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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-10-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we examine the readings and discover many important truths about God. We learn about the nature of God and how He is faithful, just and forgiving. We see how we cannot earn our righteous standing before God and how this is a free gift to us through faith in His One and Only provision, Jesus Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Second Chronicles. The context was a time of deep darkness in the Kingdom of Israel. Godly King Josiah, who was a key reformer for the Nation during the decline of the theocratic kingdom, had just been killed after going into battle against Neco King of Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:23). Following his death, the decline of the kingdom continued with the appointment of Josiah's son Joahaz as King of Judah who was promptly deposed by Neco (2 Chronicles 36:3). At this point, "The king of Egypt made Eliakim his brother king over Judah and Jerusalem, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. But Neco took Joahaz his brother and brought him to Egypt" (2 Chronicles 36:4). This king "did evil in the sight of the LORD his God" (2 Chronicles 35:5) and after some 11

years was dragged captive to Egypt (2 Chronicles 35:5a, 6). In the short span of time before the happenings in today's reading two more kings ruled in Judah, first King Jehoiachin (v. 9) and finally Zedekiah who is introduced in the opening verse of the reading.

Note: We included all the intervening verses between 11 and 23 in order to include the full context and lead to the full meaning.

First Reading:

> *2 Chronicles 36:11-23 NAS95 11 Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. 12 He did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD. 13 He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar who had made him swear allegiance by God. But he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD God of Israel. 14 Furthermore, all the officials of the priests and the people were very unfaithful following all the abominations of the nations; and they defiled the house of the LORD which He had sanctified in Jerusalem. 15 The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; 16 but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy. 17 Therefore He brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; He gave them all into his hand. 18 All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. 19 Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. 20 Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, 21 to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete. 22 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia–in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah–the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 23 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up!'"*

We see in the reading that Zedekiah continued the wickedness of his forefathers and did not listen to the Lord who spoke through the contemporary Prophet Jeremiah (vv. 11-12). At that time, the Kingdom of Babylon was now the reigning world power and Jeramiah had spoken to Zedekiah about the coming siege by their mighty ruler King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah told him a message from the Lord saying, "I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live!" (Jer 27:12). Zedekiah failed to heed God's advice given by Jeremiah and eventually "the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy" (v. 16a). The event that occurred next has reverberated throughout Jewish history ever since and included the destruction, looting, and burning of the temple, the destruction of the walls around Jerusalem, and the deportation of the people (including Jeremiah). God wasn't finished with Israel though, and He kept His promise to restore the temple and the city after seventy years. God said through Jeremiah, "For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place" (Jer 29:10). In the closing verses of the reading we see how the Medo-Persian king Cyrus made a decree concerning the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem along with the restoration of the people (vv. 22 – 23). Interestingly, the Prophet Isaiah predicted the coming of Cyrus over a hundred years before he was even born and stated that he would be God's shepherd to rebuild the temple, which hadn't even been destroyed yet. Isaiah said, "It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! And he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' And of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid'" (Isa 44:28).

What can we learn about God from the reading? First, God works through any world leader, even idolatrous, pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar and King Cyrus of Persia. We saw in the reading how God used Nebuchadnezzar to discipline His people during a seventy-year period under He raised up Cyrus to restore it. God called Cyrus His shepherd (Isa 44:28). Saint Paul told in the New Testament about how all rulers were established by God. He said, "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" (Romans 13:1).

A second thing we can learn about God from the reading is that He keeps his promises. Even when His patience is tested, His punishment also includes a plan for restoration even before the day of Judgment comes. As we saw in the introduction to the reading, King Zedekiah was the last in a long line of evil rulers that God allowed to serve in the Kingdom of Judah. Once the rules and the people continued in their unrepentant sin, God carried out His promised plan to discipline the people for 70 years. Then, he restored them according to His promise. In the same way, God is also faithful to us in that He only disciplines us because He loves us. The author of Hebrews said in quoting from Psalm 94:12, "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES" Hebrews 12:6). He goes on to explain the meaning of the Lord's

discipline. "For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

Finally, we can draw more attributes of God from the reading, here are a few:

- God is slow to anger: contrary to popular belief, God is not capricious in His display of anger, nor is He looking for people to burn up with His wrath. He is patient and wanting people to repent, not desiring that any should perish (1 Timothy 2:4).

- God is abounding in love and faithfulness. Abounding connotes the overflowing and abundant nature of God's love and faithfulness. He's not going to run out!

- God is also just. He will punish the sin of the guilty who have not brought themselves to Him in surrender. It would be unloving for God to allow injustice to prevail. So even in His punishment of wickedness, God is exercising His loving faithfulness.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move on to the second reading, we will learn more about another important aspect of God: He is a forgiving God, the One who has provided the ultimate forgiveness for the sins of all humankind through the giving of His Son the Lord Jesus Christ. The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As you read, take careful note of how clearly God has provided us with the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and how works flow from a believer's heart that has been changed by God.

Second Reading:

> *Ephesians 2:4-10 NAS95 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

Saint Paul provided what is quite likely the clearest explanation of Christian salvation in the entire Bible. He said that a believer was "dead in their transgressions" (Romans 3:23) but then was "made alive together with Christ" (v. 5). He states twice that a believer is saved by grace, not works (verses 5 and 8), not because of our works but because of God's great love for us (v. 4) and the grace of God (v. 8a) through our faith (v. 8). Finally, Paul says that the end result of our creation ("His workmanship") is the good works that God has prepared for us through His foreknowledge (v. 10). Salvation is a free gift from God (v. 8) that cannot be earned (Romans 6:23).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

> *John 3:14-21 NAS95 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not*

> *judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."*

The story from verse 14 was recorded in Numbers 21, during which Moses instructed the Hebrew people to construct a bronze image of a fiery serpent and place it on a stick. When the people looked in faith to the healing power provided by God through the symbol, they were saved from the danger inflicted by the snakes (Numbers 21:8). Jesus said about Himself, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). People who looked at the bronze serpent with faith in God were healed. In a similar way, those who look to Jesus in faith are forgiven of their sins and given eternal life as a gift of God. This is the same thing that we saw in the second reading (Ephesians 2:8-9). In both cases, the people were (or are being) saved by God's grace through faith in God.

We see in this passage that God's love is the foundation for life that is eternal. It is God's love that moved Him to give His one and only Son. "Begotten" is a translation of a Greek word that has the connotation of being unique. So, to clarify, John is saying that there is no one else like God's Son Jesus. He is the only one of His kind and He was given to us to provide the one and only way to eternal life. As we said earlier, God does not want people to perish (1 Tim. 2:4). His love compelled Him to send His Son into the world to be our Savior. So what separates those who have eternal life and those who are perishing? Belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is a robust word that connotes trust, relationship, and knowledge that is applied to one's life. While we grow in our belief in Jesus, we must clarify whether we truly believe or not. We must have a place of entry into the life of Christ. Do we want Him or not? If we reject Him, then we stand condemned already. Our unforgiven sin leaves no other option than to be judged by God at the end of our lives. However, if we turn to Jesus in faith and rest our hope for salvation in Him, then we are saved. That is why He came to this world, to save.

We have covered a very lot of important ground this week. As we prepare for Easter Sunday on which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, let's contemplate how great is the mystery of salvation. How are you feeling, do you feel guilty because you sense that you haven't done enough for God? If you have repented of your sin and trusted in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness, you can rest in God's graceful provision for you. Spend some time in prayer right now to talk to God and tell Him about your feelings. We pray that you have benefited from the readings this week.

Reflection Questions

1. We saw in the second reading how Paul explained the source and outcome of salvation for a believer in Jesus Christ. Explain the relationship between faith and works for the believer based upon Ephesians 2:4-10.

2. A common theme that exists in the lives of many who do not believe in Jesus as their only source of forgiveness of sin before God is the extent to which they do good works in their lives to justify the bad things they may have done. Read both the second and the Gospel readings again, and then the following verses:

Joh 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Ac 4:12 "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1John 5:12 – 13 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 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.

In light of these readings, explain the relationship between works and salvation for the non-believing person. Without faith in Jesus, do their "good" works ever provide a means for them to earn their way into heaven?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-03-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. First, this week we discuss the Old Testament reading from Exodus in which we will take a substantial look at the Ten Commandments. Because of the importance of this topic, we will dedicate most of this week's study to it. During that study, you will see how wise God was to establish His chosen people with these foundational rules for living. We will also learn how many of these are repeated in the New Testament and expanded upon by Jesus. Then we look at four very profound verses from the opening chapter of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians before we discuss Jesus' first Passover celebration with His newly gathered group of disciples. Finally, as we look forward to celebrating Easter in just a few weeks, we reflect upon the importance of Jesus' celebration of the Passover as we study the Gospel lesson from John 2.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Exodus in which we see God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. These statements are essentially a restatement of the Jewish Law. We often think of rules in a negative light. Instead, we should consider God was gracious to His people in giving them these

elements of the Law, which was for their benefit. This is because if they followed these with their whole heart, it would help them to live life according to His design and accomplish the basic calling that He had given to them. This would be their greatest joy. After Noah and his family had landed and departed from the ark, God said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1b). As you read the Commandments, meditate upon how keeping them helps you to accomplish God's purposes for your life and can help you to live according to the Designer's specifications.

First Reading:

> *Exodus 20:1-17 NAS95 1 Then God spoke all these words, saying, 2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. 7 You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. 8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. 12 Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

Before we enumerate the Commandments, the question may arise, are Christians in the Church Age bound to the Ten Commandments? To understand the answer, we must remember that there were three types of Law in the Old Testament: Civil, ceremonial, and moral. As Christians, we live not under the Mosaic Law but under grace (Romans 6:14) and are not citizens of the Theocratic Kingdom as were the Jews in the Old Testament. Christians are not bound to the Jewish ceremonial law. However, it can argued that we are bound to aspects of the Mosaic Law to the extent that they follow either biblical absolutes or biblical principles repeated in the New Testament. In fact, a total of nine out of the Ten Commandments are clearly repeated in the New Testament with the exception of the Sabbath Day, which we will discuss below. As Christians, we also pledge to uphold the moral law found in the Old Testament because this stems from the holiness of God and does not change. In

fact, Jesus Himself taught on and expanded these Ten Commandments in His Sermon on the Mount (found in Matthew 5-7). Mt 5:17-20 records Jesus' opening thoughts from the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

So, the answer to the opening question is "yes" New Testament Christians are wise to follow the moral law found in the Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments. But as Jesus stated, our righteousness must exceed the outward appearance of righteousness, as was displayed in the Pharisees. Instead, our righteousness must come from the inside out, the fruit of a changed heart that is surrendered to God's will (Ezekiel 36:26).

The following is a list of the Ten Commandments from the reading along with some notes about each, including a reference to the respective verses in the New Testament. The number of the commandments has historically been stated as ten throughout the centuries (the Decalogue), including the use of that number in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint or LXX). However, there have been differences among theologians in the numbering and ordering. In this study, we follow the numbering and ordering developed by Saint Augustine.

1. *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. 3 You shall have no other gods before Me (vv. 2-3). You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments (vv. 4 – 6).*
   Some theologians have broken this section into two between verses 3 and 4, but such a split is immaterial because if a person makes an idol then they are also worshiping a different god. A definition of idolatry is the assigning of godlike power to anything or anyone other than God. Another way of thinking about idolatry is when we hold something or someone as more important than God. In Matthew 4:10, Jesus reaffirmed this teaching when He said: "YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY." As a corollary, Scripture

is clear that people are to pray to God alone and to no one else. The Hebrews, to whom this commandment was given, were thoroughly immersed in a culture of idolatry. If you read further in Exodus, you will see that after Moses went up on Mount Sinai to meet with God, the people assumed he was dead and then commenced to build an idol of a golden calf (Exodus 31:1-6). It is important to recognize the forbidding of creating idols in verses 4 – 6. This teaching is clearly repeated in the New Testament. Paul warns the Corinthians about worshiping idols in 1 Corinthians 6:9, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor **idolaters**, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals" (shall enter the kingdom of heaven). He also did this in Galatians 5:19-20 saying, "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions." In our day, many religious societies such as Hinduism are built around the worship of idols representing false gods. The bottom line is not to worship a false god, whether it is in the shape of an idol or not. We need to be careful to place our focus on God, not on other things or people.

2. *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain (v. 7).*
   This means that a person is not to use the Lord's name in an irreverent manner. Jesus said in the Lord's Prayer, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name'" (Matthew 6:9). This admonition is repeated in Matthew 5:33-37.

3. *Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy (vv. 9 – 11).*
   This commandment is not found in the New Testament, although there is a strong biblical **principle** in the Bible about observing one day of rest and focused worship unto the Lord. We will discuss in detail later in this study after we finish the listing of the Commandments.

4. *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you (v. 12).*
   This is the only commandment with a promise and is repeated in Ephesians 6:2, "HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER (which is the first commandment with a promise).

5. *You shall not murder (v. 13).* This is repeated in Matthew 5:21-22 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell."

6. *You shall not commit adultery (v. 14).* Jesus affirmed this and expanded on it by saying: "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Mt 5:27-28). This is repeated in Hebrews 13:4, "Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge."

7. *You shall not steal (v. 15).* This is repeated in Ephesians 4:28, "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need."

8. *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (v. 16).* Simply stated, you are not to tell a lie. This principle is repeated in Revelation 22:8.

9. *You shall not covet your neighbor's house; (v. 17a)*. For the NT teaching, see below.

10. *You shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor (v. 17b – ff.).*
This principle is repeated in Hebrews 13:5, "Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge," and again in Colossians 3:5 in which it is called idolatry. "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry." If we as Christians were honest, we would agree that covetousness is present in our own lives.

Concerning the Sabbath, there is a biblical principle about setting aside one day a week to worship the Lord and rest from work following the examples of believers in the New Testament. Even in the wording of the original commandment, God provided the principle of a day of rest. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 20:11). Obviously, God isn't the One Who needs to rest, instead the seventh day was created for humans because of their physiological and psychological needs. In addition to resting on one day of the week, both the Jews and the early Christians set apart this day of rest for worship. In the Book of Acts we see how Paul met on Sunday (the first day of the week) with the believers in Troas (Acts 20:7). In First Corinthians, Paul commended the people to take up a collection on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2). It was on Sunday (the Lord's Day) that John received the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory in heaven (Revelation 1:10). The Bible teaches that this day of rest isn't obligatory for Christians. In Second 2 Timothy, a list of some 18 sins is given, but not one of them is the breaking of the Sabbath (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Again, in Galatians a list of 15 more are given (Galatians 5:19-21), and in Romans some twenty more are given (Romans 1:29-32), however none is the breaking of the Sabbath. But, before we run ourselves ragged by not resting, we must pay attention to what the author of Hebrews says: "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb 10:24-25). He commends believers who continued to make meeting together a priority, for some had stopped joining together with other believers on a weekly basis. It is clear from the New Testament teaching that the keeping of **a** "Sabbath" day is a matter of principle, not a matter of law. When you set Sunday aside for rest and worship, or some other day of the week, you are following a solid biblical principle ordained by God.

Understanding the Commandments of God is of profound importance for Christians today for a variety of reasons. First, following God's Commandments provides us with God's protection for our lives. The law is a safety net, a framework through which God can bless us and protect us throughout our lives. There is something inherently destructive to us when we break the Commandments. While we live in God's grace, we are free to continue to pursue the work that God has preordained for us (Ephesians 2:10). God gives these to us in His grace to show us what abundant and true living is all about. Second, one of God's purposes in giving the Ten Commandments was to show us that we couldn't obey His Laws, and therefore, we need a Savior. Paul put it this way when he explained the role of the Law: "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COVET'" (Romans 7:7). The demanding and exacting nature of the Law is to point out our flaws and to let us know that there is something inherently wrong with our moral compass. The inability we have as humans to live up to the Ten Commandments (especially defined by Jesus), was to point to our need of a beautiful Savior. Because Jesus kept the Law from the heart, He is able to provide us with a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and the Pharisees. His righteousness is applied to our

account (2 Corinthians 5:21). We are set free from the consequences of breaking God's commands and do not reap the end result of spiritual death (Romans 6:23).

Following the Ten Commandments will not guarantee a person's entrance into heaven. Instead, they point us to faith in Jesus Christ because they reveal how nobody can perfectly keep them. Paul said, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He also said about the entirety of the Jewish Law, "Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). We don't keep the commandments by trying harder. Instead, our obedience flows out of a heart that has been changed by God, what Jesus called being "born from above" (John 3:3) This mystery of the second birth comes about when a person comes to believe that they are a sinner and unable to earn their own forgiveness of sins before God. When they place their trust in the Lord Jesus as their substitute, their "Passover Lamb" slain for their sins (1 Corinthians 5:7), then they can begin to walk in true obedience of God. This is in contrast to following their natural human inclination to strive to try harder in their own strength.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move on to the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, let us place ourselves in the proper context of the First Century Church. The context is the opening of the Letter that Paul wrote to address some specific concerns that he had about things happening in the Corinthian Church. Corinth was a city filled with idolatry, and as Paul ministered to the church there, he opened his First Letter to them with a high-level summary of the prevailing theological positions of the two main opposing forces to Christianity. The first group was the Jews who were thoroughly immersed in the Greek culture. Just as had happened during Jesus' ministry (as will see later in the Gospel reading), the Jews sought to be convinced by miraculous signs before they would believe in God. Then even when signs were given, they still did not believe. The second group was the Greeks who searched endlessly for wisdom and new things. For example, Luke said in the Book of Acts, "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). As you read the second Mass reading for today, notice how the unbelievers disregarded the truth of the Gospel message.

Second Reading:

> *1 Corinthians 1:22-25 NAS95 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24*

> *but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

Paul shows in this passage how God's value system is upside down in contrast to these two opposing, worldly ways of thinking. Paul stated how Christ is the "power of God" which contrasts with the Jewish idea of power being displayed through miraculous signs and victorious displays of political rulership. He also said that Christ is the "wisdom of God" appealing to the Greek's desire for wisdom in which wisdom was personified in the scholars of the golden era of Socrates and Plato. In our world, Jesus Christ can be an offensive term for those who do not know Him. We must decide whether we let the world intimidate us or whether we will continue to trust in His Name.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from John Chapter 2 in which we see Jesus' cleansing of the temple during the Passover. The celebration was an important feast which commemorated the "passing over" of the death angel of the houses marked by the blood of the sacrificial lamb just before the Jews' Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12). The Lord struck the firstborn of every family and animal in households throughout the land of Egypt that did not mark their doorpost with the blood of the lamb as God required. It is foundational for every Christian to understand the Passover feast because of the fact that Jesus is our sacrificial Lamb, the One whom we commemorate during the Easter season. Jesus is the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). As you read, remember that Jesus' disciples did not yet understand these things about His upcoming death that atoned for the sins of the world.

Gospel Reading:

> *John 2:13-25 NAS95 13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; 16 and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business." 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME." 18 The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?"*

> *19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" 21 But He was speaking of the temple of His body. 22 So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken. 23 Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. 24 But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, 25 and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.*

In the reading, the Jews asked Jesus, "What sign do you show us as your authority for doing these things" (v. 18). This corresponds to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians that the Jews ask for a sign. Jesus in His grace provided them with a sign, but they still did not understand about the analogy between the destruction of the temple and Jesus' death and resurrection. It wasn't until after He resurrected that the disciples understood that Jesus had an authority beyond any earthly power.

Why did Jesus take such drastic measures to cleanse the temple during the preparation for Passover? The system that was supposed to point people towards worship had been corrupted into a crime syndicate in which the ruling Jewish powers sold sacrificial animals and exchanged currencies for outrageous profits. Very likely any sacrificial animal that was brought in by the people would have been deemed unworthy and would need to have been replaced by one provided by the syndicate for a very high price. The religious leaders were exploiting the people and abusing their power. This touched Jesus in a tender spot, for His passion was for God's glory. Clearly, God's glory was not the passion of those who were in charge of the religious system of that day. Instead, their self-serving passion echoed the indictment of the Old Testament prophets who vehemently opposed the exploitation of the "sheep" by the shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34). Once Jesus opposed this system, he in effect signed His death warrant. But Jesus did not cower to the corrupt religious leaders; instead He surrendered Himself to His heavenly Father. It is this ability to separate ourselves from the need for approval of others that Jesus now gives us. Jesus stood up for what is right so that we can now stand up for what is right in our age. May our passions be directed for God's glory.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading we studied an aspect of the Old Testament Law, which is God's standard for righteousness under His Theocratic Kingdom rule. His standards for righteousness have not changed, which would be daunting for us if we did not have Christ. The bad news is that "we all have

sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The Good News is that Christ died for our sins so that when God looks at us He sees Christ's perfect righteousness. This is a gift that we receive when we "confess with [our] mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in [our] heart that God raised Him from the dead" (Romans 10:9a-b). Have you made this transaction in your heart with God?

2. As you grow in your Christian walk, you might wonder what to do with your ongoing guilt that you have when you are disobedient. Nobody can perfectly keep the Ten Commandments or the other principles that are stated in the New Testament. Reflect on this cycle that all of us have experienced. You sin, then you feel guilty, then you promise to never sin again, then you try really hard not to sin, and then at some point, you commit that same sin again. Why would God not just make us perfect, once we give our heart to Him? Well, maybe it's because He wants us to live in dependence on Him (not independent of Him). Our pre-converted response to sin is to try harder. Our converted response to sin should be to run to our Savior. Guilt should lead you to a renewed place of surrender and dependence, convincing you of your ongoing need for a Savior. When you recognize throughout the weeks ahead that you have been disobedient to God's Command, let the guilty feelings remind you of Christ's sacrifice and provision of righteousness provided for you through faith in Him. You can take yourself down off the cross while remembering that Jesus placed Himself there for you. When you experience guilty feelings, talk to Jesus about your ongoing need for His saving grace. Let your guilt and shame bring you back to a place of brokenness and dependence on Him.

List one thing with which you are struggling that you can turn to Jesus to carry for you this week.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-25-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the first reading from Genesis in which we see Abraham's journey to sacrifice his son Isaac and discuss the typology of Isaac. Then we move to the second reading from Romans where we discover more about God's special relationship with His believers. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which we see Jesus' transfiguration in which a glimpse of his divinity is revealed to this very special subset of believers including Peter, James, and John.

Before we begin this week, I want to note something about the various formats in which we make these study notes available each week. For readers who have subscribed to the Mass Notes by email they receive the text of the study along with a link to both the PDF and the html version published on the web site. The version on the web site has the advantage of "mouse over" links for all of the verse references. This means that anytime an online reader positions their mouse over a verse reference the full text of that reference is made available to them. [In the cases where the text of the verse isn't provided this is a very handy feature.] Being able to see how Scripture interprets itself or correlates with other passages is a good skill to develop as you read and study God's Word. Please keep this in mind as you do your own studies.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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The first reading is from the Book of Genesis. The context is the story of Abraham traveling to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac. As you read, highlight any similarities that you find between Father Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and God the Father's giving of His Son Jesus for a sacrifice on Calvary. *Note: All of the intermediate verses between 1 and 18 were included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

Genesis 22:1-18 NAS95 1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." 15 Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

Abraham fulfilled God's commandment to journey to the mountain in order to sacrifice his son, the son of promise born to him and Sarah. Abraham likely believed that since God had already provided him a son through supernatural means in his old age He could provide him with another son once he sacrificed Isaac or He could raise Isaac from the dead. One thing that stands out is both Abraham and Isaac's faithfulness in obeying God. Abraham was obedient to his Father God, while Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of even carrying the wood for his own sacrifice and allowing himself to be bound. We wonder what was going through Isaac's mind during all of this. At the last possible moment, God provided a substitute sacrifice (v. 13). In the end, God complemented Abraham for his obedience (v. 18).

When I read these passages, I have always felt that somewhere during this event Abraham may have explained the situation to Isaac. Perhaps, as Abraham was preparing to lay his son on the wood he may have told him about God's commandment to sacrifice him, and perhaps even his hope that God would bring him back to life. This would have revealed Isaac's great faith in God being able to raise him from the dead, as it is hard to imagine Isaac willingly laying down upon a pile of wood while Abraham raised a knife to kill him.

There are two main applications of the reading. First, God took note of Abraham's radical faith that was manifested in his obedience and blessed him for it. In the same way, we as believers and the seed of Abraham we are blessed by God for our radical faith that is manifested in daring steps of obedience. As children of Abraham, we are called to obey God even when it means taking radical measures in what He has revealed in His word for us to do. A second application has to do with the typology of Isaac. Isaac is what is called a "type of Christ." Here are a few of the similarities between Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus for sin on the cross (1 Peter 3:18).

- Abraham journeyed and on the third day reached the mountain (v. 4). Isaac was bound, but then released on the third day because God provided a substitutionary sacrificial lamb. Jesus, God's sacrificial lamb (John 1:29), laid in the grave for three days and rose from the dead on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:4) whose sacrifice was a substitute for our sins. Both physical people were given back to their fathers on the third day.

- Both Isaac and Jesus were willing to offer their bodies as a sacrifice (vv. 7-8, Colossians 2:6-8).

- Father Abraham surrendered his son Isaac to God's will (v. 10). God surrendered His Son Jesus by His own will. The Scripture says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

- Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice (v. 6), and Jesus carried his wood for His sacrifice (John 19:17)

- Ishmael was technically Abraham's first son, but he was a child of the flesh born to the slave Hagar, not the child of promise born to Sarah. Therefore, Isaac was his father's one and only son (v. 2). Jesus was God's one and only Son (John 3:16), Whom He loves (Matthew 3:17).

- Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of death. Jesus was obedient to His Father to the point of death and beyond (Philippians 2:8).

We see this story of a Father's sacrifice, echoing the ultimate story of God's sacrifice that was made through Christ's death on the cross for us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is Paul's teaching on the very special relationship that exists between God and the believer. He said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Next, he teaches on the difference between those living in the flesh and those living in the spirit. He said that those that live in the flesh cannot please God (v. 8), but as believers we are not in the flesh but in the spirit (v. 9). Next, there is a connection to the first reading as Paul said, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (vv. 16 – 17). Like Abraham and Isaac, we are heirs with God through our faith in Christ. As you study the text of the second reading, remember the special relationship that you have with your Father God through faith in Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *Romans 8:31-34 NAS95 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; 34 who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.*

We learn a few things from this short passage. Unlike as we saw in the first reading how God let Abraham off the hook from sacrificing Isaac, He did not allow such a provision for Himself when it came to the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. His Son was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). If God was willing to go to such great lengths to save us, we can be assured that He will continue to provide all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Paul said in this reading that since God is our justifier, and this does not come through our own performance or good works, how could anyone say that we are guilty when we have already been forever forgiven (v. 33)? He noted that Jesus is the One that intercedes for us. Later, Paul said, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). We can have absolute confidence in the fact that since Jesus is our one and only intercessor with God the Father, nobody can bring a charge against us because we stand holy and blameless before Him. In the midst of our trials, we can take hope that God is still in control and that He is at work for our good. A few verses previous to this concluding though Paul says that "God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes" (Romans 8:28). God is in the business of conforming us to the image of His Son, and no one can stop Him (Romans 8:29).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark and follows the miraculous feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:9) which was after Jesus had also fed the five thousand (Mark 6:44). The disciples didn't yet understand that these two events were miracles (Mark 6:52) whereas the people continued to follow Jesus because they liked the good food that He provided them (John 6:26). After Jesus fed the 4,000, He left with the disciples in the boat and they forgot to take along enough food and had only one loaf of bread (Mark 8:14) even though seven large baskets had been left over after feeding the crowds

(Mark 8:8). At this point, Jesus knew about their lack of bread and told them to "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). This confused the disciples, so Jesus went on to explain to them about the two miraculous feedings. We are including this because it shows how Jesus corrected His disciples' unbelief in the events leading up to the revelation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration about which we will be studying in the Gospel reading.

> "17 And Jesus, aware of this, *said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? 18 "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember, 19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They *said to Him, "Twelve." 20 "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they *said to Him, "Seven." 21 And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)
> Note: The asterisks (*) denote a verb with the historical present tense, something that does not exist in the English language but does in the Greek text.

For at least this instant, the disciples were being as hard hearted as were the people who were following Jesus for no other reasons than He provided them with food and healed their sick. Jesus, because of His kindness and special relationship with the disciples, especially the unique group of three (Peter, James, and John), explained to them the meaning of what had happened during the feeding of the two large groups. At this point the Holy Spirit moved mightily in Peter's heart and he proclaimed through the power of the Spirit, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). This leads to the opening of Chapter 9 in which we as readers of God's Holy Word are honored with being able to partake in Jesus' transfiguration that included not only Peter, James, and John but also two additional biblical characters from the Old Testament living in heaven (Mark 12:26 – 27). Now let's read today's Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 9:1-10 NAS95 1 And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." 2 Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; 3 and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. 4 Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. 5 Peter*

> *said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. 7 Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" 8 All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. 10 They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant.*

After the disciples had continually misunderstood the miraculous events surrounding the feeding of the two large groups of people, Jesus chose this special subset of His disciples to experience yet another miraculous event, His transfiguration before them. This event revealed an important aspect of Jesus. While He was fully man, He was also fully God. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him in this supernatural and surreal glimpse into Jesus' divinity (v. 4). Peter, a man who it seemed always wanted to solve problems, opened his mouth to suggest that since it was the Feast of Tabernacles that they should build three booths, one for each of the three men. He said this because he was terrified and didn't know what else to say (v. 6). At this point, God spoke to them out of the cloud and commanded them to listen to Jesus, God's beloved Son (v. 7), His "Isaac."

What can we learn from the reading about living our lives as Christians? Peter, my personal favorite among all of the disciples, sought to be the "fixer" of the problem at hand. Not knowing what to say, he just said the first thing that came into his mind. Which of us wouldn't have done the same thing? How many of us have gotten into trouble by not exercising better control of our internal filters and just saying what pops into our minds? The difference between Peter and us is that Peter had the first-hand testimony of Jesus fresh in his heart. Technically, Peter wasn't mistaken in what he said, but God corrected him and told him to simply listen to Jesus instead of rushing in to fix perceived problems. That is good advice for all of us; just listen to Jesus by reading and understanding His words given to us through the Bible and not rushing in with both of our gun barrels blazing!

I remembered one time many years ago when I was working as an engineer at Ford. I was attending a small luncheon party given in my honor as I was transitioning to a new department as a part of my rotational training program. While standing in line at the salad bar, my boss gave me a very good compliment and I immediately responded by saying the first thing that popped into my head. Instead of just accepting the compliment, I denied it by, saying that I really hadn't done a very good job! I knew immediately that I had messed up, but this wasn't something that was easy to take back. To this day, I regret my knee jerk response. However, I can be certain that God has forgiven my momentary indiscretion, regardless of whether or not I continue to allow it to be an indictment

against me in my heart.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read about Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. However, Isaac was also obedient and as we saw is a type of Christ. A second type is also evident in the reading. In what ways can you determine that Isaac a type of believer similar to you and me?

2. Pay attention to the "voices" or messages you hear coming to you on a regular basis. When you hear an accusation and condemnation, what is your natural response? Do you hide, pretend, or defend yourself? Alternatively, do you run to the Savior and remind yourself of the truth? In the second reading, Saint Paul gives us a glimpse of God's heart for those who are in Christ. What concepts resonate with you and how will you seek to live in light of these truths?

3. Have you ever gotten yourself in trouble by saying the first thing that came into your mind? What was the particular circumstance, and is there any way in which you can be redeemed in your mind through what you read about in the Gospel lesson?

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Genesis in which we study the covenant that God made with Noah when he landed in the ark after the Great Flood. Then we move to the second reading from the Book of First Peter where we learn of the fate of those that were swept away in the Flood as well as the means by which God provides believers with safety through His ark of salvation in Jesus. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which we see Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and the beginning of His earthly reign that brought the kingdom of heaven down to earth.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Genesis and provides the backdrop to the origin of the rainbows. The context of this passage is just after Noah and his family, eight people in total, landed in the ark at the conclusion of the Great Flood. This followed a 120 year period during which Noah both built the ark and at the same time ministered to the people that ended up perishing on the earth. After the Flood, God blessed Noah telling him to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). At this point, God changed the human diet to allow the eating of animals and established capital punishment (Genesis 9:3-6). It was no wonder that God placed fear of humans in the minds of the animals (v. 2). Today's reading outlines what is known as the "Noahic Covenant."

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First Reading:

> *8 Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, 9 "Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; 10 and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. 11 "I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth." 12 God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; 13 I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. 14 "It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, 15 and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Genesis 9:8-15 NAS95)*

The unconditional promise that God made to Noah was that the earth would never again be destroyed by a global flood (v. 11). This "Noahic Covenant" is unconditional because it is not predicated upon Noah, his family, or anyone born afterwards to perform some duty. God's promise was confirmed by His giving of the sign of the rainbow, something that evidently did not exist before the Great Flood. In our day when we see the rainbow we can remember God's grace and faithfulness. God was faithful in accomplishing His promise to Noah in rescuing those that trusted in His ark. God showed His tremendous grace because He didn't altogether destroy the earth because "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6:8). God provided the "ark of salvation" to all of those who believed. Had anyone else other than those eight people acted in faith and stepped onto the ark, they too would have been saved from the flood of God's wrath that was poured out upon the earth. In the same way, Jesus is the "ark of salvation" for all those who believe, which is what we will discuss in the next reading. In the case of Noah's family, it was both the physical ark and their belief in it that saved them. They had to believe a global flood was coming, build the ark, and enter into it before the flood began. It is interesting to note that Noah's ark is a type of Christ that prefigured the coming of Jesus (the antitype). A "type" is a theological term for people, statements, or events prefiguring or superseded by antitypes. The Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is the only "ark of salvation." When we trust in Jesus, we ourselves enter the ark by faith and by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). Like the ark that only had one door, Jesus is the only door to heaven (John 10:9).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the Book of First Peter. The reading follows Saint Peter's teaching on the

characteristics desirable in a Christian including being "harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit" (1 Peter 3:8). This was in order to bring others to faith in Jesus even during times of spiritual persecution, and calling believers to provide a defense to the antagonists of the hope that we have in God (1 Peter 3:15).

Second Reading:

> *18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; 19 in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, 20 who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. 21 Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you–not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience–through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. (1 Peter 3:18-22 NAS95)*

Peter explained that Jesus died **once** for our sins, which is a sacrifice that can never be repeated (v. 18, Hebrews 9:28). God used Noah as a "minister of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5) to preach to the people during his generation over the 120 years it took for him to build the ark (Genesis 6:3). Jesus' Gospel message was proclaimed through Noah during his days on earth "to the spirits now in prison" (v. 19), meaning Hell. This does not mean that Jesus went to Hell and preached to the dead spirits in order to give them a second chance. The Bible is clear that it is appointed for man once to die and then to face judgment (Heb. 9:27). Everyone that did not believe that they needed to be saved ended up in this terrible, eternal prison. Except for Noah, his wife, his three sons and their three wives, the entire population of the earth was destroyed.

The apostle Peter is saying in this passage that salvation comes through faith in God's provision of Jesus. Just like the ark was God's provision at the time of Noah, God has made the ultimate provision for our sins through Jesus' death and resurrection. He is the one and only "ark of salvation." Peter is not saying that water baptism as we think of it saves you. Rather, he is making a correlation between the ark's ability to save Noah and his family and Jesus' ability to save anyone who comes to Him in faith ("an appeal to God for a good conscience" v. 21). Peter equated baptism with faith, and he explained that the "baptism" which does save us is our faith that we have in the Lord Jesus who is above all authorities and powers (v. 22b). The text uses the term "corresponding" (Greek "antitupos") in the first word of verse 21. Water baptism is the counterpart (corresponds) to the salvation that we as believers possess through faith in Jesus Christ and God's grace alone (Ephesians

2:8-9). During the time of Saint Peter, a person who expressed faith in the Lord Jesus obediently submitted to baptism (Acts 2:38). We can be joyful that God has provided Jesus as our "ark of salvation" in which we can enter through the means of faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). Although we are members of the church universal, the church doesn't save us, Jesus does.

We encourage you to learn more about the practice of baptism in the Bible by reading the **Going Deeper Section** as the end of this week's Mass Notes.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark a few verses before that which we studied last week. This passage records Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness (also found in Matthew 4:2). It is important to note that Jesus' temptation was all part of an ongoing story in the book of Mark that began with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and followed by Jesus starting His earthly ministry. Each of these components should be seen as Jesus' credentials for verifying His claim to be the Son of God (Mark 1:1).

Gospel Reading:

> *12 Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. 13 And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him. 14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:12-15 NAS95)*

Immediately after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus was compelled by God the Holy Spirit to go to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Although God knew that Jesus would successfully endure this trial of 40 days without food and in constant temptation by Satan, Jesus still had to complete the test in order to show to the world both His victory over temptation as well as his triumph over His human condition. Who can imagine going without food for 40 days in the desert? Saint Paul said the following about Jesus:

Philippians 2:6-8 NAS95 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus voluntarily emptied Himself of the independent use of His divine attributes. Although he was fully God, He was also fully human, and as such was subject to temptations that only a human can experience. Where the first Adam failed, we find in this passage that Jesus (the last Adam 1 Cor. 15:45) resisted the deceptive lies of the Enemy. This is all part of the testimony that Mark is gathering to persuade his audience that Jesus is worthy of our worship as God's Servant to bring the good news that salvation is accessible (at hand).

Undoubtedly Jesus' temptation went far beyond anything that any of us will ever experience. However, we can have hope that in light of Jesus' example, we too can persist in our temptations. Saint Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Finally, Jesus' successful completion of the 40 days of temptation brought about the beginning of His earthly ministry and the unveiling of the "kingdom of God" (v. 15). By this time, John the Baptist had been arrested and Jesus took over his message to repent and believe in the Good News (v. 15).

What does this week's study mean for us today? God calls us to identify with Reverend Noah's message of faith and a call to action the same way He calls us to faith and action in our times. Jesus took over where Noah left off and called for people to examine their hearts by repenting of their sin and trusting in His once for all sacrifice to take their transgressions away forever. As believers, we are vastly different from the "spirits in prison" who didn't believe in Noah's message and therefore perished in the Great Flood. Every time that we see a rainbow, whether it is in the sky or in the colors of a peacock, we can remember God's grace and faithfulness in granting us salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone and not because of any of our good works. God has provided us with the power to resist temptation. We have Jesus' example that a person can resist through trusting in God's dynamic power, the Holy Spirit who lives inside of those who believe.

Reflection Questions

1. Although it's not directly stated in the Bible, I have always maintained that Noah hired workers to build the ark during this 120-year construction project. Additionally, I think that Noah ministered to the people during this time, both in the building of the ark and in ways in which are not told in the Bible. In what ways are you a "preacher of righteousness" in the various contexts in which God has placed you (work, home, school, etc.)?

2. How does Jesus' fulfillment of all righteousness (even in resisting temptation) give you hope in the midst of your own journey? List one particular area in which you have recently been tempted. In what ways can you identify with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness? How does the application of 1 Corinthians 10:13 empower you to resist?

"No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Going Deeper: Biblical Teaching about Baptism

What does the Bible teach about baptism? Throughout the ages the church's understanding and practice of baptism has developed. The following information is not meant to disparage any particular church's teaching on the subject, but to provide the biblical foundation from which the practice evolved.

The word translated "baptism" from the original is "baptizo" which means to immerse or submerge. The practice of baptism is very Jewish in that the Jews were familiar with ceremonial cleansings in a bath known as the "mikvah." It was in such a mikvah in which Bathsheba was cleansing after her time of the month when King David spied upon her. A popular myth is that Baptism was also a means in the Old Testament of confirming the reception of a Jewish Proselyte, although this practice is found nowhere in the Bible. Nobody in the Bible was ever baptized into the Jewish community. This came about only through the prescriptions of the Law, and especially by circumcision (Exodus

12:48-49). The Jewish practices of ritual cleansing are, however, mentioned as an elementary doctrine by the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 6:2), one that is emblematic of the purity in which God requires of worshippers. We know from the Bible that a ritual cleansing of the body in a mikvah or any other type of bath, be it sprinkling, immersion, or pouring, cannot remove the **spiritual** dirt from anyone (1 Peter 3:21). The Scripture says that only God can forgive sin (Mark 2:7, Ephesians 2:8-9, and especially Luke 5:23-24).

John the Baptist initiated the practice of baptism, although his was a baptism of repentance. Saint Mark said, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). This "baptism of repentance" signified the participant's testimony of their personal repentance of their sin, meaning they had a change of mind and agreed with God that they had sinned, and they desired to follow a new direction in their lives. In the case of John's baptism, we see the believer's response to their need of repentance is to immediately submit to immersion in water as a public, outward expression of the inward change they had experienced in their hearts after hearing John's preaching. Jesus took over where John the Baptist left off and continued this baptism of repentance. It wasn't until the Book of Acts that we find the disciples teaching a different kind of water baptism.

In order to understand the transition brought about in the practice of baptism in the Book of Acts, we must first understand that this Book is itself one of transitions. The first transition was that of Jesus to heaven when he left His disciples in charge of continuing His ministry. As the disciples were all gathered with Jesus, they watched Him ascend into the clouds with the promise to "come again in like manner" (Acts 1:11). The next big transition was when the disciples gathered to await the promised Holy Spirit on Pentecost. On that day they received a baptism of a different type, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we see an interesting exchange that occurred between Paul and a group of disciples in Ephesus:

Acts 19:1-5 NAS95 1 It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." 3 And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." 4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 When they heard this, they were baptized ***in the name of the Lord Jesus*** *(emphasis added).*

John's baptism was qualitatively different as it was a baptism of repentance; whereas the baptism performed in the Book of Acts and hereafter is 1) a baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 5), 2) tied to the personal reception of the Holy Spirit, and 3) still contains the element of repentance, but also includes the recognition of Christ's resurrection power in living the Christian life. These elements are all tied together, creating a complex conglomeration of multiple dimensions of saving faith: repentance, believing in Jesus Christ, and receiving of the Holy Spirit from God. We find this in the Second Chapter of Acts during Peter's address to a large group of devout Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5) on the Day of Pentecost:

> *Acts 2:37-41 NAS95 37 Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" 38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 "For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." 40 And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" 41 So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.*

Here we see the instantaneous response of the people who repented of their sins, believed in Jesus "for the forgiveness of their sin" (v. 38b), received the Holy Spirit (v. 38c), and submitted to immersion as a public profession of their newfound belief. Baptism was for them a means of identifying with the death of Jesus by immersing themselves in the water, and then rising to a newness of life upon coming out. This ceremonial practice would have knit well with their previous Jewish religious practices. Baptism is Jewish, it was given to us by the Jew John the Baptist, practiced by the Jewish Jesus, brought into its final form by Jewish Peter, and immortalized by the Pharisaical Jew, Paul.

Another case in Acts is descriptive of the later application of these same principles:

> *Acts 8:26-40 NAS95 26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO*

> *SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. 33 "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH." 34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. 36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 37 And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.*

In the story of Philip and the Jewish Ethiopian "eunuch" (one who voluntarily submitted to castration for the purpose of serving among a king's harem), we see the progression of events as they played out in the life of this royal official who was returning from Jerusalem where he had been worshiping.

1. The man read the Word of God,

2. He understood the Word of God and believed it (Philip was obedient to the Holy Spirit in answering the call to explain it to him),

3. He publicly expressed his faith (to Philip),

4. He was baptized as soon as it was practically possible.

In baptism a person symbolically expresses their death to their former way of life and their birth in the newness of life as a believer in the Lord Jesus. Through it, believers identify with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection from the dead. One commentator puts it this way. "Immersion = Death. Submersion = Burial (the ratification of death). Emergence = Resurrection." Saint Paul said:

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> *4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection (Romans 6:4-5 NAS95).*

Regardless of how the practice of baptism has developed in the church, and God has granted liberty to them to make this determination, the biblical teaching is straightforward as to the meaning.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-11-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Leviticus in which we see the procedure for dealing with the skin disease of leprosy. While this may not seem like a random passage to read, it becomes an important backdrop for the New Testament and Gospel reading where we learn that whole-hearted obedience to which Jesus calls His followers.

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Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Leviticus, this provides some insight into the incident between Jesus and a man afflicted with leprosy that we will see later in the Gospel lesson.

First Reading:

> *(Leviticus 13:1-2) 1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, 2 "When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot, and it becomes an infection of leprosy on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.*

> *(Leviticus 13:44-46) 44 he is a leprous man, he is unclean. The priest shall surely pronounce him unclean; his infection is on his head. 45 "As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' 46 "He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.*

The Old Testament law gave specific regulations for the well-being of a community. One such regulation was about infectious diseases. The disease of leprosy could devastate a community, so God gave them instructions on how to deal with this problem. The person who had leprosy had to be inspected by the priest and separate himself from the rest of the people. This would be a dire diagnosis. The law also provided instructions for what a leprous person would do if they became healed. They must present themselves to the priest and offer a sacrifice (Lev. 14:1-32). This information will be important as we move toward the Gospel, since Jesus healed a man of leprosy. The priests would have had to dig out their law books to put this into practice, since being healed of leprosy was uncommon until Jesus came onto the scene.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In the context of this passage, Saint Paul addresses many issues that were perplexing the new believers in Corinth who had to make many decisions in a pagan culture. One of the decisions had to do with eating food that had been previously sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:18-19). He says that the food does not inherently have anything sacrilegious about it, but one's motive was really the determining factor in all decisions for a godly life.

Second Reading:

> *(1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1) 31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; 33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. 1 Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.*

Paul teaches that the underlying motive of the heart needs to be God's glory, no matter what we do. It's hard for us to imagine how eating or drinking can even have religious connotations, but he affirms that all of life can be sacred if done with God and His glory in mind. Part of God's glory is when we surrender our wants and demands in order to bring others to know Him. Paul laid down his Jewish food purity laws to reach the Gentiles living in a pagan culture. We may not have this same backdrop, but we can still be challenged by this to consider how our lives lived for God can be useful for ministering to others who are different than us. That is how we can imitate Paul and so imitate Christ.

An example of this very thing happened a few summers ago when we were in France on a cultural discovery trip with some students from our local college. After church, we were invited over for a very culturally French tradition called "aperitif." This tradition is a rare invitation to foreigners, so we felt honored to be invited to a French person's home, and were glad that the students did not come along. We were not normally used to imbibing in strong drink in the middle of the day, especially right after church. We drank and enjoyed their hospitality with a clear conscience because of Paul's teaching. We were building bridges with people who needed to see the light of Christ in our lives and we met them on their turf for God's glory.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. The context is the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry in his adopted home town of Capernaum, where He first met Saint Peter. From there, He left and went to a secluded place to pray where Simon and his companions began looking for Him (Mark 1:35-36). Next, Jesus traveled to another city (see Luke 5:12) and continued His miraculous healing ministry there.

Gospel Reading:

> *(Mark 1:40-45) 40 And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." 41 Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and *said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." 42 Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. 43 And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, 44 and He said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." 45 But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.*

We see in this story the fulfillment of the Old Testament passage on leprosy we studied in the first reading. In those days there was no known cure for leprosy, so you can imagine the desperation of anyone afflicted with the awful, skin eating disease. Several insights can be observed from this interaction. First, the leper knew he had a problem that he couldn't fix on his own. Second, he came humbly to Jesus, falling on his knees and asking him for healing. Even this early on in Jesus' ministry, the man knew that Jesus offered a potential cure for his disease. Third, we see that Jesus had compassion for this desperate man and was willing to heal him. Fourth, in all probability the priests had never in all of Jewish history ever had the need to exercise the provisions in the Law for the confirmation of a leper's healing. Jesus instructed the man to go to the priest as commanded in the Law of Moses (v. 44). Mark may have included this interaction in order to confirm the evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah, fulfilling the Law and the Prophets.

Unfortunately, the man failed to follow Jesus' order to not proclaim the source of his healing, but rather went and widely spread the news about this miraculous event. This story sets the tone for Jesus' subsequent ministry in which throngs of people came to him for healing but at the same time neglected the weightier matters of the heart (Matthew 23:23).

What does this mean for us today? Like the leprous man, we too can be tempted to turn to God in times of crisis to heal our temporal circumstances, without being willing to completely follow Him in trusting obedience. It is easy for us to think we know better than Jesus in other matters of our lives that don't seem to be so desperate or even "spiritual." But as we saw in 1 Cor. 10:31, everything can be considered spiritual and done for God's glory. Having a trusting obedience is what glorifies God. In Luke's Gospel we find a circumstance where Jesus healed ten lepers, but only one of them returned to Jesus and thanked Him (Luke 17:11-19). Although God stands ready to help deliver us from our temporary circumstance, we need to be willing to look beyond them to see what God could be doing through them, so that He can be glorified in our lives.

When I was a teenager, I used to go out and party with my friends, and then drag myself to Mass the next morning. This type of compartmentalization was a subtle way for me to justify doing my own thing and still trying to be in good with God. I felt that by going to Mass, I was earning points with Him to make up for the bad things that I did. Since then, I've come to understand that Jesus calls us to live an integrated life. I realized that I could not live an obedient life without God's help. I came to Jesus like the leper and fell on my knees and asked Jesus to heal me of the corruption and discontinuity within my own heart. He was willing, just as with the leprous man. When we come to Him and ask Him to save us, He gives us His Spirit to help us live a unified life (John 14:16). We don't have to end up like the leprous man, who merely used Jesus to get his way. Instead, we can surrender to God and let Him have His way in and through us. This is the way of Christianity.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways can you relate to my story of how I lived during my teenage years? Are there still ways you are tempted to live a "compartmentalized" faith? What are the root issues that need to be confronted and confessed to Jesus, our one mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)?

2. How can you see your life choices fall under the umbrella of God's glory? We may not be able to do "spiritual" things all day, but if we are surrendered to God, everything we do can be spiritual and give Him glory. Are there ways that you can have this mindset at your job, in your family responsibilities and even as you interact with people who are different from you? How might your week look different if you sacrificed your preferences to serve others so that others might see Christ in you?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-04-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Old Testament Book of Job where we see Job's cry to God about the futility and brevity of life. Although his ancient message is somber, it provides us with tremendous wisdom in our day. Then we move to the second reading from First Corinthians and close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark that continues from last week.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Job that recorded events which happened during the Patriarchal Period (the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). This Book records a story about a man named Job who was a victim of an invisible spiritual battle with Satan. Job was a godly man that God has blessed with a large family as well as many material possessions (Job 1:1-3). At some point, Satan approached God and told Him that if He removed these blessings from him that Job would

curse Him. God allowed Satan's challenge, yet after his family and possessions were taken from him, he still praised God (Job 1:20-11). Next, Satan approached God and told him that if his good health were taken away from him that this would cause him to curse God. God then allowed Satan to bring about "sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). Even though Job's wife urged him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:7), Job persisted in his reverence of God and went about scraping his wounds with a potsherd (2:8). The next scenes alternate between Job's lament to God (Job 3), the false wisdom of his friends (Job 4 – 5), his response to his friends (Job 6), and then the section of today's reading in which he again cries out to God. Job's friend Eliphaz was the first to speak and incorrectly made the case that people who are innocent do not suffer. Job's response was to tell Eliphaz and the others gathered with him, "For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; So that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty" (Job 6:17). Second, he said, "My brothers have acted deceitfully like a wadi, Like the torrents of wadis which vanish" (6:17) and he continued in this same vein in the subsequent verses. Even during this time of terrible affliction, Job affirmed the just nature of God, saying, "But as for me, I would seek God, And I would place my cause before God, Who does great and unsearchable things, Wonders without number" (Job 5:8-9). We pick up in Chapter 7 with today's reading, noting the previously mentioned condition of Job's skin that appears in verse 5.

First Reading:

> *1 "Is not man forced to labor on earth, And are not his days like the days of a hired man? 2 As a slave who pants for the shade, And as a hired man who eagerly waits for his wages, 3 So am I allotted months of vanity, And nights of trouble are appointed me. 4 When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the night continues, And I am continually tossing until dawn. 5 My flesh is clothed with worms and a crust of dirt, My skin hardens and runs. 6 My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, And come to an end without hope. 7 Remember that my life is but breath; My eye will not again see good." (Job 7:1-7)*

Job lamented to God that his days were in vain, and no better than those of a bond servant (vv. 1 – 2). Even when he attempted to rest at night, this solstice was taken from him (v. 5), probably in part because of his painful sores (v. 5). The reading culminates with wisdom in verse 7 where Job observed that his "life is but breath" and because he had lost hope (v. 6) he felt that his "eye will not again see good" (v 7b). It is because of verses like this that this Book of the Bible is categorized as a Book of wisdom. Job is wise to understand that in the large scope of the world, his life is short and that when a person loses hope they have nothing good to look forward to. In reality Job should have hoped that God would resupply his wealth. If you read ahead, you know how the story ends with God restoring to Job two times that of what he had before (Job 42:10), along with seven new sons and three daughters. The double portion of children was evidently granted to him because if you think about it, the first portion of his family was awaiting for Job in heaven.

What does the reading mean to us today? First, we must recognize as did Job that our lives are but a vapor (James 4:14). We must make the most of our service to God regardless of our circumstances during the brief time that He has granted to us. Whether we receive physical blessings from God and regardless of our health, we are still called to glorify the Lord Jesus in our hearts. Second, there is a true, unseen spiritual battle that rages on around us. Saint Peter said, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Saint Paul urged Christians to "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). Even though Job never knew the cause of his tumultuous trials, we can learn from this Book that when we experience trials they may arise from a spiritual source.

A third point is that we are to be on alert for the false doctrine presented by Eliphaz that the innocent do not suffer. The innocent most certainly do suffer, and this is to serve God's purposes. Job, himself an example of an innocent man suffering, had a very humble spirit who even after he was afflicted he still maintained his integrity before God. In contrast, Job's friend Eliphaz sat with him and attempted to show his superiority over Job by proclaiming Job's guilt because he knew that somehow innocent people couldn't suffer. If the innocent cannot suffer, he mused, then Job must not be innocent! The best example of the innocent suffering is the Lord Jesus Himself. In general, all of humanity is far from innocent, because "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God "Romans 3:23). However, regardless of our perception of our own level of innocence, suffering is allowed by God as a supreme mystery in order to bring about His perfect will in our lives.

Finally, we see from the text that spiritual warfare can result in both physical illness as well as the manifestation of psychological illness and suffering. Although Job was not aware of either the cause of his physical loss or bodily affliction, both were from a spiritual cause – Satan himself. Finally, we are called to live humbly as servants and see ourselves as no better than common day laborers or "bondservants" in the ancient world. Again, we see the example of the Lord Jesus who came not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's teaching on the calling for believers to follow his pattern of self-denial and service to the Lord. Paul is providing a defense of his ministry during which he mostly provided for his own means even though as a ministry worker he was due wages in this position (1 Corinthians 9:9). Paul paid his own

way through his tent making business (Acts 18:3). "Tentmaking" is a term that has arisen since then which refers to a minister that makes a living off a different occupation while at the same time working as a minister without a salary from that position. *Note: We have included all of the intervening verses between verses 16 and 23 in order to provide the full meaning and context.*

Second Reading:

> *16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. 17 For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. 18 What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. 19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. (1 Corinthians 9:16-23)*

Paul said that the reward for his ministry wasn't money but the privilege of preaching the Gospel without financial support (v. 18). Paul said that he willfully set aside his right to be paid as a minister and therefore became "enslaved" to this form of "tentmaking" ministry in order to remove any possible offence that anyone might have in him being paid (v. 19). Second, Paul forced himself to confirm to the Jewish customs within biblical limits, without being bound to the Law (vv. 19 – 21). He became as a Jew to win the Jews, and continued this principle by becoming as a weak person to win the weak person (v. 22).

If we look back and compare these passages with what we learned from the first reading, Paul had a godly attitude towards winning others to the Lord Jesus Christ, much in the same way that Job had a humble way of responding to his friends as well as to God during his affliction. Had Job's friends acted to become weak in order to win the weak, they would have been commended by God instead of cursed (Job 42:7).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. The context is Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, a fishing village on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, and the home of Saint Peter.

Gospel Reading:

> *29 And immediately after they came out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Jesus about her. 31 And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them. 32 When evening came, after the sun had set, they began bringing to Him all who were ill and those who were demon-possessed. 33 And the whole city had gathered at the door. 34 And He healed many who were ill with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was. 35 In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there. 36 Simon and his companions searched for Him; 37 they found Him, and said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." 38 He said to them, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for." 39 And He went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out the demons. (Mark 1:29-39)*

Several points arise from the text. First, even this early on in His earthly ministry the Lord Jesus has the power to heal the sick. His healing of Peter's mother was in fact so complete that upon her being raised up from her sick bed she immediately began to serve them (v. 31). Jesus fame became evident because after the Sabbath day had concluded the people brought those sick or possessed by demons to be healed even at night (v. 33 – 34). This continued throughout the night and Peter's home became a regular hospital for those afflicted both physically as well as spiritually. Second, in a related point, Jesus' ministry was the occasion of an intense spiritual war that brought about both spiritual suffering and outright demonization of the people. The text doesn't say whether the cause of Peter's mom's affliction was spiritual, but regardless the outcome of Jesus' healing of her was for the glory of God. This is the same theme that we saw in the first reading with God allowing Job's suffering for the ultimate glory of Himself. This was also the case in the second reading with Paul suffering in being a tentmaker working without financial support for his ministry in order to remove any stumbling stones in the way of potential believers. In both cases, God allowed suffering for the purpose of expressing His glory.

A final point in the reading is Jesus conscious and intentional prayer ministry before God. Even after spending much of the night healing people in the vicinity of Peter's home, early in the morning while

it was still dark, Jesus set out to find an isolated place at which to pray (v. 35). Jesus made it a habit throughout His ministry to seek an isolated place at which to pray. By means of application, if Jesus felt that prayer was at least as important of a ministry as was his divine healing, how much more important should prayer be in our lives as a source or our own divine power in our lives and for the intercession of others?

Reflection Questions

1. With what are you being tempted? Write down a list of one or two things (and then destroy it!).

We suggest starting this week with a conscious effort to remember that this world is under the control of dark, spiritual forces until it is delivered back into the hands of Jesus as His Second Coming. We are to "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). Putting on the armor of God means a variety of things, but foremost it is both knowing and holding to the promises of God that we find in the Bible. One such promise is that "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1Corinthians 10:13).

2. In the second reading we read that Paul said, "21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it" (1 Corinthians 9:21-23).

Think about the application of this verse in your own life and complete the sentence below.

I will become as _____ in order that I may win _____ to the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-28-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy in which we study a prophecy about the coming Messiah that was fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Then we move to the second reading from First Corinthians where we study Saint Paul's teaching on marriage of Christians. Finally, we return to the Book of Mark for the Gospel lesson where we see Jesus heal a demon-possessed man.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Deuteronomy. At this point in history, the people of God (the Hebrews) were entering the Promised Land after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They were in need of structure and direction, so that their new life in the Promised Land would be fruitful and safe. It had been many generations since this people group had been able to make their own decisions and govern themselves. Therefore, God gave them a strong leader called Moses and some thorough

instructions, recorded here in the book of Deuteronomy. This Book primarily records the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. There are several big ideas behind God's giving of the Law. First, the Law established a new covenant with the Hebrew people called the Mosaic Covenant. This Covenant between God and the Hebrew people included promises that were conditional in nature. The Mosaic Covenant consisted of ordinances which included moral laws, civil laws, and ceremonial laws for God's chosen people, the Jews. The Law also expanded the already existing promises granted by God in the Abrahamic Covenant into a new covenant referred to as the Palestinian Covenant. Although the promises made in this Covenant were unconditional, the Jewish people will not fully obtain them until the Lord Jesus returns to rule and reign on the earth. A second aspect of God's giving of the Law provided a means for God to hold people judicially accountable when they break the law. Saint Paul explained this in Romans Chapter 4 by saying, "when there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). Finally, since Moses was himself a prophet, the Law also included prophecy, as we will read about in the first reading as follows below. *Note: We have included the last two verses in Chapter 18 that were omitted from the reading in order to provide the full meaning and context.*

First Reading:

> *15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. 16 This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.' 17 The LORD said to me, 'They have spoken well. 18 I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19 It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. 20 But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' 21 "You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' 22 "When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him." (Deuteronomy 18:15-22)*

As the Hebrew people were on the brink of newfound freedoms, this passage guided them so that they would be more discerning about those who claimed to speak for God. The reading pointed out several things. First, God promised to Moses that He would raise up a Prophet like himself (v. 17) and provided stern words about the importance of listening to the future Prophet. God warned that

there is accountability for failing to listen to the true Prophet (v. 10 "require it of him"). Second, in verse 21 God also provided a test for any person that claimed to be a prophet. If a person claims to be a prophet, they must not speak on behalf of a false god and whatever they say must come true. If the self-proclaimed prophet fails either of these two tests, he must be put to death.

The Old Testament is full of prophecies from God-ordained prophets who spoke on behalf of God and called the people back to their covenant relationship with God. We know from the New Testament that the final Prophet whom Moses predicted in verse 15 was none other than Jesus Christ Himself. The proof for this fact is found in three places in the New Testament, once in the Gospel of John and twice in the Book of Acts. Nathaniel said in John's Gospel, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote–Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45). Peter quoted Deuteronomy 18:15 in Acts 3:22, and Stephen in his famous speech he made just before being martyred said about Jesus, "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN" (Acts 7:37).

Let's discuss briefly the importance of recognizing false prophets in our own day through the application of the prophetic test given in Deuteronomy 18. First, the New Testament authors warned about the coming of false prophets. John said, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). 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). If false prophets will abound, how are we to respond to these false prophets? We have a story in Acts 17 that illustrates the answer to this question. It says: "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

Paul was so bold in another letter as to say that even if he came back to them and changed the message of the Gospel or they had a special appearance of an angel, not even that should persuade them from the sure foundation that was already laid. He said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8-9). Therefore, our response is very clear. We must be diligent to study God's Word so that we can test what people are saying and discern whether they are a true prophet (speaking the Word of God) or whether they are a false prophet (speaking presumptuously). These are strong words, but as we study God's Word, we will be able to reject false teaching when we encounter it.

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Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's teaching on the value of a person's singleness during this period in the church when it was undergoing explosive growth and at the same time, persecution – especially from the Jews. These verses have often been used to elevate singleness over marriage. But as you understand the context of unbearable famine and persecution for the church, we see that Paul was putting a temporary moratorium on weddings, in order to help them endure the unusual circumstances that these believers were facing. *Note: Verses 36 – 38 were included in order to provide the full meaning and context.*

Second Reading:

> *32 But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; 33 but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. 35 This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. 36 But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. 37 But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. 38 So then both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. (1 Corinthians 7:32-38)*

The fact that the Old Testament and other places in the New Testament affirm the beauty and value of marriage needs to give perspective to the interpretation of this passage. For example, Paul recommended that young widows remarry (1 Timothy 5:11-15) and Jesus Himself affirmed the Old Testament teaching that a man shall leave his father and mother to be united to his wife (Matthew 19:5). In the present crisis (mentioned in 1 Cor. 7:26), Paul was giving them apostolic teaching that applied wisdom to their dire situation. First, Paul said that if a person is single, they can be wholly dedicated to the service of the Lord, whereas a married person is also concerned with the affairs of their mate and family (vv. 32). In times of persecution and famine, it is much easier to be single than

married. The simplicity of life when one is in survival mode is complicated when a spouse and children are brought into the picture and their vulnerabilities can be exploited by persecutors. Second, he said that if a person desired to marry that there was nothing wrong with their desire (v. 35). What he was saying was that at this time in the church it was strongly advantageous for a person engaging in ministry to remain single, like he was. This is the path that Jesus and others in the New Testament chose, including Saint Paul. Finally, Paul said that fathers should not unduly guard their daughters in such a way as to prevent them from fulfilling their desires to marry (vv. 36 – 38). During that cultural context, the father's approval of the marriage meant everything. This is of course still the case in many cultures in the world.

What does this mean for today? Since the rest of the counsel of Scripture affirms the sanctity of marriage, we must not look at marriage as a better or worse state of affairs. There are advantages and disadvantages to both singleness and marriage. If you are single, you currently have the gift of singleness (1 Cor. 7:7). If you are married, you have the gift of marriage. Will you let God use either state of affairs to further His work in your life?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Mark Chapter one which continues from last week. Here we find Jesus in His adopted hometown of Capernaum, the home of Peter where He called His first disciples among the fishermen in this lakeside village.

Gospel Reading:

> *21 They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. 22 They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, 24 saying, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are–the Holy One of God!" 25 And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" 26 Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." 28 Immediately the news about Him spread everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)*

Several points arise from the text. First, early on in His ministry Jesus is widely accepted in the synagogue in Capernaum as a rabbi, or teacher. The text says, "He entered the synagogue and began to teach. They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (vv. 21b – 22). This is an extremely important point because later on when the religious leaders began contesting His teaching, they pointed out that He was just a carpenter from Nazareth. They said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us? And they took offense at Him" (Mark 6:3). This hearkens us back to the passage from Deuteronomy, which gave a prophecy about a great Prophet and criteria for discerning whether someone was speaking on behalf of God. Jesus passed the tests (and then some), but the religious leaders failed to hold up their end of the bargain. They refused to listen to the words of the Prophet and will have to stand to give an account for their rejection of God's Messiah. Jesus spoke with authority because He was The Authority!

A second important point from the text is what the demonic spirit within the man in the synagogue said about Jesus. The demon recognized Jesus as being from Nazareth and the "Holy One of God" meaning Messiah (v. 24). Although the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus as Messiah, the demonic spirit was compelled to testify as to His identity. One day, "every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). Finally, God used the testimony of the demonic spirit in order to further the spread of the Gospel (vv. 27 – 28). Each one of us will have to decide how to respond to the authority of Jesus. Will we reject His authority or surrender to it?

As believers, we too can speak with the authority of God, following Jesus' example and being filled with His Words. Anytime we recite Scripture we possess the authority of God and have power within the range allowed by God's sovereignty to upset spiritual darkness. Keep this in mind the next time you encounter spiritual darkness including false teaching. You can apply the test for a true prophet that we learned about from Deuteronomy, as well as speak the truth from the words of Scripture into confusing and dark issues. Although we may not have all of the well-reasoned answers to spiritual skeptics, if we know the Word of God, we can respond with God's authority simply by applying the truth of Scripture to each encounter.

This week one of my relatives is being forced to take a hard stand at her school. Her coach has decided to get around the rules regarding the frequency of athletic practice allowed for this particular conference by scheduling "open gym" periods with the team. In theory, these events are optional, but in reality, any player missing one of the open gym periods would be in jeopardy of harming their standing on the team. This particular team player has decided to abide by the rule and miss this informal practice session in order to satisfy the calling that God has placed upon her heart

to be obedient to Him. Although our study of the Word of God can sometimes be rather abstract in terms of application in our daily lives, in this case it became clear to this person from God's teaching that they needed to take a stand. Is there anything in the Bible study lesson this week that caused a "prick in your heart" about which you need to take a stand for God? In what areas in your life have you been exposed to false teachings and need to exclaim that these sources are accursed?

Reflection Questions

Think about some of the concepts covered in this week's Bible reading:

- Being discerning about who I listen to and rejecting false teachings.
- Being obedient to true teaching (that line up with Scripture).
- Being wise about how I think about marriage and singleness.
- Surrendering to Jesus' authority.
- Standing up to the misuse of authority by using Scripture as my authority.

With which of the concepts above do you need help? Talk to God in prayer about how you would like for Him to be at work in this area.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-21-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Prophet Jonah who wrote about events that happened just before the Northern Tribes of Israel were taken captive by the people about whom he was writing. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and then close with the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Jonah. Jonah was a Prophet who came from the region near Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The context of the reading is the fulfillment of God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to his foreign Gentile enemy. You may be familiar with what transpired in the first two chapters before Jonah finally obeyed God. His disobedience included getting on a ship going in the opposite direction at which point a fierce storm arose that threatened the lives of all of those on the ship. The sailors threw Jonah overboard where he was swallowed by a great fish. After

being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights it finally vomited him up on the shore. This is where we enter the story. *Note: All of the verses in the range from 1-10 have been included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

> *1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. 4 Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. 7 He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. 8 But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. 9 Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it. (Jonah 3:1-10)*

What does this story teach us about God, the human condition, and our life in the world. First, we see that God is a God of second changes. Verse one says, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the **second** time." Second, God is a God of compassion and mercy. He sent Jonah to Nineveh as a mission of mercy to inform the people that Nineveh was going to be destroyed. Thirdly, we learn that God rewards faith (Hebrews 11:6). Verse 5 says that the Ninevites believed God and showed that in their actions. Fourth, we learn that God responds to their repentance by not destroying them. Finally, we learn that God's plan of salvation extends beyond the Jews to the Gentiles (Jonah 4:11).

Jonah was reluctant to bring this message of salvation to the Gentiles who were also his enemies. This story provides insights into the human heart. Even though Jonah had received a direct revelation from God as a prophet, he was at first unwilling to share that message with those whom he deemed unworthy. There is a little bit of this in all of our hearts, it is called spiritual pride. In contrast to Jonah's hard heartedness, we see the surprise responsive hearts of the Ninevites (Gentile enemies of Israel). The Lord is no respecter of persons. We have this concept corroborated in Acts

10, "Opening his mouth, Peter said: 'I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him'" (Acts 10:34-35). The story of Jonah reminds us to reflect God's heart, which loves all people (John 3:16).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is that Paul is answering questions that the Corinthian church had asked him. In this particular section, he deals with marriage, singleness, circumcision, and buying one's freedom from indentured servanthood. This passage relays the criteria for making decisions that drastically change one's life.

Second Reading:

> *29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; 30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; 31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)*

The criteria for making life-changing decisions is to have an eternal perspective. Paul gives certain examples about what that may look like for the Corinthian people. He is not encouraging singleness for the sake of holiness or an emotionless existence. He is saying however that we must view our circumstances in light of an eternal perspective. If this world in its present form is passing away, how now shall we live?

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Mark Chapter 1. The context is immediately after Jesus' baptism and subsequent temptation by the devil in the desert.

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Gospel Reading:

> *14 Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." 16 As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." 18 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 19 Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him. (Mark 1:14-20)*

This passage records the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that includes His message and the calling of His messengers. First, His message is one of good news, which is what the word "gospel" means. Jesus came to let people know that it was now time for them to respond to His invitation to enter into the kingdom of God. Instead of the kingdom of God being far away and only for a few elite people, Jesus let them know that the kingdom of God is actually among them (v. 15). The proper response to this good news is to repent, which means to turn from their sin, and believe in the gospel. This is the same response He asks of each one of us today.

The second part of this passage is the calling of His messengers. Simon, Andrew, James and John were all hardworking fishermen. Jesus invited them to be His disciples, which meant leaving their nets and following Him. In the case of James and John, this also meant leaving their father in the boat to carry on the family business without them. Jesus' disciples were not rabbinic students but were rather common tradespeople who would have been considered unclean by the religious authorities.

What we can see about God's heart from this passage is that He reaches out to the least likely candidates. First, Jesus proclaimed the Good News to the common person. One would believe that the Messiah would choose an elite class of religious leaders who show great promise in leading the kingdom. Instead, just as we saw in the first reading, God is no respecter of persons. The prerequisite for life in the kingdom is repentance and belief, not religious pedigree. In addition, God chose the lowly to be His representatives.

In my life, I have had to reconsider my beliefs regarding who would or would not come to believe in

Jesus Christ. I worked in a state prison where I saw convicted criminals give their heart to the Lord that provoked deep change in their lives. Someone who would have been manipulative and self-seeking became trustworthy and sacrificial. One man in particular was a practicing Muslim and had even adopted a Muslim name. Over the years, his heart became softened and one day another of the professors led him to express faith in the Lord Jesus. This is just one example of people who are often marginalized by the Christian society thinking that they will never come to the Lord. How we treat people is a reflection of God's heart for them and that He wants all men to come to the knowledge of everlasting life in Him (2 Peter 3:9).

Reflection Questions

1. As we saw in the lesson, the word "gospel" is a word that means "good news." Do you see the message of the Bible as good news? If so, how is the kingdom of God being "at hand" good news in your life? How might this be good news to others in your life? Is there anyone with whom you would like to share the good news of Jesus Christ this year?

2. In the first and last reading we saw how God is no respecter of persons; He does not show partiality. How does the fact that God reaches out to the hearts of people who we may consider unlovable and impossible to reach challenge your beliefs about sharing your faith with others? Are there people that you are quick to judge? Pray that God would open your eyes to their potential and change your heart so that you can reflect His generosity in bringing unlikely people into the kingdom.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-14-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from the Book of First Samuel in which we learn about God's calling of this important prophet. Then we move to Saint Paul's First letter to the Corinthians and close with the Gospel lesson from Saint John. I included a brief story about a personal struggle I was having that is very common among men, which I hope encourages all Christians to be pure in their daily lives. We also include this week a more detailed study at the end regarding understanding our identity in Christ.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of First Samuel. The context is the commissioning of the Prophet Samuel in the era of the period known as the Judges. This was the period of time when the history of Israel followed a pattern of rising and falling. God would allow His people to fall into the hands of their enemies, next the people would repent and God would raise up a deliverer. After some time in freedom, the people would become complacent again, the cycle would repeat. This was also the era in which the people "did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25) versus following the commandments of the Lord.

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Note: Many verses were omitted in the reading. Since this is a more comprehensive study of the Scriptures we have included all of the verses between verses 1 and 19.

First Reading:

> *1 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD before Eli. And word from the LORD was rare in those days, visions were infrequent. 2 It happened at that time as Eli was lying down in his place (now his eyesight had begun to grow dim and he could not see well), 3 and the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was, 4 that the LORD called Samuel; and he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, lie down again." So he went and lay down. 6 The LORD called yet again, "Samuel!" So Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he answered, "I did not call, my son, lie down again." 7 Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, nor had the word of the LORD yet been revealed to him. 8 So the LORD called Samuel again for the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli discerned that the LORD was calling the boy. 9 And Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down, and it shall be if He calls you, that you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for Your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10 Then the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening." 11 The LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. 12 In that day I will carry out against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. 13 For I have told him that I am about to judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons brought a curse on themselves and he did not rebuke them. 14 Therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." 15 So Samuel lay down until morning. Then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. But Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. 16 Then Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." 17 He said, "What is the word that He spoke to you? Please do not hide it from me. May God do so to you, and more also, if you hide anything from me of all the words that He spoke to you." 18 So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD; let Him do what seems good to Him." 19 Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fail. (1 Samuel 3:1-19)*

This is the story of young Samuel's initiation into the office of Prophet. He wasn't familiar with how the revelation of the Lord was going to come since "the word of the Lord was rare in those days" (v. 1). At first, Samuel didn't recognize God's voice and instead thought that it was Eli the high priest who was calling him. Finally, Samuel listened to the Lord and, as a result of what God told him, he had to convey a very difficult message to Eli. This must have been a challenging task and a sort of

test for this young man to undertake since what Samuel told Eli was very somber news. Samuel had to convey the message that nobody in Eli's family line would continue in their priestly duties forever (14). God had already revealed to Eli that there would be judgment upon him for his lack of restraint on his wicked sons (1 Samuel 2:27-36). This was the final confirmation that the prophecy would come to pass. As a result of all of this, God officially confirmed Samuel as a prophet as we see in the closing verse 20 (not included in the reading. "All Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was confirmed as a prophet of the LORD" (1 Samuel 3:20).

Some important lessons that we learn from this passage include:

- God will fulfill His promises, whether they be blessings or curses. If this is the case, a point of application is to be aware of God's promises and live in light of these realities.

- God spoke through the prophets to disclose ultimate reality for those of us who are finite. While this might have felt harsh at the time, it was actually for humankind's good to know the Truth. Some of the prophetic utterances were divinely inspired to become part of our Holy Scriptures (1 Peter 1:21). These Truths can be heeded or rejected while we are here on earth. But God discloses these ultimate things so that we might live as wise people here and now.

- Because we can trust God's Word, it's important for us to study in light of the truth He has revealed to us. We see this in Samuel's life as he learned to listen and even to do difficult things in order to follow God's voice.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Saint Paul wrote this letter in response to several matters that were happening in the church including sexual sin, improper celebration of communion, and lawsuits between believers. This particular section is focusing upon the sexual liberties that some people were taking. The City of Corinth was known for temple prostitution and all forms of promiscuous sexual practices related to pagan worship. Some of these

people were now converted and part of the church but did not understand proper behavior in light of their new status in Christ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Paul gives the overarching principle for a believer's newfound freedom in Christ in verse 12. Then he explains a particular application of that freedom. *Note: The intermediate verses that were omitted in the reading have been included in order to provide the full meaning in context.*

Second Reading:

> *12 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. 13 Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. 14 Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! 16 Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, "THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." 17 But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. 18 Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)*

There are three overarching principles that Paul uses to help Christians be discerning about the choices that we make. First, when contemplating one's freedom in Christ, we must consider whether this helps or hinders our relationship with God (v. 12). Paul said that all things are permissible for him but not all things are beneficial (v. 12). The second main point is that when we are united in Christ we are one with Him in Spirit; therefore, when we sin we drag Him into any sinful patterns that we engage in (v. 17). This should help us to consider how our choices affect Christ, not just ourselves. The third overarching principle to help us be discerning in our freedom is the fact that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are to honor God with our bodies (19-20). These points put together provide a very strong deterrent when we are tempted to go back into immoral and sinful patterns. We are not only encouraged to resist sexual immorality, but Paul actually calls us to flee from it.

Way back in 2002 I was leading a Bible study and I made an offhanded comment about how all of us are hypocrites at heart in one way or another. After class, a woman who heard my comment gently confronted me about this comment and said, "No, not everyone is a hypocrite, and you were wrong

in making that statement." Her words cut me to the heart because like David who was confronted by the Prophet Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1-13) I was deeply disturbed by her words. This was because at that instant I realized for the very first time in my life that I had been addicted to viewing pornographic images for many years. After I left the class, I poured my heart out to God and a strange thing happened. Over the course of the next several weeks, I realized that my attraction and compulsive desire to look at pornography was gone. Two weeks went by without an incident, then three, then a month, then two months. After about six months I began to think that I needed to take precautions in my life because even though God delivered me it would be possible for me to go back into the cycles of viewing pornography, which involves feeling bad about it and destroying it, staying away from it for a week or two, then inevitably returning to it to begin the cycle all over again. These cycles were actually very similar to what we read about in the first reading in the era of the judges. I am very thankful to the work that God did in my life on that day in 2002, and greatly respect the woman for the courage that she showed in confronting me that day.

People, and especially men, fly around like insects and get caught in webs: lies, pornography, alcohol, stealing, and lusting after loose women. Are we so naïve to think we are like the bees who have stronger wings and can brush through these webs without getting caught in them? Unlike the cobwebs that we just brush off as we walk by, we cannot do this so easily with the complex webs (temptations) that we live in today. For many, these webs may start out only as an annoyance, slowing their progress, but later on they become like glue, binding them. God tells us, "For the power of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "And lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:13 you read every week in Mass, you may not realize that God really does provide the power to you to stop your sinful, compulsive behavior, whatever it may be. God stands at the door ready to deliver us from our temptations, and I am living proof. If you are struggling with your own temptations and not feeling any relief, I urge you to connect with a brother or sister in the Lord and confide in them about the struggle that you are having. Then turn to the Lord in prayer, together, and outright ask for God to deliver you from your temptation. I don't know how He will respond, but you can be guaranteed that He will answer your prayer in the best way possible for your benefit.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 1. The context is Jesus' gathering of His disciples after His baptism by John the Baptist. From this passage, we see that John the Baptist and his disciples recognized Jesus' identity as Messiah early on during His ministry.

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Gospel Reading:

> *35 Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" 37 The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. 38 And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). 42 He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (John 1:35-42)*

John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus, declared that Jesus was the Lamb of God (v. 36). He understood that Jesus' mission as Messiah would entail becoming the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world (v. 29), thus becoming the sacrificial lamb of God. Even though Jesus had never gone through formal "rabbinical training", they still recognized Jesus as a rabbi. The word means "teacher" (v. 38). One of the first disciples was Andrew who found his brother Simon and told him about his discovery of the long-awaited Messiah. It is very significant that when Simon recognized Jesus as Messiah one of the first things He did was to announce a name change for Simon to Cephas. This almost indicates a type of covenantal relationship with Peter that consisted of a name change and Jesus obvious vision of whom Peter would become later in his ministry, the "rock." While Peter did not always exhibit rock-like qualities throughout the Gospels, Jesus called him by this new name. Afterwards, significantly, Peter is always listed first whenever a list of disciples is provided in the Bible.

Reflection Questions

1. In our age, God speaks primarily to us through His revealed word found in the Holy Bible. Reflect upon the young Prophet Samuel's first experience of hearing the word of God. In what ways are we like the prophet in not hearing the word of the Lord?

2. Each of the readings this week point to the fact that God has a vision for who we can become if we surrender our lives to Him. Samuel became the prophet, the Corinthians became purified, and Peter became the Rock.

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What are some things that you have been given a sense as to a specific calling that God has for you? Perhaps someone has told you that you are especially good at something. Or perhaps God has placed something on your heart? Would you pray about setting some goals this year about acting upon this calling?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 01-07-2024



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

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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This week we are first going to examine the second reading from Saint Paul because the first reading from Isaiah and Gospel lesson from Saint Matthew must be studied together in light of the insights from Paul. The second reading is Ephesians Chapter Three where Paul unveiled a mystery that had been hidden throughout the ages until after Jesus' First Advent, what we just celebrated at Christmas. As you read this section of Ephesians (without all of the skipped verses), try to select the single verse that Saint Paul provided which summarized this mystery.

Second Reading:

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

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

In this week's reading, the mystery was that the Gentiles would be gloriously grafted (Romans 11:17) into the people of God through the Church. It is important to understand, at least from a high level, Paul's background while we discuss this mystery which was revealed to him. He was formerly a member of the Jewish group known as the Pharisees, a cult which we have discussed extensively in the context of Jesus' interactions with them. The Pharisees were a group of devout Jews who from all accounts would have abhorred the concept of unconverted Gentiles joining their strict Jewish sect. A

modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

> *1 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth, And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you, And His glory will appear upon you. 3 And nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising. 4 Lift up your eyes round about, and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms. 5 Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you. 6 A*

> *multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-6)*

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v. 2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v. 3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in a previous edition of Mass Notes. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period, God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second, He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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Gospel Reading:

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

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

The Jewish priests and scribes told the Magi the prophecy from the Prophet Micah, which they evidently weren't aware of, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This must be the case, or they would have gone directly to Bethlehem in the first place and avoided King Herod. Verse 9 said, "And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they **had seen**

in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was" (emphasis added). Then, the star reappeared! So, what did they do? Did they stop and ask for further directions? No, followed it and went to Bethlehem! Now they had both the prophesy from the Jews, and the star to guide them. Therefore, they kept going on the journey, but had to BELIEVE God's revelation and follow it.

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

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

Reflection Questions

1. Think about the message that you send implicitly when you send someone a gift. A child gives his father a pair of gloves for Christmas. Another child gives his mother a box of candy. In light of the New Year and the idea of making resolutions for the next twelve months, what single gift could you present to Jesus this year?

2. It is easy to criticize the Pharisees for judging the Gentiles and for considering them "unworthy" of being saved. The definition of grace is that no one is worthy of it. It is God's unmerited favor. Think about your own attitude towards those who seem unlikely to become Christians. Is there someone who you can identify as unlikely to be a fellow heir, a fellow member of the body and a fellow partaker in the promise of Christ Jesus through the Gospel? Commit to pray for this person and look for ways to be like St. Paul by loving them and speaking the truth of the Gospel to them.