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 12-15-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Zephaniah, one of the so-called "Minor Prophets," largely because their 12 prophecies are shorter than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Then we move to one of the Epistles of St. Paul, Philippians, a letter likely written from a prison cell in Rome, making its theme of joy even more significant. Finally, we conclude with a reading from Luke's Gospel, which includes some interesting instructions for the people of Jesus' day.

Introduction to the First Reading:

Zephaniah has been called "the Royal Prophet," probably because he was the great-great-grandson of King Hezekiah of Judah. He was the last of the prophets before the captivity of Judah and ministered during the reign of Josiah, who tried to restore proper worship practices which had been pretty much abandoned in Judah. His message centers on "the Day of the LORD," which is seen from two perspectives: 1) a time of judgment against sinners, and 2) a time of blessing for those who follow God.

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First Reading:

Zephaniah 3:14-18 NAS95 14 Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! 15 The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; You will fear disaster no more. 16 In that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not be afraid, O Zion; Do not let your hands fall limp. 17 "The LORD your God is in your midst, A victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy. 18 "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts–They came from you, O Zion; The reproach of exile is a burden on them.

The first two-thirds of the prophecy deal with God's judgment of sin and apostasy. Someone has said that the book is an out-working of the text, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). God's people must worship Him and Him alone. Otherwise, judgment will come, and in this case it is to be the captivity of the nation by Babylonia, which did occur in 732 BC and 586 BC.

Today's reading, however, is in a concluding portion of the book that looks forward—beyond the captivity—to a time, yet future, when Israel will rejoice in the promised Kingdom blessing, chapter 3:9-20). Such a blessed future will be an occasion to "shout for joy… shout in triumph… rejoice and exult." Why? Because God has "taken away His judgments against you" and "He has cleared away your enemies." What causes for joy and rejoicing? But, even more astounding, the promise is that God Himself will be among them. The phrase is repeated: "The LORD is in your midst" (vv. 15, 17).

As in other Old Testament prophecies, Zephaniah warns his people that judgment is certain; it will come on the Day of the Lord's wrath. But he admonishes them in chapter 2:1-3 to "Seek the Lord … seek righteousness; seek humility." There will be a restoration, as we see in chapter 3; a remnant will be saved.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

Zephaniah had promised a time of future joy and rejoicing after severe judgment and captivity. In this epistle, Paul encourages Christians to find their joy and peace in God in the midst of trials and

difficult circumstances. He himself had suffered to even get to Philippi some years before (see Acts 16), and he understands how stressful life can be. But, as in Zephaniah, it's the promised presence of God that enables the Christian to live above life's stresses and rejoice in God's goodness.

Second Reading:

Philippians 4:4-7 NAS95 4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! 5 Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Chapter four of this power-packed letter emphasizes the power that Jesus provides for the Christian's life. There is strength in unity, vv. 1-3; strength of God's peace, vv. 4-7; strength of God's presence, vv. 8-9; and strength of God's provision, vv. 10-19. We look today at the significant words from verses 4-7.

Paul instructs the Philippians with emphasis, "rejoice." That joy is possible, of course, only because it is "in the Lord." Outside of one's personal trust in the all-sufficient grace and the mercy of God, there is no lasting source of joy. He encourages the believer to be gentle. Though translated a variety of ways ("forbearing," "moderation"), its meaning in the original language if "sweet reasonableness." Wouldn't life be so much more pleasant if we lived in a continue environment of sweet reasonableness? How is that possible? Well, believers in Jesus must be constantly aware that "The Lord is near." Not merely that He is watching judgmentally, but that He is near to help, to keep us sweet and reasonable. The indwelling Christ does that for us when we cannot by ourselves.

The next admonition is so difficult for many of us. He writes, "Be anxious for nothing." Didn't Paul realize the many anxieties those first-century Christians were facing? How could it tell them not to worry? He is likely saying that Christians should not be distracted by the affairs of life that they forget the real source of life, peace, and joy. It's good to remember that he was living in circumstances that may have been far more difficult than the Philippians at that time. But, more importantly, he provides the antidote for anxiety: prayer and thanksgiving. Nothing in life is beyond the realm of prayer. We may and should take everything to God in prayer; He should be our first resort, not the last. We should approach God with confidence that He is both able and willing to relieve our fears.

The result is the incomprehensible peace that only God can provide. Peace is not just the absence of fear or stress. It is, as the Hebrews say, "Shalom." The term implies wholeness, harmony, completeness. Those attributes can be found only in the God of Peace. Here are Paul's words from another of his epistles: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13)

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels all cover the life and ministry of Jesus, each from a different perspective with somewhat different purposes in mind. Luke's telling emphasizes Jesus as Savior, a divine man. He stresses the humanity of Jesus Christ and his perfection as a human. His audience probably consisted mostly of Gentile Christians, but he wrote to show his readers that the Gospel is for both Jews and Gentles.

Luke's account is more chronological than the other Gospels. Today's reading is taken from Christ's teaching as He approaches Jerusalem for the climactic final days of his earthly life. In this passage, which could be titled "The Signs of the Times," He speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (the title He frequently uses to speak of Himself).

Gospel Reading:

Luke 3:10-18 NAS95 10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" 11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." 12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" 13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." 14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." 15 Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, 16 John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 "His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

Today's reading reports on the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. John's words just prior to this reading were rather scathing. "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). He had been prophesied that that the Lord would come to straighten the crooked places and make level the rough ways. "All flesh," he said,"shall see the salvation of God" (v. 6).

It is in response to that teaching that the crowd asked, "Then what shall we do?" John the Baptist lists a number of practices that his listeners could pursue that would demonstrate a genuine change of heart that he has been calling for. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1). A man with two coats could show his heart change by giving one to someone who had not. Likewise, with someone who has enough food; he can share.

When the tax collectors (usually men who collected more than the tax due to enlarge their own pockets) indicated they wanted to enter the waters of baptism for repentance, John tells them to collect only what is the proper tax. Soldiers also asked about their responsibility, and John pointed out what, apparently, were the illegal practices of some: taking money by force, falsely accusing people, complaining about their wages. They are to discontinue such practices.

All of this had the people conjecturing about who this prophet really was. Could he be the Messiah? John responds to clarify his role by noting his inferiority to the One he is preparing the way for. John's baptism was with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (was was to be fulfilled in Acts 2). It's interesting to note the final words of this reading, "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." Yet, the preceding words are words of judgment ("winnowing fork," "burn up the chaff"). You see, the gospel has two facets. It offers the free grace of God in response to faith in the work of Jesus, but it promised judgment to those who reject Jesus.

Reflection Questions

1. In light of the second reading, list the ways in which you daily lay down your anxieties to God. Do I have the unexplainable joy and peace of God because I pray with thanksgiving and give my anxieties to Him?

2. In the Gospel reading the crowd asked John, "Then what shall we do?" To which John responded

with a list of practices believers in God exhibited as evidence of their change of heart. List two ways in which your life provides this evidence of turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to living out your life for God.