapter, Paul explained the case that God justifies sinners on the basis of their faith in Jesus alone, and challenged the false notion in the Roman church that although believers receive salvation by grace alone they preserve it by their good works.

Read the text, noting that additional verses were added for context.

Second Reading:

> *1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; 4 and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; 5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God*

> *has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. 6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. 8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:1-8)*

Paul started out by connecting this section of teaching with his previous teaching about justification by faith. "Therefore, having been justified by faith" (v. 1a). He said that believers have a new relationship with God, one of peace, through the Lord Jesus Christ. He went on to say that believers have hope in seeing the glory of God and that they can persevere during their trials because this produces godly character which in turn produces hope (vv. 3-4). Finally, Paul made an amazing statement about how Jesus died for us while we were still in our sinful state. He said, "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" v.6). He continued, "***But God*** demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (v.8, emphasis added). Notice the phrase "But God." God's direct involvement in the affairs of our lives greatly reassures us of the reality of His love for us! God loved us so much that he gave his only begotten Son for us (John 3:16). He did this with the full awareness of the *future* sins that we would commit, yet He went through with a humiliating death on the cross for us anyway. As we approach Good Friday, think about the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice for us. Moses left a heavenly palace in the court of the Pharaoh in order to deliver the Hebrew slaves from bondage, so that they might find rest in the Promised Land. Jesus left the realities of Heaven in order to deliver us from the bondage of our sin, so that we might find rest in His eternal home, our Promised Land. May we continue to appreciate and adore our Savior for what He did for us!

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading covers a story of Jesus freeing a woman of the bondage of sin. While we may or may not be able to relate to her particular sin struggle (sexual immorality), we can all relate to the problem of looking for love in all the wrong places.

Gospel Reading:

> *5 So He came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph; 6 and Jacob's well was there. So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. 7 There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." 8 For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. 9 Therefore the Samaritan woman said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10*

Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." 11 She said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep; where then do You get that living water? 12 "You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself and his sons and his cattle?" 13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw." 16 He said to her, "Go, call your husband and come here." 17 The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have correctly said, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; this you have said truly." 19 The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. 20 "Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He." 27 At this point His disciples came, and they were amazed that He had been speaking with a woman, yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why do You speak with her?" 28 So the woman left her waterpot, and went into the city and said to the men, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?" 30 They went out of the city, and were coming to Him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But He said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples were saying to one another, "No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work. 35 "Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest. 36 Already he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. 37 For in this case the saying is true, 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor." 39 From that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all the things that I have done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to Jesus, they were asking Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. 41 Many more believed because of His word; 42 and they were saying to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world." (John 4:5-42)

Some key observations from the text include:

- This story of misunderstandings shows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world
- He shows Himself to those who are seeking to worship God in spirit and in truth (not just to the religious elite)
- While she is seeking validation and significance through temporal realities (water, wells, religious argumentation, human relationships), Jesus is wanting to open her heart up to eternal realities (living water that will truly satisfy her soul, a life that is regenerated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, a life that is not afraid of the truth).
- Jesus loves her enough to break through her misguided notions of where life comes from and helps her to see that He is the Messiah, the anointed Deliverer, to save people from their sins.
- As a result of her changed life, others see the reality of Jesus and believe in Him as their own Savior.

What about you? Are you thirsty?

It's easy to look with judgment on this poor Samaritan woman, who was looking for love in all the wrong places. She bumps into Jesus one day and gets a whole new lesson on her need for a Savior. But as Christians, we can grow cold to our need for a Savior. But, if we're honest, we have our own broken cisterns that don't satisfy our deep thirst:

- Finding approval from others
- Achieving goals and accomplishing things
- Perfectionism
- Religiosity
- Looking to others for our sense of identity and validation

It's easy to do what this woman did and argue about places and forms of worship, to punt to mystery, to look for love in all the wrong places.

What religious conundrums do you throw into Jesus' face when he is trying to deal with spiritual life issues? What strategies do you use to deflect the painful sense of thirst that gnaws at your soul?

He is patient and keeps pressing us to come out of hiding and be honest: to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. But what does it look like to drink this living water, to become true worshipers?

It looks like a relationship with Jesus. Do you have this? Are you pursuing Him? Are you letting Him love you, speak to you, fill you and change you?

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Reflection Questions

1. One of the common themes for this week's reading has to do with being delivered from the bondage of sin. In what ways does sin feel like slavery or bondage? How does Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well reassure you that he is powerful enough to free you from the bondage and penalty of sin? How would you respond if He offered you living water?
2. How are you like the Hebrew people? Re-read the 1 Cor. 11 passage and take a personal inventory. How can this story be instructive to you in your life? Ask yourself who in your circle of believing friends and relatives prays for you on a regular basis. Ask yourself for whom you have been praying recently.

Second, reach out to one other believer this week with a specific prayer request and ask them to pray regarding this one specific issue throughout the week. Finally, ask the person with whom you communicated how you may pray for them in one specific way this week.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 03-17-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. Today's study reveals God's gracious plan to make Abraham the progenitor of a physical line of chosen people and the spiritual line of God-followers. The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's favored letters—that is, it's favored by many Bible readers because of the promise of joy and confidence to those who trust God wholeheartedly. The Gospel reading from Luke takes us into a very intimate occasion in the life of Jesus that demonstrated visually and orally His unique character as the very Son of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

So much is packed into this passage of Scripture that it could take several pages of commentary to explain it all clearly. Note that this choice servant of God is known first as Abram ("exalted father"). His name is later changed to Abraham ("father of many nations"; Gen. 17:5). It begins with the reassuring promise of God that He will protect Abram; He will be "a shield" to him. And he promises him a great reward. In what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant, introduced in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in chapters 13, 15, and 17. God had promised Abram that he would be "a great nation" and his "offspring" would be blessed. And that raises a great question in Abram's mind. This passage answers the question and gives us a preview of the history of the nation to be born of Abram.

First Reading:

> Note: The reading omitted verses 1-4 and 16 that are included below.
>
> *Genesis 15:1-18 NAS95 1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram*

said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

Abram is perplexed. How could he have offspring, he asks, "since I am childless"? Not knowing the miraculous plan that God had in mind, Abram proposes that God use Abram's servant Eliezer as his heir. But God responds that his heir "will come forth from your own body." Then God gives this faithful follower an object lesson. He instructs him to look at the stars and count them. That's impossible, of course; the stars are innumerable. "So shall your descendants be," God tells him. In response, Abram offers a statement that reveals the depth of his trust in God. It is a statement that is referred to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23): "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is a critical faith statement. It is not on the basis of any action of Abram that he is declared righteous, but it is on the basis of his faith, his trust in God. That same principle of faith remains true today. It is not by our holy deeds that we are considered righteous before God but because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus who paid the sacrifice for our sin.

In confirmation of God's promises to Abram, there follows a demonstration of God's commitment to

fulfill His promises to Abram. The ceremony of sacrifice that is pictured is the affirmation of God that He alone will fulfill the covenant He is making with His servant. Not only that, God gives Abram a preview of what is to happen to his progeny, events that we will read about in the later chapters of Genesis and the early portion of Exodus. The 400-year captivity of Israel (the descendant nation from Abram) in Egypt is clearly foretold. And the promise of their ultimate release is predicted, as well.

The ceremony pictured in these verses included symbols of God's presence (a smoking oven and a flaming torch) which were to give Abram assurance that God Himself is making this covenant with him, and it is certain of fulfillment. It concludes in this passage with the promise that the land from the River of Egypt (the Nile?) to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia will be the homeland of God's chosen people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul rehearses some of the factors of his relationship with the people of the church at Philippi and what he hoped and prayed for them in terms of their spiritual growth and steadfastness. He wanted them to live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (2:27). He also taught some very important spiritual truths that should have encouraged his readers to work together for unity among themselves and to recognize the great personal sacrifice of Jesus for them. They should understand, also, the exalted place that Jesus has been given as a result of His obedience to the Father, even to the point of death.

Second Reading:

> *Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NAS95 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. 1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.*

In today's reading, the writer offers a significant contrast. He wants his readers to follow his example and that of others who "walk according" to the pattern of his life. And he warns them of the many who walk as "the enemies of the cross of Christ." He is distressed by such conduct; it brings him great sorrow. But the followers of Christ must be warned. These evil-doers are characterized by

unwholesome appetites, an unseemly pride in their wrong-doing. Perhaps the danger of their behavior is suggested in the last characteristic, "who set their minds on earthly things." What God has created and given us here on this earth is not inherently bad, but an unhealthy attachment to earthly things is fatal. As John wrote in 1 John 2:16, "For everything in the world—the carvings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." And his conclusion is the key: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." Paul makes it clear that the "end" of them "is destruction." Believers must concentrate on the eternal, not the temporal that distracts us from God and will not last. Rather, the Christian has much more to look for.

Paul goes on to note the contrast between the "enemies" of Christ and the true believers. The Christian's citizenship is not in this temporary, passing world. It is in heaven, and it's not just something we hope to enter someday; it is the place where we should continually and eagerly be looking "for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," who will descend from our spiritual homeland to come for us. And then the changes that Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15 will occur. He says our current "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory." We surely don't fully understand all that that means, but it will occur, not by anything we can do but by His power. After all, He has the power to subject everything to Himself, and He eventually will do so.

Once again, Paul reveals his deep passion for the Philippian believers. He calls them "beloved brethren," and he again speaks of his longing to see them, who he considers "my joy and crown." In light of the glorious promise for the alien Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, their future and eternal abiding place, Paul gives a final challenge to those he loves so dearly, "Stand firm in the Lord."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels present Jesus in a variety of settings, each writer including those events and sayings that fit best into his argument. The four together give us a complete picture of what God wants us to know about Jesus' life and ministry. After all, according to the writer of Hebrews, God "in these last days has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus provides the very best picture of who God is because He who was and is God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In today's passage, Luke gives us a unique picture of Jesus, different from every other representation of Him in the Bible.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 9:28-36 NAS95 28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and*

> *his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. 33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not realizing what he was saying. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.*

In the paragraph just preceding these verses, Jesus had spoken of the cost of being His disciple. The disciple "must deny himself and take up his cross daily"; "whoever wants to save his life will lost it." To follow Jesus is to be willing to serve Him unashamedly and faithfully. Knowing that there will be some who will faithfully follow, He concludes this teaching by promising that some of His hearers "will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." That was said many years ago, and yet we still have not yet seen God's kingdom established on earth in the fullest sense that He has promised it. So, what could He have meant?

Today's passage may well be the fulfillment of that promise, as we shall see. A little more than a week after that pronouncement Jesus took three of his most intimate disciples—Peter, James, and John—with Him to a mountain to pray, which was a common practice for Him. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus prayed. (Interestingly, the same thing occurs on a later occasion in the Garden of Gethsemane on Jesus' last night before His crucifixion, Luke 22:45.) When they awoke, they saw what must have seemed like a dream to them. They saw Jesus with a different facial expression and clothes that were dazzling white and gleaming. Two men were talking with Him, and somehow the disciples recognized the two as Moses and Elijah, long dead and revered Old Testament prophets. They were "appearing in glory," and the three disciples "saw His glory." It was Moses in Exodus 33 who asked to see God's glory, but God indicated that no one could see His glory and live.

There must have been something about the appearance of these three that was supra-natural. It was an appearance beyond anything earthly normal. It's also interesting to note the topic of discussion between Jesus and the two prophets; they "were speaking of His departure." Jesus had told His disciples on more than one occasion that he would be leaving them, and He had indicated the method (His death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven). Peter, in his usual impetuous way, was eager to keep them from leaving, so he suggested building "tabernacles," probably the kind of booths that were associated with the Jewish festival. He was interrupted by a cloud that came upon them, frightening them. Then they heard a voice, the very voice of God. "*This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him*!" As God had spoken at Jesus' baptism, so He speaks once again, confirming that

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Jesus is the Holy One, the anointed one of God, the one above all others who should be heard and obeyed. It seems abundantly clear that these three close disciples of Jesus had the unique privilege of having just a glimpse, a peek of what the Kingdom of God is like. The qualified king, the representatives of the old covenant, and disciples of the new, all are represented. Glory shone around as it will in that glorious future kingdom. Watch for it! Be prepared!

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Saint Paul talked about "stand[ing] firm in the faith" (Philippians 4;1). List at least three specific ways in which you are you living as a citizen of heaven, for eternal values rather than worldly pleasure and standing firm in your faith?
2. In what ways to you recognize Jesus as God Himself as seen by Peter, James, and John, in the great transfiguration scene? God said to listen to Him. In what ways are you doing this in your life? In what ways are you acting upon the information you are receiving from God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-10-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Today we learn about the nature of faith and the importance of knowing God's word so that when we need it we have it to combat temptations we encounter in our lives.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy, the last Book of what is called the Pentateuch, the first five Books of the Bible. Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land (see Numbers 20:12), so God gave him instructions about what the people were to do when they entered the land. As always, understanding the context is important because some forty years had passed since God had delivered the Israelites from their captivity in Egypt. Only the people who were twenty years and younger were allowed to enter because of their sin of unbelief (Numbers 14:29). This was a time of much grieving because many memorials would likely have been held for the numerous people that had died during the era of wandering in the desert. The chapter opens with an introductory statement which sets the tone for today's reading. "Then it shall be, when you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it and live in it" (Deut 21:1). Finally, God had opened the way for the people to enter the Promised Land.

First Reading:

> *Deuteronomy 26:4-10 NAS95 4 "Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. 5 "You shall answer and say before the LORD your God, 'My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. 6 'And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. 7 'Then we cried to the LORD,*

> *the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; 8 and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; 9 and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 'Now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which You, O LORD have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God;*

God architected the people's entry into the Promised Land at a time to correspond with the harvest, at which point the manna would cease (Joshua 5:12). God provided instructions to the priest that the first thing that was to be done was to make an offering to Him (v. 4). God affirmed the legacy of the father of the Israelite nation, "a wandering Aramean," likely referring to Jacob who sojourned for a long period in that region (Syria) under the control of his father in law Laban (v. 5). During the Nation's time in Egypt, the population of Jews greatly multiplied, a trend which began way back when Jacob had first entered Egypt (v.5e). This is affirmed in Genesis, "Now Israel lived in the land of Egypt, in Goshen, and they acquired property in it and were fruitful and became very numerous" (Genesis 47:27). The Egyptians then began to resent and distrust the people, and took them as their slaves (v. 6). God however heard their cries and began the process to move them out in the Land that he had promised to Abraham. The closing verse of the reading marks a bookend of God's instructions to make a kind of "first fruits" offering to the Lord upon entering the Land.

Today's message served as a reminder to the people who were about to enter the Land about the naure of God's fruitfulness. When the people entered the Land, they would find it very fruitful, just as the Lord had promised them (Exodus 3:8, Numbers 14:8, etc.).

In our day it is perhaps easy for us to overlook the fact that everything comes from God when His actions are more behind the scenes compared to His bold and obvious acts in leading the people out of captivity in Egypt and eventually into the Land. As we approach Easter Sunday, we also have the opportunity presented to us from God to reflect upon the nature of God as our supreme provider. God has given us fruitful blessings beyond comparison by sending His Son to atone for our sins once and for all. Like the fruit of the harvest that waited for the Jewish people for which they had done nothing to earn, we can celebrate how God gave us Jesus as a totally free gift which we cannot earn and not deserve. We will learn move about this gift in the next reading.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Today's second reading is from one of the most important texts in the entire New Testament Bible. The context of the tenth chapter or Romans deals with the current situation of the Nation of Israel. This section of Romans is sandwiched between chapter nine dealing with Israel's past situation, and chapter 11 which deals with Israel's future. Chapter 10 opens with a message concerning the Nation, "*Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation*" (Romans 10:1). This is God's present-day message for all people, not just Israel. Many in the Nation of Israel in Paul's day misunderstood the message of faith, a condition which continues until the present time.

Paul said in the second verse, "*For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge*" (Romans 10:2). In today's reading, Paul will explain the basis of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Second Reading:

> *Romans 10:8-13 NAS95 8 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, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 13 for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED."*

Here, Paul quoted from a crucial Old Testament text in Deuteronomy which explained the conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant. It is important to understand the biblical citation anytime when all capitals appear in the text. This section in the Law first provided the list of blessing that God has promised to the Nation, but then concluded with the condition, "*if you obey the LORD your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and soul*" (De 30:10). The Law then went on to say that the Law was undeniably right within their reach, "*But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it*" (De 30:14). Paul quoted from the Greek version (Septuagint) of this important text to say that God's message of the New Covenant is right here among them through his message. Whoever trusts in the Lord through belief that God raised Jesus from the dead will be saved, whether they are a Jew or a Gentile. "Whoever will call on the name of the LORD will be *saved*" (v. 13), period.

Paul wrote his message to a church which was being tossed by the false Gospel that salvation came through works and not by faith alone which produces the fruit of good works. In fact, he dedicated the entire Book of Galatians to refute the controversy brought about by the Judaizers who taught this false doctrine. Paul summarized the matter in the second chapter of that Book, "*nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified*" (Galatians 2:16).

What does Paul's message mean to the church in our time? Everything, since this same false message has continued from the time when Paul first wrote against it. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a free gift (Ephesians 2:8-9), one that is brought about from reading the word of God. Paul made the source of our Christian faith clear just a few verses past today's reading, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ*" (Romans 10:17). As believers in the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus Christ we can trust in our salvation as an accomplished fact of God from which will

flow the fruit of our good works. Our salvation does not come from works any more than the Creator comes about from its own creation. This is a crucially important core truth about salvation that makes today's reading one of the most important texts in the entire Bible.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the reading from Saint Luke is right after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (Luke 3:21), which marked the opening of His ministry when He was around 30 years of age (Luke 3:23).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 4:1-13 NAS95 1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness 2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. 3 And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." 4 And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE.'" 5 And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6 And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. 7 Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'" 9 And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; 10 for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,' 11 and, 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" 12 And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'" 13 When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.*

Luke recalled how Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit of God to be tempted by Satan in the desert for a period of forty days during which he fasted. These temptations were many (see verse 13, "every temptation"), however since Jesus was hungry the first one recorded here dealt with Satan's offer of food (v. 3). Satan's question to Jesus began with the word "if," through which the master deceiver doubted Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Jesus replied to each inquiry of the devil by answering with the Word of God. "If you are the Son of God," then make the stones into bread (v. 3). Also, "If you are the Son of God," throw Yourself down from the height of the temple (v. 9).

Today's reading teaches us how we are to resist temptation, whether we understand that it comes from the devil or not. By placing God's word into our hearts through reading and memorization of it, we can "answer" each temptation with the word of the Lord in our hearts.

I remember once when I was a teenager our family went on a summer vacation trip to the Washington, DC area with its rich history. One day we visited a old well which was famous for some events during the Civil War in which people through coins into expecting a blessing. As I peered into the well, I saw the large amount of money sitting just a few feet below the edge and within an easy

hop into the now dry ditch. I looked around and seriously considering jumping in at a time when nobody was watching. However, a thought began to reverberate through my mind as I began to carry out my plan. "Though shalt not steal" (Exodus 20:15). I had evidently heard this from my Catechism classes. But, I thought, this isn't stealing, these people are just throwing their money into this hole. Still, the words echoed through my heart, and I finally turned away from my folly. Looking back on this many years later I realized how knowing just a bit of God's word had protected me from carrying out something that was truly stupid!

Carrying God's word in our heart takes hard work and isn't something that comes about by accident. Instead, we have to endeavor to prepare before we face temptation such that when it comes, we will be prepared to answer it with God's word in our hearts. If we don't have the word in our reserves, we will never be able to rely upon it when the need arises. That is the heart of what Luke taught us in today's reading.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we saw how God prepared the Nation of Israel before their entrance into the Promised Land by asking them to first prepare a sacrificial offering from the goodness of His provision from the fruit of the harvest. In what ways can you prepare your heart to celebrate Easter Sunday in such a way, so that then it comes you can see things differently in light of God's provision?
2. In the second reading we learned about God's teaching regarding faith. Once a person understands the Gospel message faith is indeed truly mixed together with works (please refer to James 2:18 on your own). In what ways have you ever perhaps trusted in works instead of faith for your salvation at some point in your life by going through the motions of your religious practices?

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

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we learn about the power of words to reveal a person's heart. We discover how as believers we can look to a future time when we will overcome death. Finally, we continue the study of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Apocryphal book of Sirach.

First Reading:

1 SIR 27:4-7

When a sieve is shaken, the husks appear;

so do one's faults when one speaks.

As the test of what the potter molds is in the furnace,

so in tribulation is the test of the just.

The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had;

so too does one's speech disclose the bent of one's mind.

Praise no one before he speaks,

> *for it is then that people are tested.*

Today's reading profoundly reveals how a person's words reveal their heart. It closely parallels James' words in James Chapter 3. Words are very powerful and the writer shows how one's words easily reveal our faults, so it is perhaps better to keep silent Words are the fruit of a person which disclosure the inner working or the heart. My fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Dow, who has since gone away to heaven, had many sayings. I remember that he used to tell me, better to silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt! His words and those in the first reading make good advice for us today.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading continues the study from the past several weeks in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians. The context is the teaching on the return of the Lord Jesus to the earth to capture and reward His church. Paul said about this a few verses before today's reading, "*Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed*" (1Corin 15:51-52). When Jesus returns, those who are alive on the earth and who are believers in Him will not die but rather will be translated into heaven to rule and reign with Him forever (1 Thess 4:17). With these things in mind let's proceed with the reading.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:54-58 NAS95 54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. 55 "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.*

In the first verse of the reading Paul quoted from Isaiah 25:8 which reads, "*He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken.*" The context of Isaiah was the restoration of Israel after their exile to Babylon as a result of their sin. Paul quoted the Septuagint version of Isaiah and applied it in an eschatological context. Paul look forward to the God's ultimate restoration of His people in glorified bodies similar to what Jesus displayed after His resurrection (1 John 3:2, "we shall be like Him"). Next, Paul quoted from Hosea 13:14, a passage in which God is chastising Israel for their sin and telling them that they will not be ransomed from physical death. Here Paul used an Old Testament quotation to show the useless of trying to outright the penalty of sin, because all sin leads to death (verse 56, Romans 6:23a, "for the wages of sin is death"). Israel had forsaken the Lord and was paying the price for it through exile and ultimately death. Thankfully,

the reading does not end there, with an all important "but God" idea in verse 57. "[B]*ut thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*." As believers in the Lord Jesus through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), we have achieved victory in an eternal sense the moment we believed. Through our faith we can stand strong in the Lord, "steadfast, immovable" (v. 58a) while living with God's promise that our work for Him will be worthwhile (v. 58).

Right now (March, 2019), I am dealing with the impending death of both my father and my father in law. Both men are professing believers in the Lord Jesus, and through their testimony I can stand firm in my faith that when they pass, they are going to be forever with the Lord in heaven. In the meantime, all of the believers in our extended families can look forward to the day when they will be reunited with these two men.

Living with these biblical truths greatly helps us as we ourselves age and also watch as our family and friends pass away. The hope that we have in Jesus helps us to safeguard our hearts from the hopelessness experienced both people in this world who have no such hope.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Saint Luke is Jesus' continued teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount in which he addressed "a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon" (Luke 6:17).

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:39-45 NAS95 39 And He also spoke a parable to them: "A blind man cannot guide a blind man, can he? Will they not both fall into a pit? 40 A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher. 41 Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye. 43 For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. 44 For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. 45 The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.*

Jesus taught His disciples and the crowds some important truths about the nature of His kingdom, a kingdom which was already there (Luke 17:21), and yet to come, as we saw in the second reading. First, the truths of the kingdom must be taught by teachers of the real truth (vv. 39 – 40). Jesus, Peter, and Paul were very clear about what was happening in their times about false teachings and about what would happen in the future. Jesus said, "*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves*" (Matthew 7:15). Paul said, "*For the time will*

come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths" (Timothy 4:3-4). Peter said, "*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves* (2 Peter 2:1). Someone once said in reference to the post millennial spirit of our age, "the only truth that counts is true truth."

Second, believers are called to approach others (and God) with great humility by first examining themselves and getting right with God by repenting of their sin and seeking reconciliation with people whom they have offended (vv. 42-43). The good work of God is produced by a person with a humble heart, such a person is known for their good works that flow from their relationship with God (v. 44). As we saw in the first reading, a person is known by the words they speak (v.45).

It is perhaps easy to judge the false nature of a group of people called a "cult" whose teachings are so absolutely unbiblical that anyone inside the Christian church can easily understand their insidious nature. However, when false teaching happens under the guise of the Christian church it can be much harder to recognize and deal with. When Jesus spoke His Sermon message, He was beset by the false teachings of the cult of the Pharisees. They taught that the way to reach God was through strict observance of the Law as they interpreted it, a religion of "do." Jesus came along and contradicted their false teachings with a different message, a message of "done." Jesus taught them that God had already secured their salvation, all that was necessary was for them to believe it. These contrasting messages, the false religion of "do" versus the true religion of "done," continue in modern times. Jesus secured eternal life for His believers, none of whom will be lost (John 18:9). Through our faith in Jesus Christ we can say, *"thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Corinthians 15:57). When "blind guide" attempt to mislead us in the church, we can turn to the truths revealed about God's granting of eternal life to us through faith alone as a result of God's grace. For, "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading we saw how Paul quoted from the Old Testament where God had poured out curses upon His people Israel for turning away from their covenant with him. However, Paul showed how the Gospel of Grace eclipsed this temporal punishment and pointed the way to an eternal kingdom with eternal life in a perfect human body. How does this contrast between the two covenants help you to understand the struggles you face in your own life? In what ways do you feel that God has in some way given you over to death? How does reflecting upon and growing in your faith in Jesus help you to understand how to achieve victory over these thoughts?

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2. Doing the work of God is evidence of our salvation through faith in Christ Jesus as our works flow from our hearts that are changed by God and Who also placed His Holy Spirit in us as a testimony to the truth. However, in what small ways have you perhaps bought into certain aspects of the false Gospel of "do" versus the true Gospel of "done" in which we feel that in some ways we have earned the right to eternal life? In what ways does enduring hardships point us more deeply to the work done by Jesus on the cross for us and oppose the false construct offered by the Pharisees who vainly worked to earn their salvation?

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Ayis' Testimony



My Personal Testimony

When I was a child, I dreamed that I would follow in the footsteps of my father that went to two Olympic Games. My father was a Swiss champion in swimming, I was hoping to shine in tennis or soccer and then my worst nightmare happened…I lost all of my skills in one debilitating surgery!

My Brain Tumor was misdiagnosed for years and I was literally dying. In 1988 I had to have an emergency surgery. The surgery was performed by some of the best surgeons in Switzerland. The surgeons were using me as a "guinea pig" in a brand new technique but the odds of success were dim as I had a thirty percent chance of survival. After ten hours of surgery and intensive care, I had lost all my motor skills and did not know why God had saved me. I was in shock at what was happening. but the situation become even worse when the doctors made my prognosis for the future "I would maybe walk in a year, maybe finish high school one day, could not swim, higher education would be out of the question and I would never have a normal life". I was resigned to give up on life but the turning point for me was when my parents placed me in a rehabilitation center for a week and I saw young children my age with various handicaps fighting with the best of their abilities. I decided then that I would do the best with what God gave me, I had seen people with worse handicaps than me doing their best and I had no right to give up. Although I was working hard in physiotherapy etc… I was going through heavy depression and it was tough remembering things I could do at thirteen but I comforted myself in knowing that as long as God was with me I would be okay.

From that day I fought regaining my balance little by little and walked in six months, I graduated high school, swam at a third division school, went to College and completed a Bachelors and Masters Degree. I also self published a book of my experiences with a Brain Tumor in the hope of helping and motivating people never to give up in the face of adversity.

Twenty years later God's purpose for me to survive and keep fighting was showed to me when I last expected it. I met my future wife on the internet when I was in New York and she was in Spain. What united us was her strong faith in God as she had overcome utter poverty in the Dominican Republic. She overcame very tough odds of success and she did it all thanks to her faith in God. I moved with her in Madrid and later we would get married in Stamford, CT. Today we are living in Boston and have a beautiful three year old daughter.

I still have irrecoverable double vision, a nystagmus, coordination and balance problems but I have learned to ignore them and focus on God's blessings in our lives.

> "And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven." James 5:15

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-24-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at several readings which get at he concept of dying to ourselves in order that God may work out His plan in our lives. This is counter-cultural and something that we can only do through God's empowerment, while we cannot even expect a reward for during our lifetimes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the reading from First Samuel is evil King Saul's continuing effort to locate David and murder him. The reading is a self-explanatory narrative of yet another of Saul's many unsuccessful attempts on David's life. Earlier, the Prophet Samuel had anointed David as king in place of Saul (1 Samuel 16:13). After this, the now king David became Saul's armor bearer (1 Sam 16:21) and personal harp player (1 Sam 16:23) which helped comfort the soon to be dethroned king who was tormented by evil spirits from God (v. 23). We included the intervening verses from the reading which were omitted since it made the story clearer.

First Reading:

Note: The reading covered only 1 SM 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23, the intervening verses have been included.

1 Samuel 26:2-25 NAS95 2 So Saul arose and went down to the wilderness of Ziph, having with him three thousand chosen men of Israel, to search for David in the wilderness of Ziph. 3 Saul camped in the hill of Hachilah, which is before Jeshimon, beside the road, and David was staying in the wilderness. When he saw that Saul came after him into the wilderness, 4 David sent out spies, and he knew that Saul was definitely coming. 5 David then arose and came to the place where Saul had camped. And David saw the place where Saul lay, and Abner the son of Ner, the commander of his army; and Saul was lying in the circle of the camp, and the people were camped around him. 6 Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite and to Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, saying, "Who will go down with me to Saul in the camp?" And Abishai said, "I will go down with you." 7 So David and Abishai came to the people by night, and behold, Saul lay sleeping inside the circle of the camp with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the people were lying around him. 8 Then Abishai said to David, "Today God has delivered your enemy into your hand; now therefore, please let me strike him with the spear to the ground with one stroke, and I will not strike him the second time." 9 But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him, for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD'S anointed and be without guilt?" 10 David also said, "As the LORD lives, surely the LORD will strike him, or his day will come that he dies, or he will go down into battle and perish. 11 "The LORD forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed; but now please take the spear that is at his head and the jug of water, and let us go." 12 So David took the spear and the jug of water from beside Saul's head, and they went away, but no one saw or knew it, nor did any awake, for they were all asleep, because a sound sleep from the LORD had fallen on them. 13 Then David crossed over to the other side and stood on top of the mountain at a distance with a large area between them. 14 David called to the people and to Abner the son of Ner, saying, "Will you not answer, Abner?" Then Abner replied, "Who are you who calls to the king?" 15 So David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? And who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not guarded your lord the king? For one of the people came to destroy the king your lord. 16 "This thing that you have done is not good. As the LORD lives, all of you must surely die, because you did not guard your lord, the LORD'S anointed. And now, see where the king's spear is and the jug of water that was at his head." 17 Then Saul recognized David's voice and said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And David said, "It is my voice, my lord the king." 18 He also said, "Why then is my lord pursuing his servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand? 19 "Now therefore, please let my lord the king listen to the words of his servant. If the LORD has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering; but if it is men, cursed are they before the LORD, for they have driven me out today so that I would have no attachment with the inheritance of the LORD, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.' 20 "Now then, do not let my blood fall to the ground away from the presence of the LORD; for the king of Israel has come out to search for a single flea, just as one hunts a partridge in the mountains." 21 Then Saul said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have committed a serious error." 22 David replied, "Behold

> *the spear of the king! Now let one of the young men come over and take it. 23 "The LORD will repay each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the LORD delivered you into my hand today, but I refused to stretch out my hand against the LORD'S anointed. 24 "Now behold, as your life was highly valued in my sight this day, so may my life be highly valued in the sight of the LORD, and may He deliver me from all distress." 25 Then Saul said to David, "Blessed are you, my son David; you will both accomplish much and surely prevail." So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place.*

The reading details how King Saul set out to locate and murder David, but God delivered Saul into David's hands who did not take advantage of the opportunity and kill him because of his respect for "the Lord's anointed" (v. 11). David seized the opportunity only so far as to gather evidence of his innocence in harming Saul by taking his water pot and spear, which he then offered to return to him by means of some long-range yelling across the canyon (v. 14). The whole affair resulted in Saul making a public confession of his sin by way of screaming a reply to David whose voice he recognized. Saul said, "*I have sinned. Return, my son David, for I will not harm you again because my life was precious in your sight this day. Behold, I have played the fool and have committed a serious error*" (v. 21).

This chronicle revealed some very important attributes of godly King David. Although David was in fact the king whom God has already ordained to replace Saul, David waited for God to resolve the issue of the dueling kingship. David respected the position of King and God's ordination of the office, and he left the deposition of the king in the hands of God rather than taking advantage of the many opportunities he had to remove Saul and step in as the rightful ruler and King of Israel. Additionally, King David was patient in waiting on God to formally induct him into the position of King.

In the context of theocratic kingdom, the king of Israel served not only as an all powerful civil ruler but also held a defacto religious position by means of their direct appointment by God. There is a clear distinction between the former kings of Israel in the rulers of our day because the religious and civil powers are more clearly separated. In terms of application, in our day, which of us hasn't seen the obviously evil goings on of our civil rulers and wished that we could take advantage of some easy opportunity to remove these rulers from power, even if by recounting or a recall election? Which of us hasn't looked upon a religious leader with disgust because of abuse of their position and some moral failures? Yet, even today God has made it clear that we are called to respect those people who are placed in positions of authority while not approving their wickedness. Saint Paul said in Romans,

> *"1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. 3 For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; 4 for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on*

the one who practices evil" Romans 13:1-4).

This reverence for authority, both of civil and religious leaders, is the primary lesson which we can take away from the reading. Second, we can learn from David and seek to become like him as he was "a man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22) who waited with great patience and virtual for God to work out His plan in his life.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This week's second reading continues from First Corinthians last week which ended at verse 20. This portion of Chapter 15 picks up after Paul had explained how our natural bodies are planted as seeds that then emerge as spiritual bodies after we die in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15: 36-44). Paul said about our natural bodies, "it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (v. 44). We pick up with t reading in verse 45.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:45-49 NAS95 45 So also it is written, "The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. 47 The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. 48 As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

The reading opened with Paul's quotation of Genesis, the creation account of how God created man. "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The central idea in the reading was the continuation of the concept of the spiritual seed we mentioned in the introduction. The natural body is planted as a spiritual seed in order to accomplish God's work on the soil of the world. It is only after the seed dies in the course of the world that it then blossoms into a spiritual one and bears much fruit by bringing others to do so.

Paul's teaching in the reading closely parallels the Lord Jesus' Parable of the Grain of Wheat in John 12. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). In essence, one must die to ourselves and allow God to work through ourselves in order to produce spiritual fruit. After the seed of our natural body dies on earth it then blossoms into the fruit of eternal life which comes through our faith in the Lord Jesus.

We saw in the first reading how David rather died to himself when he didn't take advantage of a blatant opportunity to kill Saul, even though Saul sought to murder him. We know how Jesus during His first reign set aside the independent use of his divine power while looking forward to the day when He would receive His new body upon resurrection from the dead and the day in which He

would return to the earth to rule and reign forever. In our lives, we too are called to die to ourselves and can do so knowing that our earthly bodies will be replaced with eternal ones in heaven with God. Through our faith in Jesus and through what we have learned in the Scriptures we can set aside our rights and privileges and die to our own desires, even when it appears obvious to nonbelievers that we should claims our rights.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Today's Gospel reading continues from last week in Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:27-38 NAS95 27 "But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. 30 Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. 31 Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. 32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. 37 Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. 38 Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure–pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."*

Jesus' heavenly perspective challenged those who heard Him to engage in many unheard of practices in a culture of Roman oppression and occupation. And yet even the common sense of that era would have ruled against doing good for one's enemies, the most obvious case the Roman soldiers who forced the Jewish citizens to assist them in various ways or face prosecution. Imagine standing in a marketplace in Jerusalem minding your own business when you are approached by a soldier demanding you to carry his armor some distance to an adjacent city? Or one of them demanding a bribe from you in order to alleviate you of the burden. This was the culture in which Jesus presented this message.

Jesus challenged those listening to love their enemies (v. 27), bless those who cursed or mistreated them (v. 28), not retaliate against someone who struck them (v. 29), give to the needy (v. 29), and the treat others the same way that they wanted to be treated, i.e. the Golden Rule. By following these prescriptions, they would receive a heavenly reward. Jesus went on to challenge those

listening even further, extending even to their thought lives regarding not judging people in their minds. In closing, Jesus reminded the people that their blessings to other people will be repaid (v. 38), however not in exactly the way they may have imagined in an earthly sense. Rather, their repayment Jesus is describing is one of spiritual value, like we saw in the second reading with the sowing of an earthly body maturing into a spiritual one.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount isn't as much a calling to behave better, to become a better person by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Rather, he is challenging us to maximize our production of spiritual fruit by setting aside our earthly rights to things like responding to unfair criticism. Instead, He calls us to hold our words in the hope that our behavior may be so counter cultural that the offending party will seek to find out what is so different about us. In this way our quiet behavior may result in the worldly parties seeking the truth of the Gospel for themselves.

My brother in law once owned a breakfast / brunch type restaurant in which he had invested a great deal of money in new equipment after taking on a large business loan. One day he went to the store to begin his work day only to find out that his key wouldn't work, he had been locked out of his own restaurant after the locks had been changed. Come to find out the store was being taken over by the employees who thought that they had better ideas on how to run the operation. My Christian brother could have sued, but with the equipment being in a rented building and the landlord in cahoots with the new "owners," there was little possible value in the legal case. His attorney told him that he would likely win the case against his former employees, but then be unable to collect anything of any real value, and then the restaurant equipment would have to be destroyed in order to be removed. In the end and after much prayer, my brother in law chose to take the high road and allow the employees to reopen the restaurant without his interference.

How many of us could have followed Jesus' instruction in today's Sermon and acted in such a counter cultural way as my brother in law?

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of a time when your right were violated and you were rightfully allowed some form of retaliation but instead chose not to? What was the long-term impact of this upon the others in that case?
2. In the seed-bearing analogy, God has planted us in the world in order to die to ourselves so that we can produce spiritual fruit. What are some specific circumstances in which you have recently died to yourself, and how does knowing about Jesus' life and ministry help to deal with your feelings regarding these matters?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-17-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from the Prophet Jeremiah, the second reading from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, and finally the Gospel from Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the prophet Jeremiah, who was known as the weeping prophet, due to the devastation and grief he experienced with the exiled people of God in the days of the Old Testament. He makes a set of contrasting statements in this passage, that provide a stark interpretive framework for the meaning of life on this planet. While there are many confusing and chaotic experiences in life, some things are very easily defined, based on Jeremiah's words here.

First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 17:5-8 NAS95 5 Thus says the LORD, "Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind And makes flesh his strength, And whose heart turns away from the LORD. 6 For he will be like a bush in the desert And will not see when prosperity comes, But will live in stony wastes in the*

> *wilderness, A land of salt without inhabitant. 7 Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD. 8 For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit."*

First of all, Jeremiah delivers the bad news: cursed is the one who puts his/her trust in the wrong things. What are these false places of trust? The list includes: 1) mankind, 2) one's own strength, and 3) anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. Then he provides a word picture to help the reader taste the severity of this misplaced trust. Putting our trust in the wrong things creates a desperate situation, likened to a bush in a desert where there is no water. The unquenching thirst becomes a wasting sort of lifestyle, where there is no hope for flourishing or true prosperity. The "bush" lives in a wasteland, where it is surrounded by unsatisfying and harsh conditions, incompatible with life. This is an excellent picture of the soul that is disconnected from the Lord. While there may be signs of life on the outside, the sentence of death is already pronounced on it and it cannot survive, let alone thrive in this world.

Jeremiah describes this inhospitable environment as "a land of salt" where there are no people who can stand to live there. Again, this picture conjures up a truth about the soul, namely, that it is thirsty. But apart from God's provision, there is no satiation for our thirst. It is a land of salt. And though we may try and try to find water, we end up joining into the song that is sung by the world (in a myriad of different ways): "I can't get no satisfaction."

What hope is there for the thirsty soul? Jeremiah delivers the good news. There is blessing for those who are tired of living under the curse. There is life for those who are feeling the sting of death. There is abundance for those who are willing to give up their pursuit of false notions of satisfaction. The key to true blessing is to put your trust in the Lord. The result of putting your trust in the right place is likened to a tree that is planted where it can flourish, next to water. Even in a time of heat and drought, it still finds water, because the roots extend into the rich and fertile soil that has been saturated with the life-giving stream. The tree is not "anxious" because the water gives it stability and strength to weather storms and extreme conditions. The tree can give its energy to bearing fruit, even if the immediate climate is not conducive to growth and flourishing. What a picture of contentment and satisfaction. Who would not want to experience the abundance of this second picture of the flourishing tree and avoid the forlornness of the first picture of the scroungy bush?

The problem is not that the tree is thirsty; the problem comes when the tree is not planted into the One who can satisfy the thirst. And there comes the rub. We all want an abundant and fruitful life, but there are different philosophies of how to get there. Will we trust the Word of the Lord, or will we experiment with trying to find life outside of God's provision for us? Will we trust the Lord, who Is the One who created all things, knows all things, and provides us with all things? Or will we determine our own path and put our confidence in our own paths?

Trusting in the Lord. How simple, and yet how very difficult this is for us. The human soul has a

tough time believing and trusting in the Lord, especially when life's circumstances are going poorly. We wonder where God is and why He is not doing more to protect and help us. Hardships and setbacks, like what the people of Israel experienced, mock us for being naïve enough to trust a God who seems impotent to save us from the difficulties of life. But is it possible that when God is not saving us from trials, He may be saving us from something more destructive and dangerous that is intangible? Is it possible that God really is helping us, even when we hurt and He doesn't take the pain away?

Jeremiah had to live out of this type of crusty, determined faith in the LORD in the midst of the exile and physical oppression during the siege of Jerusalem. His roots had to extend very deep and far to find streams of living water, for God's chosen people were being brutally attacked, pillaged, and destroyed. If Jeremiah can trust in the LORD, then maybe we, too, can walk by faith in the One who is ultimately "faithful and true" (Revelation 19:11). The two ways are clearly depicted in this passage. The question is, where will we plant ourselves and where will we place our trust?

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading drops us in the middle of a heated discussion that was being tossed around in Paul's day and was affecting the Corinthian church. Some were heretically saying that resurrection from the dead was emphatically an impossibility. But instead of divorcing themselves totally from the message of Christianity, they were trying to syncretize this belief into the Gospel (Good News). Paul starts out this chapter by clarifying the message of the Gospel. In verses 1-4 of chapter 15, he states the heart of the Gospel: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day. All of this happened according to what Scripture had predicted and what had been recorded by eyewitnesses. Paul himself was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus. God's Word was trustworthy on this point, which meant it was trustworthy on other points as well.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:12-20 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*
>
> *Omitted: (vv. 13-15)*
>
> *13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 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.*

> *16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. 20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.*

Paul continues to adamantly proclaim the importance of the resurrection of Christ from the dead as the linchpin that holds the Christian faith together. For if Christ did not rise from the dead, "your faith is worthless" (v. 17). Paul, a master orator, takes their logic to the final outcomes and shows how ludicrous it is to believe in a Christian message that is devoid of resurrection power. Some points of logic that he makes include:

- The resurrection of Christ and those who follow Him is a fundamental part of the Gospel (Good News). For if resurrection is impossible, then Christ was not raised, and cannot raise us.
- IF the resurrection did not happen, then
    - Paul's preaching (and suffering) was in vain and he was a false witness,
    - their faith was in vain, worthless, and, in fact, they were still in their sins,
    - those who had already died in Christ were completely lost—without hope and never to rise again, and
    - hoping in Christ for this life only is a fool's game—not at all a smart move.

Seeing the nature of the ridiculous conclusions that were stacked up on top of this heresy makes this position untenable with the Christian faith.

The definitive "But" comes into play in the last verse of this passage (v. 20a). "**But** now Christ *has* been raised from the dead" which makes all of the above obsolete. Paul in this sweeping way, underscores the importance of the resurrection of Christ, which has bearing on our lives today. For He was the line leader of what is to come for all who trust in Him. He was the first "fruit" and our resurrection from the dead will be a fruit that follows this inaugural event. Christ changed the trajectory of the human race by living a perfectly righteous life as a human being, which meant that death had no hold on Him. He bore the weight of the world's sin on His shoulders, even though He did no deserve the punishment of our sin, which is death. Therefore, His victory over the grave is our victory over the grave. And while we still experience physical death, we no longer are sentenced to spiritual death, if we will but entrust ourselves to His provision of grace. This is not just good news, it's the best news ever! May the resurrection life of Christ reorient our lives and become the most important organizing principle of our lives.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The heavenly perspective of Jesus is often shocking to those of us who have been saturated in a worldview where there is no God and that operates according to the prince of this world. The Gospel passage for this week provides one of these experiences where the world's values are juxtaposed to

God's value system. If we don't have eyes to see, it's not that God is out of step with reality, but more likely that we are blind to the power of an unseen world. Jesus came to shine light into our darkness.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 6:17-26 NAS95 17 Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place; and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon,*
>
> *Omitted: (vv. 18-19)*
>
> *18 who had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. 19 And all the people were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all.*
>
> *20 And turning His gaze toward His disciples, He began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. 22 Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. 23 Be glad in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven. For in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. 24 But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. 25 Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way.*

The setting of the Gospel reading finds Jesus gaining acclaim and recognition amongst not only the Jewish people, but even those from more distant regions that were not particularly God-fearing (Tyre and Sidon). His acclaim, though, seemed to have more to do with what He could do to alleviate finite trials, than about what He could to do to alleviate the infinite problem of sin and disconnection from the Father. So, while He was willing to demonstrate the power of God by healing people of diseases and delivering others from demon possession, He was not willing to further the bent of the human soul that seeks to "use God" for devilish purposes. This passage clarifies that God is not a genie in a bottle, or a vending machine that can be formulaically approached for one's own desired ends.

Instead, Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Here is what He calls blessed:

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead it

shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

Here is what He cautions us against by saying "Woe" to you who:

- Using your wealth as an end in itself; thinking that material goods can fill the cavernous whole in your soul
- Satisfying your hunger now with finite things, leaving no room for spiritual hunger to drive you to pursue eternal satisfaction
- Seek to always be amused, for there is a somber reality of this life that is designed to bring us to a place of contemplating the meaning and purpose of human existence
- Find approval from others as the organizing principle of your life, for you will never find truth. Instead, you will be willing to accept what is false in order to impress others and fit in with the crowd's worldview.

This teaching of Jesus is not popular, nor easy to incorporate into our lives. The very fact that we have a hard time with it is one of the authenticating proofs of its validity. If it meshed with our human value system, we could hardly believe it as representative of heavenly realities. So, before we try to domesticate what Jesus teaches, we must ask ourselves if we trust Him. If we do, then we will seek to understand and incorporate His perspective into our worldview and allow Him to reorient our value system, no matter how difficult or long this process may take. The good news is that we do not have to attain this perspective on our own strength or through our own striving. When we feel overwhelmed by these truths, we are in a good spot to look up and call out for help. A heartfelt acknowledgment of our weakness to live out of this heavenly mindset is the entry point for God to do a new work in our lives. The Spirit is willing to reshape us to have the mind of Christ—the question is are we willing to let Him do this work in us? Do we trust Him enough to let Him take us where we need to go, to become the type of people who have a counter-cultural mindset? If we do, then we will stand out as lights in a dark and decaying world.

Reflection Questions

1. The Prophet Jeremiah listed three false places of trust which were mankind, one's own strength, and anything that causes one to turn away from the LORD. It was perhaps easier for this man of God to understand his own weaknesses. Can you identify with any of these three false places of trust? In what ways does having faith in Jesus help to deliver you from any of these in which you identify?

2. In the Gospel reading we learned how Jesus redefined "blessing" in a way that is unrecognizable if we are not yoked to His mindset and value system. Review the four points of blessing. With which of these can you identify with and what spiritual circumstance brought (or is bringing) this about?

- Being poor, for this signifies that you are not operating on the world's value system. Instead it shows that you belong to the kingdom of God.
- Being hungry, for you are trusting God to satisfy your needs.
- Being tender-hearted enough to weep, for then you are at a place to be comforted by God's perspective, which leads to His joy and laughter.
- Being hated, ostracized, insulted, and scorned for Christ's sake, for then you will no longer be trying to find your joy in the approval of others, but will find it in the approval of God and His rewards.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-10-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. Once or twice in a lifetime God allows events to occur in the life of a person for reasons that they may not understand at the moment but later see how God used them to reveal their pride and sinfulness and need for salvation through faith in Jesus. Some time ago one of those things happened to me. Back in the day I was an engineer at one of the Big Three automotive companies (blue oval!). I wore a suit and tie to work each day and had a pass to access the test track across the street. I drove a brand-new truck and in my mind, I guess I kind of saw myself as important in the overall scheme of things in the automotive world. One day as I was getting dressed, I examined the pattern of stitching on my underwear and how the tag was placed on the opposite side of the seams and overlapping seams that joined the panels together. As an engineer I thought, isn't that strange how they placed the tag on the wrong side so that it faced out when the seams were faced in? Then it hit me, I had, for my entire life mind you, worn my underwear inside out with the tag facing out and the finished seams facing in (which even today still seems very logical to me!). I thought that I was such an important engineer and yet I had worn my underwear backwards during my entire career. As my grandma would have said, good thing I didn't have an accident. Pride gets the best of us, but God has His ways of revealing our pride in order to help us to be released to worship Him.

This week we open with a reading from the Prophet Isaiah in which we learn about our need for cleansing from our sin as well as a vision of God on His throne. Then we move to the second reading from the next to last chapter of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians where we learn about how he corrected an important misunderstanding regarding the crucially important doctrine of the resurrection. Then we close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Luke in which we see how Jesus performed a great miracle among a group of common fishermen in order to gather His own catch of men. We are going to see today how when God places a unique calling upon a person such as a prophet or disciple of Christ he often brings those people to the point of understanding their sinfulness and need for a Savior. A. W. Tozer said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." Such is the case that we will see today when we encounter two men whom God deeply convicted of their sins. As we study you may wish to check the direction in which your underwear is facing.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 6. The context of the reading is just after the pronouncement of woes upon the people of Israel for their sin in the previous chapter. His messages follow the pattern "Woe to those who." "Therefore," Isaiah said, "My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge" (Isaiah 5:13b). Isaiah continued his song of woes saying, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). The prophet's words are eerily reminiscent of Saint Paul's warnings about what was to come upon the world in the last days, a period that began the moment Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. Paul said, "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers,

disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Isaiah's pronouncement of woes serves as a warning to all generations about the deceitfulness and danger of sin. We shouldn't be surprised by events happening in Isaiah's day as if the Israelites were somehow worse sinners than the people of our own age.

From this context we begin the readings. You'll see a huge contrast between the wickedness of people and the holiness of God.

First Reading:

> *Isaiah 6:1-8 NAS95 1 In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. 2 Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." 4 And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. 5 Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. 7 He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." 8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

The first insight that jumps out of the reading requires some careful insight into the background of King Uzziah mentioned in the first verse. Isaiah provides the date of his vision as "In the year of King Uzziah's death" (v. 1a), meaning sometime after the date of King Uzziah as recorded in 2 Chronicles 26:23. King Uzziah was one of the good kings of Judah, although sometime during the end of his reign pride got the better of him when he attempted to usurp the function of a priest by burning incense to the Lord (2 Chronicles 26:16). Afterwards, because of his pride God inflicted him with leprosy that likely hastened his death. Isaiah is clearly using this mention of Uzziah's death as a warning about the danger of pride because as he continues in the reading he shows how God convicted him of his own pride. Upon seeing some miniscule portion of the glory of the Lord, Isaiah was deeply convicted of his sinful nature and said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips" (v. 5). Pride is something that anyone exposed to direct revelation from God would most likely struggle with. Their vision and special role left them vulnerable to the assumption that they were superior. Add to this the fact that once the prophets began to experience God's message, they would have been called to live much holier lives than the surrounding people did. Even Saint Paul wasn't immune from pride because we know that God inflicted him with a "thorn in the flesh." Paul said, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh,

a messenger of Satan to torment me–to keep me from exalting myself!" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Isaiah was no different and as we see in the reading, he required conviction of his sin and subsequent forgiveness (v. 7). The ministry of forgiveness was delivery by none other than the seraphim, a special type of angel who use two of their wings to cover their face (v. 2). Interestingly, although the angels cover their faces, Isaiah is allowed to see the glory of God. God allows this for the purpose of revealing Isaiah's uncleanness and compelling need for forgiveness. We see through the reading that forgiveness came from the altar of God, as only God can forgive sin.

Sometimes as I'm reading the Bible as I study the text and the related passages I come to an "aha moment." During my study for this reading, I had one of those moments as I remembered how Saint John had said something about Isaiah. When we read the Gospels, we need to take careful notice when either the writers or Jesus Himself quotes from the Bible (what we now call the Old Testament). In this case, Saint John clearly indicated that Jesus was the Person on the throne about whom Isaiah spoke. As proof, first, we know that no one can see God in His fullness and live (Exodus 33:20). However, Scripture says that the prophets saw varying manifestations of God, as Saint John made clear in the following verse:

39 For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, 40 "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE CONVERTED AND I HEAL THEM." 41 These things Isaiah said **because he saw His glor**y, and he spoke of Him. (John 12:39 -41, emphasis added, note that the capital letters indicate quotations from the Old Testament.)

Had we read past verse 8 in Isaiah where today's reading ended we would have seen these verses:

Isaiah 6:9-10 NAS95 9 He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; Keep on looking, but do not understand.' 10 "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, Their ears dull, And their eyes dim, Otherwise they might see with their eyes, Hear with their ears, Understand with their hearts, And return and be healed."

Do you see the correlation between John's writing in the Gospel and the verses he quoted from the Old Testament in Isaiah? Aha, what John was saying was that it was **Jesus'** glory that Isaiah was seeing, the glory of God on His throne!

For additional evidence that the One that Isaiah saw high and lifted up on the throne was Jesus, Isaiah used the same language about this Person in today's reading as compared to his writings about the coming Messiah in the Servant Songs later in chapters 52 – 53. Isaiah spoke of the Lord "sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted" (v. 1). Later in the Servant Songs Isaiah said about the coming Servant Messiah Jesus: "Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted" (Isaiah 52:13). What Saint John was explaining by drawing from Isaiah was that Jesus is God spoken of in the Old Testament. Jesus said. "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

We can celebrate the ways in which Jesus revealed His glory to the world in both the Old and New Testaments. We can have confidence that even though Isaiah may not have completely understood his visions and writings he faithfully recorded them in the Scriptures such that some seven hundred years later Jesus could come along and fulfill them. In the same way, we can trust that when we read the prophetic verses in the **New** Testament, they too will be fulfilled in exquisite detail in ways that we cannot totally understand. In spite of the fact that we don't have a perfect understanding of how things will play out, we can trust that God has enlightened our understanding to the extent necessary for us to accomplish the work that He has for us to accomplish.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the next to last chapter of First Corinthians and contains an early creedal statement in the first half dozen verses. Paul had just finished his instruction on the necessity of order in worship, so it's appropriate that this section opens with the statement of one of the earliest creeds of the church.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:1-11 NAS95 1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; 8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.*

One of the problems in the Corinthian church was that some of them didn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is made clear by the verses immediately following today's reading:

> *1 Corinthians 15:12-19 NAS95 12 Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. 15 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. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; 17 and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your*

> *sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.*

This context is extremely important in understanding Paul's purpose in including such deep creedal statements before he addresses the Corinthian's unbelief. You may have heard how those in the government have taught that the best way to spot a counterfeit bill is not to study the counterfeits, but instead to become intimately familiar first with genuine articles. This is exactly what Paul did by leading with the truth and then addressing the Corinthian's unbelief as a means of providing a bridge to those confused about the resurrection of Christ. Paul taught many deep spiritual truths in the first seven verses including things that we, as believers, take for granted with our more extensive understanding of faith and more extensive creeds such as the one recited each week during Sunday Mass. Paul taught:

- People are saved by receiving, standing and holding fast to the Gospel (v. 1).
- Christ died for our sins, that this was in fulfillment of the Scriptures, and that He was buried and raised on the third day again as predicted by the Bible (v. 3). This provided confirmation of the truthfulness of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus.
- The resurrected Jesus appeared to more than five hundred believers, some of whom were still alive at the time of his writing (v. 6). This was important because as live witnesses they would have been able to challenge these writings about the resurrection of Jesus.

The reading also relates to what we learned about Isaiah in the first reading in terms of the necessity of prophets to have a humble heart. He said that he was the "least of the apostles," one whom had persecuted the church (v. 9), yet labored harder than all the others because the grace of God was with him (v. 10). Yet as an apostle of Christ he had a unique calling in that when he was formerly a persecutor of the church (v. 9) the resurrected Lord appeared to him. Finally, he exclaimed that regardless of who preached the good news, the end result was that the people believed (v. 11). He said something very similar to this in Philippians:

> *Philippians 1:15-18 NAS95 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice,*

We see in this reading Saint Paul's heart for ministry. We saw how he provided the Corinthians with both truth and evidence of the truth, an "apologetic." The defense of the truth is very important in our day with a culture that denies the existence of absolute truth, yet does so absolutely. Although there is plenty of room for discussion and even error on various Christian doctrines, the resurrection is one of the central, defining doctrines of our Christian faith. We saw this in Paul's own words. "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we transition to the Gospel lesson, we will return to a very similar theme that we saw in the first reading from Isaiah. Here we will see the calling of the disciples of Christ and how the Holy Spirit convicted Peter of his sinfulness and need for a Savior.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 5:1-11 NAS95 1 Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; 2 and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. 3 And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. 4 When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." 5 Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets. 6 When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; 7 so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" 9 For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men." 11 When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.*

In the reading we see the occurrence of several miracles. We see the Lord's miracle of gathering the fish into the particular spot in which to be caught (v.4). Next, we see how Simon Peter followed Jesus' instruction (vv. 5-6), a miracle in itself. Then we see the miracle of the gigantic catch (v. 6). However, perhaps the greatest miracle of all was how God enlightened Simon Peter's heart to reveal his sinfulness and frail humanity (v. 8). Yet another miracle was how this group of disciples (Peter, James, and John) were willing to forsake their livelihood and instead become "fishers of men" (v. 10). All of these miracles are significant in that they helped bring about the specific calling to a discrete small group of disciples eventually numbering just twelve select people, each with unique skills and gift mix.

One of the significant things in the reading concerns how God requires humility in His servants. Just like we saw how Isaiah responded to seeing the glory of Jesus on His throne, Saint Peter responded in a very similar way when he experienced the miraculous catch of fish. Any sport fisherman who has ever endured a slow fishing season may understand that even a nominal catch is a miracle. However, in the case of the Peter, James and John these were professional fishermen who made their living at fishing. Peter's reaction indicated that there was much more going on than just the miraculous catch, God was working in his heart to convict him of his sinfulness as well as using the miracle to

prove that Jesus was able to fulfil His words.

What are some ways that we can apply what we have learned today? In the first reading we saw how God exposed Isaiah's sinfulness and need for cleansing from his sin. In the Gospel lesson we saw how Saint Peter was convicted of his sinfulness and need for a Savior. In our lives we must be aware of our own pride and our need for God's forgiveness, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). God in His grace brings to mind our sinfulness so that we may repent of our sin and be healed (see Acts 3:19). Without God Himself bearing the penalty for **our** sin the ultimate end for us is death (Romans 6:23). He did this for us through His grace while we were hopelessly trapped in our sin with no hope of escape. Paul said, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Our receipt of the free gift of forgiveness comes through our faith in the Lord Jesus and not any of our perceived good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Saint Paul said that we need to receive this gift:

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

God tells us not to take this for granted, but rather to test ourselves. "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?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). The stakes are very high, each of us should examine our hearts and see whether we are trusting only in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for us, because in terms of earning our salvation God said through Isaiah, "Our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before the Lord" (Proverbs 14:12). Let us take to heart the Gospel message: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). It is not enough to just know the Gospel, we must respond to message and live in light of this good news.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading Saint Paul provide several proofs regarding the resurrection. A. How do these proofs provide you with comfort today?
2. Why is the resurrection of **our** bodies important to you and how can this doctrine help you in light of the things with which you are suffering?
3. What areas of pride has God revealed to you? How has He used these times of "breaking" to usher you into new places of trust and intimacy with Him?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-03-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with two passages from the prophecy of Jeremiah, who served during the time of Judah's spiritual downfall, preparing her for captivity and removal from the land. The second reading is from the familiar but remarkable chapter on love in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church. The final reading is from Luke's Gospel and relates the story of Jesus' encounter in a Jewish synagogue where His teaching so enraged the people that they tried to kill Him.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Because of his great sorrow over the sin of the people and impending judgment to come upon them, Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the "weeping prophet." He was not just a melancholy neurotic,

however; his was a soul of deep spirituality and great sensibility. One writer describes Jeremiah as "the most Christ-like character in the Old Testament." The prophet saw the beginning of the nation's Babylonian captivity and the destruction of Jerusalem. In spite of his preaching, he had no converts. He was rejected by his own people, hated, beaten, imprisoned, called a traitor, and forced to flee. Nonetheless, he was faithful to deliver God's message to the people, knowing it would fall on deaf ears.

First Reading:

> *Jeremiah 1:4-5 NAS95 4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."*
>
> *Jeremiah 1:17-19 NAS95 17 "Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them. 18 "Now behold, I have made you today as a fortified city and as a pillar of iron and as walls of bronze against the whole land, to the kings of Judah, to its princes, to its priests and to the people of the land. 19 "They will fight against you, but they will not overcome you, for I am with you to deliver you," declares the LORD.*
>
> How reassuring it must have been for Jeremiah to have God speak to him directly and assure him that he was created by God and known by Him before his birth. God had chosen, "consecrated" (that is, set him apart), and "appointed" him to be his prophet to Judah, the remaining southern portion of the former kingdom of Israel.

Jeremiah began his ministry during the reign of Josiah (1:2) and lived through the reformation that Josiah brought about after the discovery of the Book of the Law in the Temple (see 2 Kings 22-23). To see the nation's departure from the faith and their refusal to repent was no doubt the cause for the prophet's great sorrow. His commission from the Lord must have been a great challenge from the very beginning. Although God told him he would make him like a "fortified city" and "a pillar of iron" with "walls of bronze," He also warned him that the people "will fight against you." It would be difficult for anyone to accept such a challenge with enthusiasm and hopeful prospects. The reader might be reminded of Isaiah who, also, was told that his message would be heard but not understood; the people would see but not perceive; their hearts would be "calloused," their "ears dull," and their eyes "closed" (Isaiah 6:9-10). But God did not leave Jeremiah without hope at all. He assured him that the people would not overcome him and, best of all, He said, "I am with you to deliver you."

Success for Jeremiah was not to see Judah protected from captivity or delivered from the enemy. Nor was it to have the nation respond to his message with repentance, a change of heart and mind, and a return to God in faith and obedience. Success was to be faithful in preaching the message God gave him, to persist in spite of opposition, and to trust God for the outcome. Thus, Jeremiah is a worthy

model for us to emulate.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Paul's ministry in Corinth is recorded in Acts 18 toward the end of his second missionary journey. Corinth was a Roman colony, an influential city in its province. In spite of difficulties and opposition in Corinth, Paul remained there "many days," perhaps 18 months. In his first letter to the Corinthians, a few years after his initial visit, the apostle deals with a number of problems, disagreements, and even divisions in the church body. His purpose is to correct the errors and encourage the people to spiritual growth and unity. Sanctification might well be considered the theme, that is, the encouragement to follow Jesus in obedience and life transformation that would set them apart as disciples of Christ.

Today's reading is in the middle of a very detailed discussion of spiritual gifts, which begins in 12:1 and continues in chapters 14 & 15.Perhaps Paul understood that the subject in hand was so controversial and divisive that he needed to introduce a topic of essential importance if there was to be harmony among the believers. Chapter 13 is known far-and-wide as the great chapter on love, and it must be clearly understood if it is to become the standard by which Christ-followers are to be known. (See John 13:34-45).

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13 NAS95 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way. 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. 4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

Paul makes it clear in chapter 12 that spiritual gifts are supernaturally given to the church for the benefit of the body, not for individual pleasure. As he writes in v. 31, believers "should earnestly

desire the **greater** gifts, and he proceeds to show a "more excellent way," the way of love. To read chapter 13 is to understand something about the essential element for unity in the body and fruitful ministry. "Love conquers all," as they say.

Verses 1-3 highlight the preeminence of love. No matter how effective we might be in getting our message out, no matter how gifted we may be, no matter how great our faith in God is—without love, our efforts will be fruitless, and our work will be for nothing. We should keep in mind that there are several words for love in the language that Paul used. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul chose to use the word agapé, which is a word of action more than emotion. It means acting toward another person in the best interest of that person. It is unselfish, other-directed, and self-sacrificing. Paul is saying that love is preferred over eloquence, prophecy, mysteries, knowledge, faith—all of which he himself demonstrated in abundance.

The words that describe love in verses 4-7 are indicative of the qualities that the Christian should possess and demonstrate. Many are included in the list of the Spirit's "fruit," in Galatians 5:22-23. We would do well to ask ourselves, "How many of these godly traits do I show to others in my daily life?" Patience, kindness, generosity, humility, goodness, graciousness, confidence, assurance, endurance: are they easily seen in our lives? One of the most convicting truths about love is that it doesn't keep track of wrongs. How difficult it is for many of us to lovingly overlook the wrongs done against us.

The concluding verses of the chapter (8-13) emphasize the permanence of love. Everything else may pass away from our lives and experience, but love will endure. Paul uses a very helpful metaphor to explain how life should reflect our growing maturity. We used to "speak," "think," and "reason like a child," but when we grew up, we "did away with childish things." He goes on to teach us that we have not yet arrived, we see things now only "dimly," but one day it will be "face to face," and then we'll understand fully all that God has planned for us. The concluding sentence (v. 13) is well known, but perhaps not fully appreciated. Faith and hope are essential, of course, and they will continue to be important, but the greatest attribute of the Christian life is the continual demonstration of love. Jesus said that we are to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-38).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

Luke's Gospel is the result of the careful study of Dr. Luke, a companion of the apostle Paul, who wanted to present an accurate review of the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke focuses on Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. He makes it clear that the gospel is for both Jews and Gentles. He seeks to confirm what Christians already believed was true and trustworthy. Today's reading details the appearance of Jesus in a synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown. Apparently he attended there regularly. On this occasion he stood up to read from the sacred scrolls. In this passage we read about the conflict between Jesus

and the crowd who earlier "were speaking well of him," but changed in their attitude after His reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 4:21-30 NAS95 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?" 23 And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" 24 And He said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is welcome in his hometown. 25 "But I say to you in truth, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut up for three years and six months, when a great famine came over all the land; 26 and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. 27 "And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." 28 And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; 29 and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. 30 But passing through their midst, He went His way.*

Jesus read a portion of chapter 61 of Isaiah's prophecy, and indicated that it had "been fulfilled in your hearing." At that point everyone responded well to His comment and wondered what it all meant. They identified Jesus with Joseph, Mary's husband, and the presumed father of Jesus. Jesus knows that the people had heard of the wonderful things he had done at Capernaum and knew that the people wondered why he didn't do such things here in Nazareth. Jesus answers with what has become a common expression today, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country."

Jesus then relates two stories that were, no doubt, familiar to his audience. The prophet Elijah had helped a poor widow who was suffering in the midst of a famine of three-and-a-half years. His successor, Elisha, brought healing to the Syrian general, Naaman, a leper. The point of these illustrations from history is that even the greatest of God's prophets did not serve everyone; not every leper was healed; not every widow was cared for. Likewise, although Jesus may have performed miracles in other places, He did not do so everywhere and for everyone. The crowd seemed incensed that He did not do these works in His hometown.

Why was the crowd so upset to the degree that they "drove Him out of the city"? They were so enraged that they had intended to throw Him off a cliff. Only by God's miraculous deliverance was Jesus able to escape "passing through their midst." There are several probable major reasons. First, Jesus related two Old Testament stories of the prophets ministering to Gentiles during a time of Israel's unbelief and disobedience. Remember, that one of Luke's purposes in writing his Gospel was to reveal God's great plan to include Gentiles in His redemptive plan. That was an irritant to the Jews.

Second, Jesus seemed to equate Himself with the revered Old Testament prophets. Furthermore, He was making an unambiguous claim that He was the Messiah who fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that He had read. It was because of the total impact of these claims that we read, "They were filled with rage" and sought to kill Him.

Reflection Questions

1. Ask yourself, "Could I, like Jeremiah, remain faithful to teaching God's Word in the midst of strong opposition, endangering my life?" In what ways are you facing opposition to your Christian beliefs and way of life? How has God empowered you to take a stand for Him?
2. I worked for many years with several people who I found out many years later were Christians. I was surprised that they had never approached me to discuss their beliefs, and their bashfulness made me ponder their motives in not doing so. Yet even if they did not speak up I knew that there was something different about them. In what ways is your life characterized by love so anyone who knows you would recognize that you belong to Jesus?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-27-2019

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the Book of Nehemiah in which we learn about rebuilding of the people of God through their learning from the Word of God. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul in which we learn about spiritual gifts distributed among members of the church. Finally, we close with a reading from Luke in which we see Jesus quoting from the Prophet Isaiah in fulfillment of this Old Testament prophet's writings about Jesus.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Nehemiah that concerns itself with the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the people following their exile to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. During their 70 year exile from the land there was a change of world powers from Babylon to Medo/Persia under the reign of King Cyrus. The return to Jerusalem happened in three waves beginning with Zerubbabel as chronicled in Ezra chapters 1 – 6. The second wave was led by Ezra as described in Ezra 7 – 10. The third and final wave was led by Nehemiah as described in Nehemiah chapters 1 – 3. Nehemiah was concerned primarily with the rapid rebuilding of the wall of the city that he accomplished against the greatest of odds in just 52 days. We have to remember that in the ancient near east the city wall formed an extremely important physical barrier in the city but also an import cultural and psychological foundation. The city gate was where information was passed to the people, judgments were held, and various goods moved in and out of the city. This city gates were the choke points through which every important thing passed into the city, whether food, information, or important (or not) people.

There are three topics to keep in mind while reading the chronicles of Nehemiah (and Ezra). First is

the city of God, meaning Jerusalem. Second is the people of God, the Jews. Third is the Word of God. Today's reading is concerning that last topic, as the context of the reading is the restoration of the Scriptures to the people after the restoration of wall of Jerusalem. At this early stage of the restoration of the people to the city, the spiritual lives of the people were in shambles after an entire generation had passed since their captivity in Babylon. As the next generation prepared to resume their lives in the Promised Land, they found the homeland physically broken and spiritually void. Nehemiah, the man of God, after successfully directing the people in the rebuilding the city walls, gathered the people together to hear Ezra cast a vision for the spiritual rebuilding of the people (Nehemiah 7:5). Ezra was a priest who returned with Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 12:1).

First Reading:

> *Nehemiah 8:1-10 NAS95 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel. 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. 4 Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. 8 They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. 9 Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

After the rebuilding of the wall around the city of God, Nehemiah gathered the people of God to learn from the reading of the Word of God. During their seventy-year captivity, the reading of the Word was scarce. As Ezra began the reading of the Word, the people instinctively responded in unison by worshiping the LORD "with their faces to the ground" (v. 6). As the Levites (priests of God) read the Word they also explained it to the people (v. 8). The people began weeping during the preaching of the Word of God (v. 9) to which the leaders responded by declaring the day as a celebration and one on which they were not to be grieved for "the joy of the LORD is [their]

strength" (v. 10).

The people experienced conviction brought about by the Word of God as the priests and Levites explained it to them. This was a very good sign that after their long stay in Babylon that the Word still had this effect upon their hearts. The Book of Ecclesiastes tell us that there is time for everything, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven– A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted" and on it goes (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). There was indeed a time for mourning as God convicted the people of their sin, and it was a good sign that this indeed happened during the reading and explanation of the Word. However, as the day progressed the leaders realized that the time for mourning had ended and instead called the people to celebrate the victory that God had given them.

In the introduction, we mentioned how there were three themes in the Ezra / Nehemiah chronicles including the City of God, the people of God, and the Word of God. As Christians, our identity isn't tied to the City of God (Jerusalem) as was (and is) the Jews. Instead, our identity as the people of God is closely tied to our relationship with the incarnate Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. In John's Gospel Jesus told us that He went aware to "prepare a place for us" (John 14:3). The Book of Revelation describes this place as the New Jerusalem, a heavenly city built by God that will one day descend from heaven and be presented to the people of God. John said, "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). This eternal city, with gates that will never be destroyed is what Jesus is preparing for us now. At the closing of the age of the people of God will inherit the City of God prepared by the Word of God.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul opened this chapter with a clear explanation of his purpose by saying, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware" (1 Corinthians 12:1). First Paul explained there the variety of spiritual gifts that God distributed among the people, next he moved in today's reading to explain their **purpose**.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 12:12-31 NAS95 12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many. 15 If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.*

> *19 If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now there are many members, but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? 31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

The big idea in the reading is that God distributes spiritual gifts among the members of the church, the body of Christ, in diverse ways in order to accomplish His purposes. Each of members of the church are to use their diverse gifts for the building up of the church, the body of Christ. Christians are not to boast about their particular gifts but rather are to cooperate with each other in the body of Christ much in the way that the parts of the body work together. Since each person's abilities are gifts given by God, they are not to boast about the gift that was given to them as if it were somehow superior to the gifting of another church member. For example, the gift of helps is in no way inferior to someone having the gift of hospitality.

The second concept in the reading beginning in verse 28 is the organization of the church by God in order to take maximum advantage of the "gift mix" in the church. God has ordained specific gifts within the organization of the local church such a way as to make the church most effective. When Paul describes the gift of tongues in the church this was most likely what we call a "sign gift" operational in the early church in which certain people were given divine, prophetic utterance which could only be understood by someone with the corresponding gift of interpretation. "Prophecy" in the early church included both foretelling (telling the future) as well as forth telling (exclaiming existing prophecy or Scripture), although the former seems to have gradually ceased in the ages since the beginning of the church age. Some possibly had both the gift of tongues and of interpretation. Additionally, we know that during Pentecost in Acts 2:6 we know that when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the first group of church members they spoke in tongues that the surrounding people heard in their own languages. Regardless of the nature of the gift being described by Paul here in First Corinthians, the gift was one that enriched the churched and helped it to accomplish God's specific purposes in the particular era. It's should not be surprising to us to find giving modern believers different gift mixes in order to accomplish His purposes in our era.

A proper understanding of today's reading is paramount to a proper functioning church today. Although God distributes spiritual gifts as He sees fit, each person is to utilize their gifts to the maximum advantage **of the church**. They are not to boast about the superiority of their gift either vocally or in their hearts as to think of themselves as superior. As Paul closed the reading in verse 31 he mentioned "*And I show you a still more excellent way*" just before he launches into his teaching of the superiority of love over all of the gifts. He said, "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). If we maintain the bond of love at the center of having hearts of service for the Lord, we will automatically use our spiritual gifts for the maximum advantage of the church.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from the Book of Luke. It opens with a statement of Luke's purpose and then moves to chapter four in which we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue in His home village of Nazareth north of Jerusalem not far from the Sea of Galilee.

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. However, Jesus stopped his quote exactly at that point at which the prophetic timetable turned to events concerning His Second Coming.

The context of the reading today from Luke Chapter 4 is that Jesus is just beginning His ministry and He had returned to His home town of Nazareth. This reading is just after Jesus' baptism. Read the text from Saint Luke and carefully note Jesus' quotation from Isaiah that is marked in all CAPITAL LETTERS.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 1:1-4 NAS95 1 In as much as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; 4 so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.*
>
> *Luke 4:15-21 NAS95 15 And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all. 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 OPPRESSED, 19 TO*

> *PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." 20 And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

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 in a previous issue.

What's the importance of the 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. The Prophet Isaiah said, "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.

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Paul provided a list of spiritual gifts distributed among the body of Christ. Read the following two verses from the reading.

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

Do you find any of the unique abilities that God has given you listed among this list? In what ways do

you serve the body of Christ with your gift? If your spiritual gift is not on the list, what is it? In what ways do you serve the church (meaning all believers, not just the local church) through the use of your gift?

2. In what ways do you feel yourself inclined to see your spiritual gifts as superior to the gifts of another person? How does having a proper understanding of the reading from Corinthians help you to reevaluate this belief?

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