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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 671: 11/09/2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-9-2014. This week, we open with the first reading from the Prophet Ezekiel, move to the second reading from Second Corinthians Chapter 3, and close with the Gospel lesson from the Second Chapter of John.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context of the reading is Ezekiel's prophecy concerning a restored temple in Jerusalem. The most likely interpretation of this text is that this is the "Millennial Temple" because its construction coincides with the beginning of the Lord Jesus' thousand-year (millennium) reign after the end of the tribulation period. This follows the conclusion of a period of judgment known as the "Day of the Lord," a prominent theme throughout the Old Testament. This period was first mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah who said, "For the LORD of hosts will have a day of reckoning against everyone who is proud and lofty and against everyone who is lifted up, That he may be abased" (Isaiah 2:12). The Day of the Lord, or DOL, is mentioned at least

another 18 times in the Old Testament including Ezekiel 13:5, "You have not gone up into the breaches, nor did you build the wall around the house of Israel to stand in the battle on the **day of the LORD**" (emphasis added). This time, also known as the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7), is the conclusion of the period of time during which God will pour out His judgments upon the unbelieving world left after the church has been "caught up" from the earth as described by Saint Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. After Jesus returns with His church (Revelation 19:11,14) the world is restored to a time of worldwide peace under the rulership of the Lord Jesus Christ for a period of one thousand years (Revelation 20:4). The reading for today is in the section that describes how life-giving water will flow from the temple to renew the salt-laden Dead Sea. *Note that the omitted verses 3-7 and 10 were included in order to provide the proper context.*

First Reading:

> *1 Then he brought me back to the door of the house; and behold, water was flowing from under the threshold of the house toward the east, for the house faced east. And the water was flowing down from under, from the right side of the house, from south of the altar. 2 He brought me out by way of the north gate and led me around on the outside to the outer gate by way of the gate that faces east. And behold, water was trickling from the south side. 3 When the man went out toward the east with a line in his hand, he measured a thousand cubits, and he led me through the water, water reaching the ankles. 4 Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water, water reaching the knees. Again he measured a thousand and led me through the water, water reaching the loins. 5 Again he measured a thousand; and it was a river that I could not ford, for the water had risen, enough water to swim in, a river that could not be forded. 6 He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen this?" Then he brought me back to the bank of the river. 7 Now when I had returned, behold, on the bank of the river there were very many trees on the one side and on the other. 8 Then he said to me, "These waters go out toward the eastern region and go down into the Arabah; then they go toward the sea, being made to flow into the sea, and the waters of the sea become fresh. 9 It will come about that every living creature which swarms in every place where the river goes, will live. And there will be very many fish, for these waters go there and the others become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes. 10 And it will come about that fishermen will stand beside it; from Engedi to Eneglaim there will be a place for the spreading of nets. Their fish will be according to their kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea, very many. 11 But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. 12 By the river on its bank, on one side and on the other, will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither and their fruit will not fail. They will bear every month because their water flows from the sanctuary, and their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing." (Ezekiel 47:1-12)*

The water flowing from the temple comes from an elevated position since the temple is where all nations will eventually come to worship. John said in Revelation, "Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED" (Revelation 15:4). The Millennial Temple will be elevated, both physically as well as spiritually, the place where Jesus reign will be central. As the life-giving fresh water flows from God downhill towards the salt-laden Dead Sea, the water becomes deeper and deeper until it disappears down into the depths of the now freshwater lake. The Dead Sea will become fresh and a source of fish, with water providing nourishment for trees that will also flourish in this formerly dead region. The application of this is that all life is from God, water is life, and this comes from God out of the Millennial temple. God can heal the fallen creation and reverse the curse of Adam. This should encourage us because sin is not the last word written in the history of the world.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. The overall context of Chapter 3 is the theological concept of "carnality". Paul addressed the problem of Christians who are immature in their faith, which resulted in the Corinthian believers indulging in the things from their old lives of sin. Paul warned that believers needed to be careful because they would all stand before the Lord, give an account, and receive a reward for what they did for God. What was at stake was not their salvation, but their eternal rewards. *Note: Verses 12-15 omitted from the reading were included to provide the proper context.*

Second Reading:

> *9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. 10 According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. 14 If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. 15 If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. 16 Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. (1 Corinthians 3:9-17).*

Paul said that all of the believers were working together to build God's church (v. 9). This project of building for God was something that was empowered by God's variety of gifts given to each believer (v. 10a, "according to the grace given"). Paul said that it wasn't as important as **what** we did, but rather our heart and motivation in **why** we did it (vv. 12-15). Paul reminded us that as believers, we are a temple of God, and we are to use the gifts given to us through God's grace to accomplish the work He has for us. God will test our works against His gold standard, that of perfect knowledge of our motives. This is something that the Corinthian church needed very much to understand, as they were struggling with carnal living in their culture that was filled with idolatry in their crossroads city. Later in this Book Paul explained to the Corinthian believers more about the coming judgment. Believers will be judged at what is called the "Bema Seat Judgment" found in 2 Corinthians 5:10. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Paul also described it in Romans. "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God" (Romans 14:10). This judgment is not about salvation, that was something that was determined by Jesus Who died on our behalf (1 John 2:2) and when we trusted in Him (John 3:16). Instead, the point of the Bema Seat Judgment is to reward believers based on how faithful they were in serving the Lord. We see this clearly in the last Book of the Bible where Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Revelation 22:12). The Bema Seat of Christ should provide extra encouragement for us to steward our gifts and talents according to God's value system and not the world's value system. As we go about our lives as Christians, we must remember to test our motives and use our spiritual gifts in the service of the Lord.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John Chapter 2. The central theme of the Gospel of John is to show that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus is the incarnation of God, the "logos" or "the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14a). Jesus declares throughout the Book that He is God, for example John 10:30, "I and the Father are One." Chapter 1 summarizes God's plan of redemption through the birth, life (and eventual death) of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One Who "came to His own, and His own people (the Jews) did not receive Him" (John 1:11). John showed that God's plan of salvation was for people to find life through Jesus' giving of His own life, not as a victim (John 10:18) in a sacrificial offering but as One who willingly offered Himself as a final sacrifice for the sin of the world once and for all (Hebrews 10:12). John said, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). The first chapter of John also introduced the person of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, who was God's appointed forerunner who came in the spirit of Elijah to fulfil the Old Testament prophecy in Malachi 4:5-6. John the Baptist came "to bear witness of the Light, that all through Him might believe" (John 1:7).

Finally, the opening chapter of John's Gospel introduced Jesus' ministry by revealing His calling of the first disciples. Peter the Rock was first and was given this new name by Jesus (1:42), followed by Philip (v. 43) and finally Nathanael (v. 45). Jesus' first recorded miracle was shared in the closing section of the chapter when Jesus revealed to Nathanael how He had seen him standing under the fig tree. Since Jesus wasn't in close enough proximity for this to have occurred naturally, Nathaniel received this as a miracle (John 1:48). This impressed Nathanael so much that he declared the Rabbi Jesus to be the Son of God, which was the first affirmation of Jesus' divinity in this Gospel.

Chapter 2, from which today's reading is found, opens with the miracle of Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana in the region of Galilee near the Sea of Galilee (John 2:1-11). After Jesus did this miracle, John recorded that "His disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11c). After the wedding celebration concluded, which according to Jewish tradition would have gone on just short of a week, Jesus traveled with His mother, brothers, and disciples to Capernaum. This brings us to the reading for today.

Gospel Reading:

> *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. (John 2:13-22)*

The first point from the text is that Jesus's actions revealed his high reverence for God and correct worship in the temple. This is the first of three Passover celebrations that are mentioned in the Gospels (v. 13, John 6:4, John 11:55). The first of two times that Jesus drove the money changers from the temple (v. 14, Matthew 21:12). The money changers were in the outer courts of the temple, preying on the Jewish pilgrims coming from various countries to observe the Passover. This

pilgrimage was required for every adult over 12 years old (Exodus 23:14-17). One reason that Jesus was angry, in addition to the fact that commerce was being conducted in the temple that included the sale of sacrificial animals, was that the money changers swindled their clients and took advantage of the fact that they had no other choice but to buy their sacrifices from these temple crooks. Jesus called this a "robbers' den" in Matthew's Gospel. On that occasion Jesus proclaimed to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER'; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN" (Matthew 21:13). In the reading Jesus told them, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a place of business" (v. 16b). (John 4:24). Jesus would not tolerate commerce in the temple, especially that of crooked money changers. Again, Jesus' actions of driving out the money changers from the temple indicated His reverence for His Father God.

The way Jesus drove the shady currency exchange merchants from the temple gives us an insight into the second point that arises from the text: Jesus' supernatural power and inherent authority. John said, "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" (v. 15). The Passover was a hectic season in Jerusalem with the arrival of thousands of pilgrims from around the Roman world. A large contingent of Roman soldiers would have stood guard outside the temple. Jesus must have driven out the money changers with such power that they could not raise any objection with the Roman authorities, who would have responded quickly to the situation. John said, ''His disciples remembered that it was written, 'ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME,'" a quote from the Messianic Psalm 69. Even Jesus' disciples didn't realize all of these things right away, but they were humble enough to insert this insight into the record once they did. The way Jesus drove the money changers away revealed the tremendous power He wielded from His Father God and His inherent authority as the author of true worship.

The third and final point from the text is the introduction of Jesus' "parabolic" teaching method. The parable in the reading today is more indirect than the "kingdom parables" in Matthew 13. Jesus told the Jews in the temple, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (v. 19). Even though the temple repair project had been ongoing for 46 years, the renovation had still not been completed. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that the renovation continued all the way up until the siege of Jerusalem that began in the year 67 and concluded with the destruction of the temple in 70. Instead of meaning the Temple building, Jesus was referring to His own body, which would be given over to death, and then would be resurrected in three days. The Jews misunderstood Jesus; something that we find out later in Matthew's Gospel was His intention by teaching this way. In that text when His disciples came to Him and asked Him why he taught the people in parables He answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (Matthew 13:11). Jesus' reason for obscuring the truth to those who won't believe is that it shields them from further judgment when they will stand before the Lord.

The first two chapters of John mark a series of firsts: the first disciples, the first miracles, the first display of Jesus' power, and the first use of His marvelous teaching method in parables. We can rejoice that we can model Jesus' reverence for His Father God when we worship God. We can minister to others through the same power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Himself possessed. Finally, we can meditate and learn from Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. Something about Jesus' teaching method makes us understand the concept even more clearly than if He had told us the truths directly.

Have a great week.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In all three readings, we see a display of God's power:

Ezekiel shows us that God's life-giving water will resurrect the Dead Sea

Paul shows us in 1 Corinthians that all Christians will face a time of giving an account for what we have done with the gifts and talents entrusted to us.

John records a display of power when Jesus cleansed the Temple and predicted His resurrection power.

As you think about these three passages and the incredible display of power, what areas of your life need God's resurrection power? How do you respond to God's power?

2. Jesus had a zeal for worship to be pure, not tainted by selfish motives. This theme was also discussed in 1 Corinthians, since our motives will be laid bare at the Bema Seat of Christ. What do you want God to change in your life to purify your worship and your motives, so that you will not be ashamed at the Bema Seat of Christ? Talk to Him about this area that you would like Him to purify and cleanse—and ask Him what your role is in making life-giving changes.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 10-30-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we look at a reading from Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians and then the Gospel reading from Saint Luke. The first reading is from the Apocrypha and will not be covered.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

command center in a marina in Mackinaw City. Evidently, a fellow camper had been watching me from the shore and at some point, she couldn't locate me. She then proceeded to tell one of the authorities at the campground who then called the police. The police then alerted the Coast Guard and the manhunt was on! The whole affair began by one piece of bad information. [*If you are interested you can read the story online here:*

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

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

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

Second Reading:

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

The key verses that revealed the context of Paul's address in this section were chapter 2 verses 1-2.

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

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

Paul continued with a very detailed explanation of the series of events that would lead up to the return of the Lord Jesus to carry away His Church. Paul said that a "man of lawlessness" would be revealed, a future world leader known throughout the Scripture as the "Antichrist." This satanic person would "oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (v.4). The lawlessness of this end time will be held back by the power of God until the time that the man of sin is revealed (vv.7-8). The man of sin will be accompanied by "the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders" (v.9). The people that remain on the earth during this time

will "refuse to love the truth and so be saved" (v.10b). This leads to a terrible conclusion. "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (vv. 11-12). The powerful delusion is partly the counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders brought about through satanic powers that are allowed to rule the earth during this terrible period of time. The satanic deception of the Antichrist, the person known as the False Prophet, and Satan constitute an unholy trinity that will wage war upon the people left on earth during the end times. To read about these three evil personalities read Revelation Chapters 12 and 13.

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

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

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

Jesus mentioned the impossibly of a camel being able to pass through the eye of a needle. Throughout the ages, a story circulated that goes something like this. Somewhere along the wall in

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

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

changed by God's power.

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

Reflection Questions

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

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

John 3:16-21 NIV 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Acts 4:8-12 NIV 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are

asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' 12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

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

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

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

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

Luke 23:32-43 NIV 32 Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals– one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One." 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For Further Study

Sam was a devout Jew who was a gifted piano performer. He was very religious on the outside, however on the inside, his heart was bent on sin and he knew something was terribly wrong. Listen to Sam's compelling story (25 minutes, Words to Live By radio program):

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http://words.net/2013/10/25/no-man-in-human-history-ever-said-words-like-that-sams-story/

Keywords: Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, Lectionary 153, misunderstandings, DOL, Day of the Lord, repentance, faith, salvation

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 1-3-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **1-3-2016.** 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:

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 strictly Jewish sect. A modern analogy would be to think of the children's game where the goal is to hammer round and square wooden pegs into their respectively shaped holes. One could never hammer a square peg into a round hole regardless of how forcefully a person went about it or how talented they were, and regardless of their background. In the same way, the Pharisees could never have in their wildest imaginations envisioned a time when large populations of Gentiles would be invited and subsequently accepted into the family of God. They should have envisioned this as the Old Testament Scriptures predicted that this would happen. Isaiah said, "Then it will come about in that day That the **nations** will resort to the root of Jesse, Who will stand as a signal for the peoples; And His resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10, emphasis added). The concept of the Gentiles

coming to God appeared throughout the Old Testament. We see this again in Isaiah in the section being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

Introduction to the First Reading:

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

First Reading:

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

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v.2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v.3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for November 2, 2013. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

The context of this section is that Jesus had already been born in Bethlehem and his parents had moved him out of the stable into a house. He was an infant, probably less than two years old as we see from Herod who later in Matthew made a plan to kill all infants two years old or younger. The Magi were likely people from the Babylonian region along the Euphrates River in present day Iraq south of Baghdad. These mysterious scholars were highly educated people that were part pagan priest, part magician, and part scribe. They were also interested in astrology and this was woven into their mystical religious beliefs. Nowhere in the text does it say that there were three of them, as

in the famous song about the three wise men. This designation comes from the three gifts they brought with them to present to the King. There were likely a small group of them but they would have been accompanied by a large number of guards and servants. Thus this would have made their arrival that much more disturbing to King Herod.

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

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass, visit this web site:

http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/010316.cfm

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-14-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 12-14-2014. This week we open with the first reading

from Isaiah and then move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with the Gospel lesson that is a continuation of the study from John's Gospel that we began last week.

The first reading is from Isaiah 61. The first verse and a portion of the second were the ones that Jesus read from while He was teaching in the temple as is recorded in Luke 4:18. It is important to note that Jesus stopped reading halfway through verse two because the subsequent verses dealt with His Second Advent. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see this, although His listeners would not have been able to catch this important detail (see for example John 12:16). The verses in question (2b – 9) were omitted from the text of the reading covered in the Mass, although we have included them below in the section that is separated by the blank line. These intermediate verses (2b – 9) won't be fulfilled until after the church age when God pours out His judgment upon the earth during the tribulation period of the end times. As you read this Old Testament prophecy from the Prophet Isaiah you can almost imagine Jesus standing in the temple proclaiming His Word.

> *1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; 2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD*

> *And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, 3 To grant those who mourn in Zion, Giving them a garland instead of ashes, The oil of gladness instead of mourning, The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. 4 Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations; And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. 5 Strangers will stand and pasture your flocks, And foreigners will be your farmers and your vinedressers. 6 But you will be called the priests of the LORD; You will be spoken of as ministers of our God. You will eat the wealth of nations, And in their riches you will boast. 7 Instead of your shame you will have a double portion, And instead of humiliation they will shout for joy over their portion. Therefore they will possess a double portion in their land, Everlasting joy will be theirs. 8 For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense And make an everlasting covenant with them. 9 Then their offspring will be known among the nations, And their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them Because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed.*

> *10 I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to*

> *spring up, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations. (Isaiah 61:1-11)*

God revealed to Isaiah some important truths about the ministry of the Messiah Jesus. First, the Spirit of the Lord would dwell upon Him (v. 1). This truth is corroborated in the New Testament by eye witnesses to Jesus' baptism during His time on earth. The baptism of Jesus was recorded in three of the four Gospels. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist said this about Jesus' baptism: "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him" (John 1:32). Jesus, as God in the flesh, was in union with both the Spirit of God and God the Father as we find in the chronicle of Jesus' baptism. Saint Matthew detailed the event as follows. "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'" (Matthew 3;16-17). Here the entire Trinity of God is present. Jesus is being baptized, the Spirit descends upon Him, and the Father announces His pleasure in the Son.

Isaiah announced a second truth from God about the Messiah (that was of course yet future in his day), and provided some details about His ministry. The Messiah would be appointed by the LORD to do the following:

- "To bring good news to the afflicted" (v. 1b). Jesus brought the "Gospel," a word which means "good news." The Gospel was the good news for those who (and are) being afflicted, or poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3).
- "He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted" (v. 1c). Jesus was the spiritual healer. When someone heals an injured person's wounds they "bind them up." Jesus did this to the injured world's heart. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12, we will read this in context during the Gospel lesson).
- "To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners" (v. 1e-ff). The world has been held captive by sin, Jesus came to redeem the world and to free everyone held captive by it.
- "To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD" (v. 2a). The coming of the Messiah Jesus was the most "favorable year of the LORD" since the creation of the universe. Had the people accepted Jesus as their Messiah, Jesus' eternal reign would have begun. Jesus' coming would fulfill an untold number of Old Testament prophecies and open the way to the future renewal of the world through worldwide peace in the Millennial and eternal kingdoms.

Finally, if we move to the closing verses 10-11, we see some additional detail about the future ministries of Jesus as follows:

- The Messiah will give those who trust in Him a reason to rejoice: They will exalt the Name of the Lord in whose righteousness they will be adorned. "I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped

me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (v. 10).
- In the future, the world will be a place of universal righteousness and the earth's curse will be reversed. "For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations" (v. 11).

The intermediate verses that were omitted in the Mass reading explain more about Jesus' ministry, but these details are concerning things that will happen after His Second Coming.

- After the Day of the Lord, referred as "the day of vengeance of our God" (v. 2), Jesus will comfort all those who mourn as a result of the terrible series of events that unfolded on the earth (v. 3). Part of what will happen during that time is terrible persecution of believers alive during that time. We see in the Book of Revelation how God comforts those who were martyred for their faith during this Great Tribulation period. "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9-10).
- The war torn world will be rebuilt after the devastation brought about by the AntiChrist and God's vengeance of his evil rulership of the global commercial empire and false religious empire known as "Mystery Babylon" (v. 4).
- Gentiles will be in-grafted in the kingdom ("strangers," v. 5), as foretold by Paul in Romans 11:11-17. God will use the Jews' rejection of their Messiah during the unforeseen "church age" in order to bring the Gentiles into His eternal kingdom.
- The rightful priesthood will be restored to Israel with their honor restored with a double blessing (vv. 6-7). God said, "For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery in the burnt offering; And I will faithfully give them their recompense And make an everlasting covenant with them. Then their offspring will be known among the nations, And their descendants in the midst of the peoples. All who see them will recognize them Because they are the offspring whom the LORD has blessed" (vv. 8-9).

That's a lot to digest. The key point of all of this is that the coming of the Messiah was a crucially important mystery that was fulfilled by the miraculous birth of Jesus that we will celebrate in just two short weeks from the date of these Sunday Mass study notes. We cannot underemphasize the importance of Jesus and as we transition to the second reading let's pause for a moment and ask God to help us to celebrate the upcoming holiday season with Jesus foremost in our minds.

The second reading is from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's teaching on the upcoming calamity we mentioned in the first reading, the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). Someone in Thessalonica had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1

Thessalonians 4:15-17). Chapter 5 opens with Paul's teaching on the **real** return of the Lord, for those alive during that generation when God will outpour His wrath upon the unbelieving earth. During that time many will come to faith in the Lord Jesus during perhaps the greatest turning of people's hearts to God since the creation of the world. Paul addressed these future believers and told them that "God had not destined them to wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9) and provided a list of instructions to them (vv. 11-15) including, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people" (v. 15). It is in this context that Paul provided the following instructions that are applicable to believers of all ages, and especially to those undergoing terrible persecution in the last days.

> *16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24)*

Paul directed the believers to live in a state of unceasing joy and thankfulness (vv. 16-18) while holding to the truths of the Gospel message (v. 20, "do not despise prophetic utterances"). Because of all the false teaching that will happen in that era (and is already happening now, 1 John 2:18), they are to "examine everything very carefully" and only adhere to those things that are actually true (v. 21b, "that which is good"). Finally, Paul pronounced a blessing upon them, wishing that God would find them blameless upon His return, and noted that the written prophecy regarding what would happen in these last days would indeed prove to be true (v. 24). Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians give guidance to us who would also live in light of truth. We do not do these things in order to be saved, we live this way because we are saved. It is God who sanctifies us—literally, sets us apart—so that our lives reflect His value system when we do not quench the Spirit of God who lives inside us. God is faithful.

Paul's message is important to us as we move towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus by the blessed virgin Mary. God calls us as believers to remember the work that He has done through sending Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. During the Christmas season we are to "set our sights upon Jesus." Although many in the world have set their sights upon Jesus in the manner of directing their weapons of unbelief against Him, Paul said that regardless of the circumstance and even in times of terrible persecution we are to "abstain from **every** form of evil" (v. 22, emphasis added).

The Gospel lesson focuses on what John the Baptist did to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. John was a few months older than Jesus. They were cousins, so they very well could have spent time together as they were growing up and beginning to understand their unique place in God's redemptive plan. We read about the prediction of John the Baptist's ministry in last week's reading.

> *6 There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light.*

> *19 This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." 21 They asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." 22 Then they said to him, "Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" 23 He said, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." 24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25 They asked him, and said to him, "Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" 26 John answered them saying, "I baptize in water, but among you stands One whom you do not know. 27 It is He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." 28 These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:6-8, 19-28)*

John the Baptist wasn't the Light but came as a forerunner of Jesus, the Light (v. 6-8). John the Baptist's purpose was to testify about Jesus so that people may believe (v. 7b). When the Jewish leaders asked John who he was, they inquired about whether he was Elijah or the prophet spoken of by Moses in Deuteronomy. The Jews were aware of these two prophecies, first that Elijah would return (Malachi 4:5) as well as the coming of a great prophet as predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. John answered them clearly by saying that he was neither the Christ (v. 20), Elijah (v. 21), or the prophet of Deuteronomy 18 (v. 22). Instead, he quoted from Isaiah 40, with which they would have been familiar, "I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD'" (v. 23). Isaiah's description of John the Baptist was very accurate, as he was the one proclaiming Jesus in the wilderness "beyond the Jordan" (v. 28). John told them that the Messiah was among them but they did not know Him (v. 26) and that he was unworthy of even untying His sandal (v. 27).

The reading skipped a large section of text including verses 9 – 18. We are covering these verses because they are not being covered during the Mass during any soon upcoming Sundays.

> *9 There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 John testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a*

> *higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" 16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. 17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (John 1:9-18)*

Even though Jesus created the world, many of His own people rejected Him as the promised Messiah (v. 10 – 11). However, this didn't stop the plan of God to grant salvation to all who believe (v. 12). Jesus was the "Word that became flesh" that "dwelt among [the disciples]" (v. 14). He is the one about whom John the Baptist testified, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me'" (v. 15). Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Law (v. 17), and was the fleshly manifestation of God, because God the Father exists in the form of a Spirit that cannot be seen by man (v. 18). Jesus is eternal, because He existed before John the Baptist although He was born physically some months after this greatest of men (Matthew 11:11). These are some profound truths that we can ponder as our lives move towards the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the Gospel lesson we learned about John the Baptist who came as the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the coming of a forerunner announcing the ministry of Jesus. Later in the Gospel, we learn that John's life was cut short by King Herod in an outright persecution for the content of John's message to repent and as Paul said in the second reading "abstain from every form of evil." Jesus took over where John left off and continued the calling to repent (Matthew 4:17), then His life was also cut short. What difference does knowing that **you** will be persecuted for your faith make in your life as you carry on this same message?

2. How does your understanding of the context of the second reading from Paul's First Letter to Thessalonians help you to place Christian persecution into a different context?

3. Review the list of what the Messiah was appointed for in the Old Testament passage of Isaiah. Pick one of the bullet points that resonates with you and talk to God about how this truth impacts you. Let God know that you want Jesus to be that kind of Messiah for you.

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/121414.cfm

First Reading IS 61:1-2A, 10-11

Second Reading 1 THES 5:16-24

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Gospel Reading JN 1:6-8, 19-28

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 12-7-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 12-7-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah in which we see a prophecy about the coming of the forerunner who would announce the Messiah. Then we move to the second reading from Second Peter and close with the Gospel lesson from the first chapter of Mark.

The first reading is from Isaiah chapter 40. This section of Isaiah focuses upon the preaching of the Gospel as well as prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). In the first verse, "Jerusalem" refers to the Nation as a whole. *Note: Verses 6-8 that were skipped in the reading were included below.*

> *1 "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. 2 "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out*

> *to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the LORD'S hand Double for all her sins." 3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Call out." Then he answered, "What shall I call out?" All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, When the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever. 9 Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" 10 Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him And His recompense before Him. 11 Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes. (Isaiah 40:1-11)*

In this passage, some timeless principles emerge for our lives today. A key point is that while humans are finite, God and His Word stand forever. If this is the case, then it is wise for us to study God's Word and to orient our lives around its truth. This passage also shares the two-sided nature of the Messiah's coming: "The Lord GOD will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him" and "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock . . .He will gently lead the nursing ewes" (v. 10-11). We see that God is gentle with those who need and accept His care, but He is also authoritative with those who are not willing to bend to His ways.

Another main theme in the reading is the prophecy of the future redemption of the Nation of Israel through the coming of the Messiah that will be announced by a forerunner. Although God disciplined Israel "double for her sins (v. 2), He began the restoration process first by sending John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah Jesus as predicted in verse 3. Isaiah's message was a picture of the manner in which the Messiah Jesus would be revealed to the world through a spokesperson as a forerunner who sends a clear message:

> *Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (vv. 3b – 5)*

The forerunner, who in retrospect we know was John the Baptist, prepared the way for the coming of the King Jesus. John "cleared the way" by **preaching** the good news (the Gospel) telling the people that they needed to repent of their sins. John was removing the obstacles that lay in people's paths in order to receive the subsequent message from Jesus that He was the only way to God (John 3:3, John 3:16, John 14:6). John was "leveling the mountains and smoothing the ground" so the world

could receive Jesus' Gospel. Like many prophetic writings, verse 5 has an "already not yet" sense in that although Jesus did come and His glory was revealed, in some future day He will return and all flesh will see the glory of the Lord.

Isaiah's message was also a picture of the literal, eschatological (end times) restoration of the Nation of Israel. In the last days, God will make Jerusalem the capital city of the universe and remove both the physical and spiritual obstacles standing in the way for people to come to the Lord in Jerusalem. Verse 3 says, "Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." We see something similar to this in Revelation 16:12 where God says that He will make a way for the "kings of the east." Although the interpretation of this passage is difficult, it seems to mean that national leaders from regions to the east of Jerusalem will be converted to the true faith of God in the end times. Like many prophecies in the Bible, a day will come when we will be able to look back and understand the fulfillment of the prophecy in hindsight. Until then the best we can do is to "study to show ourselves approved" (2 Timothy 2:15). We must endeavor to utilize the prophecies to the best of our ability in a way that calls the world to repent of their sin and place their faith in the one and only means of finding an eternal relationship with God, faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. Through Isaiah's message, we see the kindness of God who granted us salvation by His free grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). A caveat is that we must be willing to repent of our sins and turn from our former sinful behavior. This means to turn from, or agree with what God says about the seriousness of our sin.

The second reading is from the Second Epistle of Peter. The context is Paul's teaching on the return of the Lord which will occur at the conclusion of the period known in the biblical text as the "Day of the Lord." In this Epistle, Saint Peter described how the people in the future would say that since their daily lives were continuing as had been happening throughout all the previous generations that the Lord wasn't going to return. They would say, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation" (2 Peter 3:4). Paul informed his readers that Jesus would indeed return and reminded them of the flood that God unleashed upon the ungodly world during the days of Noah (2 Peter 3:4-7). What he was saying was that the coming Day of the Lord's judgment would unfold in a similar way as it did during the days of Noah. Our Lord had previously said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah" (Matthew 24:37). The reading for today picks up in verse 8.

> *8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. 11 Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! 13 But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. 14 Therefore,*

> *beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:8-14)*

As we said in the introduction to the reading, Peter said that in the future, scoffers would come saying that the Lord was delaying His return (2 Peter 3:4). Peter corrected this false teaching by explaining that God, Who exists in eternity, does not count time the same way people do on earth (v. 8). Since with God "a thousand years is like one day," the return of the Lord will come in an instant in the mind of God, quickly, "like a thief" (v. 10a). The reason that God has delayed isn't because He is not returning, but because He is longsuffering ("patient" v. 9c) and "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (v.9d). This is the message that was preached by John the Baptist, the message that we will hear later in the Gospel lesson from Saint Mark. Peter went on to reveal some as yet untold prophecy about events that would happen in the universe sometime after Jesus returned. He said that the earth would be destroyed (or renewed) by fire (vv. 10b-11), and a new heaven and earth would be created "in which righteousness dwells" (v. 13b). Peter concluded the reading with the crux of the matter. "**Therefore**, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless" (v. 14, emphasis added). He told them that since the Lord **was** going to be returning soon along with terrible events on the earth, and the earth would then undergo a purification process in which all unrighteousness would be removed, they needed to be behaving in a manner befitting of this knowledge. Jesus said, "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into" (Matthew 24:43). The reality of Jesus' soon return should encourage us to live in a manner that is consistent with His character and ways.

As we move to the Gospel lesson, let's summarize what we have covered so far. We saw in the first reading how God in His grace would send a forerunner whom we know as John the Baptist to prepare the hearts of the people to receive the message of Jesus Christ. In the second reading, we saw that Peter warned the people that scoffers would come in the future saying that the Lord Jesus had delayed His return, and they would go on about their ungodly business as if the Lord was never going to return. Peter corrected this false theology and said the Lord was going to return and that we we should not mark time the way that it is done on earth, for God exists outside of time and with Him "a thousand years is as a day." No, Peter said, the Lord would return in an instant "as a thief in the night." Since He was coming quickly people needed to act in godly ways befitting of the imminent return of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 19:16).

The Gospel reading is from the opening section of the Gospel of Saint Mark. Mark, known as John Mark (Acts 12:25) had a bit of a checkered past because he was the man that deserted Paul and Barnabas during Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). During Paul's second missionary journey Barnabas wanted to take John Mark along, but this caused a strong disagreement with Paul (Acts 15:38-40). In spite of these events, John Mark went on to prove himself to be an extremely valuable co-worker in the Lord, and was even vindicated by Paul (Colossians 4:10). Mark was evidently a close disciple of Saint Peter because the latter described him as his son (1 Peter 5:13). Mark's Gospel was written for Roman believers, primarily Gentiles because of some nuances he used

in translating certain words from the Aramaic and his use of Latin instead of Greek in some places. The main theme of Mark is the presentation of Jesus as the suffering servant of God as portrayed in Isaiah 53. He emphasized Jesus' humanity much more than the other Gospel writers including his emotions (for example Mark 8:12) and human limitations (for example Mark 11:12). Mark, unlike the other Gospel writers such as Luke, did not include lengthy genealogies of Jesus likely because these are not as significant to his intended Gentile audience.

> *1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; 3 THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" 4 John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. 6 John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 7 And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. 8 I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:1-8)*

Mark, obviously very familiar with Isaiah, quoted from his Book in the very first verse of his Gospel. The coming of John the Baptist marks the fulfillment of verse 3 from Isaiah 40 that we studied in the first reading. John was described as a most unusual man "clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist" (v. 6). The key point of this verse is now that John the Baptist had come, he would point the way for the coming of Jesus Christ (v. 7). John the Baptist said, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I" (v. 7a), then humbly said, "and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals" (v. 7b). John the Baptist then foretold how Jesus would not only baptize with water, such as he was doing, but would send God's Holy Spirit (v. 8). John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin, having been born to Elizabeth (Luke 1:34-37, Jesus' disciple John, the one whom Jesus loved, was also Jesus' cousin). Note that John's diet was indicative of his reliance upon God, the same way that Elijah relied upon God when he fed him by the ravens as told in 1 Kings 17:6. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy about the coming of a "forerunner" that was saw in the first reading. His coming was also the fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the return of the Prophet Elijah given in the Book of Malachi. God said in that Book, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." (Malachi 4:5-6). The future fulfillment will be when Jesus returns with His church at the end of the age as we studied last week.

What does all of this mean for us as we live out our lives as Christians? First, like John, we also are called to "prepare the way of the Lord" by preaching the Good News to the world that if they repent of their sin and place their faith in Jesus Christ they will have eternal forgiveness in eternity with God. God is "patient and not willing that any should perish" to the extent that He uses unusual people like John the Baptist and even more unusual people like you and me to do His work! Finally,

since the return of the Lord Jesus is imminent we need to accelerate our proclamation of this message, as well as live in a way befitting of His soon return.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The Gospel reading said that "all of the country of Judea was going to [John the Baptist] . . . and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). What do you think motivated the people to confess their sins to him? As a clue, what word is repeated in verses 4 and 7?

2. As we look towards Christmas coming up in just two and half weeks, pray and ask God if there is anything standing in the way between you and the relationship with Him that He desires with you.

> *Dear God, is there anything that you would have me to do during this Christmas season? What mountains needs to be made flat, and hills need to be leveled in order for me to accomplish your will this Christmas season?*

Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/120714.cfm

First Reading IS 40:1-5, 9-11

Second Reading 2 PT 3:8-14

Gospel Reading MK 1:1-8

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 11-30-2014

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-30-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Isaiah 63 in which we include a great deal of the surrounding context and learn about God's frustration with the Jewish people during this era. Then we move to the second reading which is the opening verses of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Finally we conclude with a lengthy analysis from Mark's Gospel on the section known as the Olivet Discourse.

The first reading is in Isaiah 63-64. Israel was experiencing the consequences of turning away from God. Isaiah, who was God's spokesperson, cried out to God on behalf of the people. The people were suffering as a result of keeping God out of their lives. But this was a necessary part of the training process, for how else would they know that surrendering to God was actually for their good unless they experienced the harsh reality of living apart from God? (The bold text is what will be read in the mass, the normal text is the biblical verses that provide the context).

> *16 For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us And Israel does not recognize us.* ***You, O LORD, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name. 17 Why, O LORD, do You cause us to stray from Your ways And harden our heart from fearing You? Return for the sake of Your servants, the tribes of Your heritage. 18 Your holy people possessed Your sanctuary for a little while, Our adversaries have trodden it down.*** *19 We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, Like those who were not called by Your name. (Isaiah 63:16-19)*

As a prophet, Isaiah was in a tough position. He desired to see God move in the hearts of the people, but he knew that the Israelites were unwilling. God is a "gentleman" and does not barge in where He is not wanted. And so the people's hearts grew harder and harder, to the point where God's protective presence was no longer felt in Israel. Isaiah's complaint was that they had become just

like the surrounding nations that did not have a covenantal relationship with God. He said, "We have become like those over whom You have never ruled, Like those who were not called by Your name" (v. 19). Again, the reading continues below.

> ***1 Oh, that You would rend the heavens and come down, That the mountains might quake at Your presence– 2 As fire kindles the brushwood, as fire causes water to boil–To make Your name known to Your adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Your presence! 3 When You did awesome things which we did not expect, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence. 4 For from days of old they have not heard or perceived by ear, Nor has the eye seen a God besides You, Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him. 5 You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, Who remembers You in Your ways. Behold, You were angry, for we sinned, We continued in them a long time; And shall we be saved? 6 For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. 7 There is no one who calls on Your name, Who arouses himself to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities. 8 But now, O LORD, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand.*** *(Isaiah 63:16 – 64:8)*

Isaiah's response to their predicament was to call God to hurl down His judgment upon the nations that were attacking them (vv. 1-3). He looked back and remembered God's power when He did "awesome things [they] did not expect" (v. 3) and finally admitted their great sin. Isaiah said, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (v. 6). The connotation of the "filthy garments" here is that of a woman's menstrual rags. This is a strong word picture of how God views our "good deeds" done in our own power. This theme is echoed in the words of King David who said in Psalm 14, "They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3). Seven hundred years later Saint Paul quoted these verses to explain how every person stands condemned before God because of the stain of sin. He said, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). He further explained that as result of our sin the penalty is death (Romans 6:23). This passage teaches that we cannot save ourselves. There is no such thing as a cosmic scale that weighs our good deeds versus our bad deeds. All of our deeds, even the so-called "good deeds" are as filthy garments, good only for the trash heap. If this is the case, we must analyze what we are trusting in for salvation. If we are trusting in ourselves, we are going to be sorely lacking.

Isaiah points to a redemptive solution in this passage by showing the need of trusting in God's righteousness. He described God's character: "Who acts in behalf of the one who waits for Him. You meet him who rejoices in doing righteousness, who remembers You in Your ways" (vv. 4-5). There is

an implied sense of relational dependence to which Isaiah is pointing. He continues this theme of relational dependence at the end of the section saying: "But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You are our potter; and all of us are the work of Your hand" (v. 8). The redemptive solution to the dire situation we find ourselves in as sinners is to throw ourselves on God's mercy and to trust in Him to save us. In the New Testament, we see even more clearly God's redemption in Jesus. He bore the wrath of God and forgives us of our sin and cleanses us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). As believers in the finished work of Jesus we are forgiven of our sin and have a special relationship with God, Who at the moment we believed sent His Holy Spirit to live within us (Ephesians 1:13).

What does this means for us today? We must consider carefully in what/whom we are trusting for salvation. Isaiah is very clear, that we cannot be good enough to be saved on our own merit. Becoming a Christian means to lean your full weight on Jesus and trust His righteousness to save you. As believers we have a special relationship with God, in a way that is similar but yet unique from God's chosen people Israel. There will be untold blessings for all believers when they pass into eternity with God the moment they die. Saint Paul quoted from the first reading and said about believers in the Lord Jesus, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). God allowed judgment to come upon the people of Israel for the purpose of bringing them back to the Lord. As we transition to the second reading, which is also from 1 Corinthians, Paul celebrates with the believers in that region the forgiveness they received through Jesus Who "died for their sins according the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). We can celebrate that we have come to believe even without having to endure a military invasion and being carried captive into a foreign land as happened with the Jews. Although the Jewish people about whom Isaiah wrote in the reading had turned away from the Lord, one day all of Israel will repent of their sin and be saved (Romans 11:26).

The second reading is the first six verses from Saint Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. Paul founded this church on his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 18. The Corinthian church was in a major cosmopolitan city in southern Greece, immersed in the surrounding godless culture of a worldly crossroads city. This was actually Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he mentioned the first letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9 that was subsequently lost.

> *1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, 2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, 6 even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)*

Paul began by affirming his apostleship, meaning that he was someone who saw the resurrected Lord Jesus and was personally called by the Lord to his ministry. This happened to him while he journeyed on the road to Damascus as was recorded in the Book of Acts (Acts 9:3-5). Second, Paul provided the name of Sosthenes who was most likely his secretary. This man had suffered for the Lord when he was beaten for taking Paul in front of a Corinthian civil court (Acts 18:12-17). The mention of Sosthenes is significant because it reveals that this important Jewish leader of the synagogue in that region (Acts 18:17) came to faith in the Lord Jesus. Third, Paul affirmed the holiness of anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus. He said, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours (v. 2). Sanctification is the concept of being set apart for the purposes of God. This word comes from the Greek "hagios" meaning "separation," and is the same Greek word that is translated "holiness."

This is a one-time, forever event, but also has an ongoing, growing element, in that as the author of Hebrews stated, "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). Finally, Paul says that in the end, believers in the Lord will be "blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 8). This is a common theme for Paul, we also see it in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 as well as in Philippians 1:6 and 2:15. Paul said in Colossians, "yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach–if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister" (Colossians 1:22-23). Believers are blameless in their positon before the Lord, meaning they are justified as if they had never sinned. However, the ungodly behavior that Paul noted later in 1 Corinthians was not indicative of true believers, for only true believers are blameless before the Lord. Paul said in the closing verse of the reading, "God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 9). Although as we saw in the first reading, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), continuing in the faith is a sign of a true believer.

We can celebrate that as believers we have been set apart from the world for the purpose of serving God. Most of us do not get too excited about holiness, because holiness has the connation of being no fun. But that is the deception of the Enemy who makes us think that holiness is a drag. The idea of holiness is to be set apart for special use, and which one of us doesn't want to be "special". That is a longing that everyone has. We see a world full of people trying to be special based on the world's value system, using their looks, their personality, their wit, their charm, their money, and their talents to try to stand out from the rest of the crowd. Wanting to feel special is a legitimate longing, but unless it's met in Christ, we will try to meet it in some illegitimate way, which is sinful (even if it is not immoral). So the moral of the story is to recognize that God's imparted holiness to us is what meets this deep longing to be set apart for special use.

Something Paul said in the second reading provides an entry point to transition to the Gospel lesson. Paul said that the Corinthian believers were "awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:7). In the Gospel lesson from Mark Chapter 13, Jesus provides some

important insight into just how that event will come about. This reading is from the portion of Scripture known as the Olivet Discourse because Jesus told it while on the Mount of Olives just across the Kidron Valley from the Jerusalem temple. In this passage, the Lord predicts the future destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and looks far beyond to the time when God will pour out His judgment upon the world just before He returns to usher in His Millennial reign. *Note: In order to provide the full context the entire first portion of the chapter that was skipped in the lectionary was included since it was so important in order to understand the entire context and the meaning that flows from it.*

> *1 As He was going out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" 2 And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down." 3 As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled?" 5 And Jesus began to say to them, "See to it that no one misleads you. 6 Many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He!' and will mislead many. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. 8 For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. 9 But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. 10 The gospel must first be preached to all the nations. 11 When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit. 12 Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. 13 You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. 14 But when you see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. 15 the one who is on the housetop must not go down, or go in to get anything out of his house; 16 and the one who is in the field must not turn back to get his coat. 17 But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! 18 But pray that it may not happen in the winter. 19 For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will. 20 Unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom He chose, He shortened the days. 21 And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, He is there'; do not believe him; 22 for false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order to lead astray, if possible, the elect. 23 But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance. 24 But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together*

> *His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. 33 Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come. 34 It is like a man away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. 35 Therefore, be on the alert–for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning– 36 in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. 37 What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'" (Mark 13:1-37)*

In order to understand the meaning of Jesus' message we must provide a brief overall grid of the end time (eschatological) events. First, although this prophecy was partially fulfilled with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD 70, the final fulfillment will be in the future when the Old Testament prophecies regarding the "Day of the Lord" will be poured out upon the unbelieving world. During this time, the events of the end times will be marked with signs on earth, signs in the sky, and signs in heaven. It is important to understand that some events run in parallel throughout our current age up until the return of the Lord; other events run sequentially, such as those that play out during the tribulation period.

Parallel Events: Some of the events that run in parallel are as follows.

- The persecution of believers (verse 9)
- The overall decline of morality and godly living (2 Timothy 3:13). Both of these conditions will grow worse and the persecution of believers will intensify until the close of this age and the return of the Lord Jesus.
- An overall increase in natural and manmade disasters. Beginning in verse 6 Jesus moved to an overall description of the age preceding his return. This period was to marked by "wars and rumors of wars" (v. 6), earthquakes and famines (v. 8), world wars (v. 8) and by many false Messiahs (christs, v. 6) coming and saying that they are the Christ. Jesus said that the Gospel must first go out to the entire world (v. 10), which we see will be fulfilled by an angel in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 14:6), in spite of the best efforts of Christian missionaries to achieve this goal.
- The coming of many antichrists (v. 22). Many antichrists have arisen in our age including figures like David Koresh, Joseph Smith (Mormons), and Charles Taze Russell (JW's). An interesting one is the case of a man named Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. This rabbi from New York was a very influential Jewish leader in the world. When he died in 1994 his followers expected him to rise from the dead in you guessed it, three days. As of this writing, he is still in the grave.

Sequential Events: Other events follow sequentially, some of which are as follows.

- Jesus' prediction in verses 1-3 of the destruction of the temple, which was fulfilled in AD 70.
- A future "catching up" to meet Jesus in the air, first of the believers that have already died, then those living of the church to heaven as predicted by Saint Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

  "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

  Once the church is removed from the world because "God has not appointed us to wrath" (1 Thessalonians 5:9) the cascading series of events known as the tribulation period will commence. The last half of the closing chapter of the tribulation period is known as the "Day of the Lord," and this is the emergency scenario that begins when Jesus warns the people in verse 15.

- Signs in the sky (vv. 24-25).
- The coming of the ultimate Antichrist spoken of by the Prophet Daniel and in the Book of Revelation. Saint John said in his day that many antichrists had already come (1 John 2:18), but the Bible predicts the coming of one known as the Man of Sin (2 Thessalonians 2:3). This is the one that will bring about the "abomination of desolation" described by Jesus in verse 14. This will mark the establishment of a global ruler known as the Antichrist (1 John 2:18, Daniel 7:8 "the little horn," Revelation 6:2 –the rider on the white horse), and the false holy spirit figure known as the false prophet (Revelation 13:11-15).
- The unveiling of God's judgments described in the Book of Revelation including the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls (Revelation 6, 8, 11, 15, 16). These are judgments of God as declared in Revelation: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve. … Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments" (Revelation 16:5-7).
- The unveiling of a powerful missionary force from God known as the "144,000 thousand witnesses" (Revelation 7:4).
- Supernatural protection of the Nation of Israel in a special place prepared by God (Revelation 12:6). This is the place to which Jesus is telling the people to flee in verse 14 when they see the Abomination of Desolation (refer to the next point below).
- The "abomination of desolation" (v. 14). This is when the Antichrist figure will establish himself as God and set up his own image in the temple to be worshiped. Paul said this about the Antichrist: "who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God" (2Thessalonians 2:4). The Jews were familiar with something like this happening before when Antiochus IV Epiphanes sacked the temple and rededicated it to the god Zeus in 167 BC, and

sacrificed a pig in the temple to his god. This "abomination of desolation" was a type of the one to come, a prefiguring of the time that the Antichrist would establish himself as god in the temple to be worshiped by everyone in the world, not just Jerusalem as happened in the earlier time.

- The destruction of the Antichrist's religious and civil empire known as "Mystery Babylon" (Revelation 18:2).
- Marriage Supper of the Lamb with all believers in heaven (Revelation 19:7)
- Return of the Lord Jesus to earth with his victorious church (Revelation 19:11-19).
- Antichrist and False Prophet thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 19:20)
- Satan bound for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:3) then released for a final battle (Revelation 20:7)
- Satan thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10).

What does all of this mean for us today? First, Jesus cautioned His disciples to be aware of their future destiny so that they were living rightly today. By using the parable of the fig tree (v. 28), something with which the people in the Mediterranean region were very familiar, they could see the signs of the times and live in a watchful and purposeful way. In the same way that Jesus cautioned His disciples to beware of by watching for the signs, we can know that Jesus' return in imminent by watching the signs ourselves. This means that we should not delay in accomplishing the work that God has placed in our hearts to accomplish. For, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Second, because God's prophets so accurately predicted events that have already occurred, including Jesus' (the greatest prophet of all) prediction of the destruction of the temple, we can trust that the events will play out exactly as God as described in the Scriptures. Because God has so accurately predicted the future, we can trust Him when He tells us how to enter into an eternal relationship with Him through faith in His Son, the risen the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, we can rest in the fact that everything is going to turn out fine for anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus for salvation. Those with faith in the Lord can trust that even if they find themselves thrown into tribulation, be it the "Great Tribulation" or any tribulation, they can trust that no matter what happens it will turn out well.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How does knowing how the Grand Story ends influence how you live today? What values do you have as a result of knowing that God wins in the end? What values do you want God to develop in you based on this knowledge of the end times?

2. The first two readings dealt with humankind's lack of righteousness (Isaiah) and the Corinthian's being called saints. Think about this contrast that is spoken about throughout the Bible. The worse the bad news is, the better the good news is. Explain why the coming of Christ to die on the cross for our sins is called "the good news." How has this become good news for your life?

Readings for the Week

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

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/113014.cfm

First Reading IS 63:16B-17, 19B; 64:2-7

Second Reading 1 COR 1:3-9

Gospel Reading MK 13:33-37

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday 11-23-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 11-23-2014. This week we open with the first reading from Ezekiel in which we see the contrast between the ungodly shepherds and God the Good Shepherd. We include a great deal of the surrounding verses in order to help us to understand the meaning of the reading based upon its context. Then we move onto the second reading from 1 Corinthians in which we study the truth of the resurrection of believers and how this provides us with great hope. Finally, we conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25 in which we study the coming judgment of everyone who lives in the world at the end of the tribulation period. We

pray that this study gives you much more insight as you attend Mass this coming Sunday.

The first reading is from the Prophet Ezekiel. The context is just after God told Ezekiel that although the people recognized him as a prophet and came to listen to him (Ezekiel 33:30-31c) they did not take his words into account and change their lives (Ezekiel 33:31d-ff). Instead, God told them that it would be afterwards that they would look back and "know that a prophet has been among them" (v. 33). In Ezekiel's time, and also in the present age God is not pleased with people going through the motions of dead religion, especially when they don't listen to God's word and let Him operate on their hearts and minds to change their behavior. Chapter 34, the section from which today's reading is taken, opens with God's scathing critique of the "shepherds of Israel," meaning the ungodly leaders of the nation including kings, priests, and prophets (except for Ezekiel, Daniel and Jeremiah his contemporaries). We get our word "pastor" from the Latin word for "shepherd." These passages are messianic, meaning that they prefigure the revelation of the True Shepherd Jesus Christ. In those days the people were as "sheep without a shepherd," something eerily reminiscent of what Jesus said some six hundred years later. "Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36-37). As usual in these study notes it is crucially important to understand the context as the reading provides a **contrast** between the ungodly "shepherds" of Ezekiel's time and the Godly Shepherd God and His ultimate fulfillment in the Person of Jesus Christ. This contrast is important enough to understand that we have provided the first ten verses of the chapter leading up to today's reading.

> *1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, 2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? 3 You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. 4 Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. 5 They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. 6 My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.' 7 Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 'As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock;' 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 10 Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'"(Ezekiel 34:1-10)*

This is the text of the reading for today that follows the opening of chapter 34. *Note: Verses 13-14 which were skipped in the reading were added in order to provide the full context.*

> 11 For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day. 13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land. 14 I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord GOD. 16 "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment. 17 As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats." (Ezekiel 34:11-17).

Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God pictures Himself as the "Shepherd of the Sheep," and this occurs early in the Bible. This theme in the reading from Ezekiel occurs frequently in Ezekiel's Book, occurring some 15 times in chapter 34 alone. The first time this concept appears is back in the Book of Genesis when Jacob was prophesizing about the twelve sons (and tribes) of Israel, this time about Joseph. "Joseph is a fruitful bough, A fruitful bough by a spring; Its branches run over a wall. The archers bitterly attacked him, And shot at him and harassed him; But his bow remained firm, And his arms were agile, From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)" (Genesis 49:22-24). The shepherd theme is reminiscent of the opening of Psalm 23, "The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want" v. 1). We see this clearly in today's reading. "I will feed them in a good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel. There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God" (vv. 14-16). As we examine today's reading we find additional insight into the identity of this Shepherd of Israel. He emerges as a Shepherd-King figure Who has a special relationship with the LORD. This is none other than the Lord Jesus Himself. If we look beyond today's reading to verse 34, we see a continuation of this contrast between the evil shepherds and the One True Shepherd. "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd" (Ezekiel 34:23). "David" in this verse prefigures the One True Shepherd that was yet to come at the time Ezekiel wrote this passage, the Person of Jesus Christ. It is also evident throughout Scripture that the resurrected King David will also play a role in governing Israel in the future Millennial reign of the Lord Jesus on earth.

As believers in Jesus, we can find great comfort from Ezekiel's writing. First, God will seek His sheep

that are lost, meaning that God Himself places a calling upon our lives to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (v. 11). Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). Second, since God keeps His promises that He made to Israel, He will keep all of the promises that He has made to us. One of those promises made to Israel is that He will re-gather this nation Israel at some future time. "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land" (v. 13a). Third, we can trust that God will take care of us in the same way that a Good Shepherd takes care of His sheep. Finally, although we may feel judged by worldly people in this age, the only real judgment that counts is our True Judge the Lord Jesus Himself (v. 17). We can trust that God's judgment will be correct in that as we enter eternity He will judge between the evil shepherds in our land and the ones that do good in serving Him.

As we move onto the second reading, we will see more about the Person Jesus Christ, since He was made alive at the resurrection, we too will be made alive when our bodies are resurrected from the dead. The reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The context is Paul's vigorous explanation of the bodily resurrection of believers, first the Lord Jesus and then all people who put their faith in Him. Paul opens this section with a caution to his readers for them to "hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2b,c). The main theme that runs throughout the chapter is that the risen Lord Jesus is the hope of all believers, in spite of the fact that some in the church had denied the teaching of the future resurrection of the dead (v.12). Paul said, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (1Corinthians 15:13-14). He closes the section just before today's reading by saying, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1Corinthians 15:19), something which denies the conventional wisdom of our age that would say that the Christian life is a noble way of living. With these concepts in mind let's move onto today's reading. *Note: Verse 27 which was skipped in the reading was provided in order to provide the full context.*

> *20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. 21 For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, 24 then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be abolished is death. 27 For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. 28 When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)*

Paul said that since Christ **has** been raised from the dead, is the first One to be resurrected (v.20), He is the one through Whom came life and is a precursor of the hope of resurrection for all who believe (v. 22b, 23). As we saw in the first reading from Ezekiel, Jesus' rulership will be established

on earth, which is one of the aspects of the resurrection. Jesus will "come in glory," (Matthew 25:31) something that we will read about in the Gospel lesson today. Paul quoted from Psalm 8 when he said that Jesus would totally subdue all of His enemies, "put them under His feet" (vv. 25-26). The evil shepherds spoken of by Ezekiel will be subdued and judged forever. The greatest enemy that Jesus will conquer is death through the victory of the resurrection, first Himself and then all believers. The culmination of world history will be marked by the end of Jesus' one thousand year (millennial) reign on earth. This will be concluded with Christ handing over His kingdom to His Father in heaven (vv.24 -28), something that would fall into the category of what Saint Peter called "things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). After Christ has handed His kingdom over to the Father, His eternal reign will begin (Revelation 21, 22).

As believers, our greatest hope lies in the hope of resurrection. We can rest in the historical fact that Jesus was the first to rise from the dead, something that is one of the best proven historical events throughout all of history. As our bodies wear out and grow old, we can rest in the fact that one day we will be given a new eternal body that will never grow old. In the same way that Paul comforted the Corinthian believers with these facts, we can find comfort and give comfort to other believers through hope in our future resurrection.

As we transition to the Gospel lesson, earlier we mentioned in the first reading how God is the Righteous Judge and in the second reading how one day He will come in Glory to rule and reign over the earth. One of the elements of rulership is acting as a Judge, and at the end His reign on earth Jesus will judge those who have survived the tribulation period at the conclusion of the Day of the Lord. This is the judgment that is marked by Jesus' statement earlier in Matthew 24, "Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left" (Matthew 24:40). The one that is taken will be taken in judgment, the one that is left behind will enter the Millennial Reign of Jesus Christ. This is similar to what happened to the nonbelievers during Noah's flood. Jesus said, "For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be(Matthew 24:37-39). As you read the Gospel lesson from Matthew 25, keep in mind the context that this judgment is immediately preceding Jesus' Millennial Reign on earth, rather than the Great White Throne judgment spoken of in Revelation 20:11-15 which doesn't happen until **after** Jesus' thousand year reign on earth. This judgment is the "reaping" spoken of by John in the Book of Revelation Chapter 14. "And another angel came out of the temple, crying out with a loud voice to Him who sat on the cloud, 'Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe.' Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped" (Revelation 14:15-16).

> *31 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from*

> *the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40 The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' 41 Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.' 44 Then they themselves also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?' 45 "Then He will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-46)*

In the reading we see how nonbelieving goats are forcibly separated from the believing sheep by the Good Shepherd Jesus. Up until the time of this judgment these two groups of people who looked identical on the outside lived together in the world. This concept of a "mixed multitude" is clearly taught by Jesus in other places in the Gospel and especially in His parable of the wheat and the tares which also speaks of this same judgment (Matthew 13:24-30). In that parable Jesus said, "Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13:30). In today's reading Jesus' point is similar, but He used the shepherd analogy that we saw in Ezekiel. The Good Shepherd who knows His Sheep will divide these two groups on the basis of their heart condition. The criteria that He will use was something He explained to Nicodemus in John Chapter 3, "You must be born from above (or again, Greek "anothen") to enter the kingdom of heaven" (John 3:3, with my explanation). Jesus said in that same Gospel, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28). Although Jesus as God knows His sheep instinctively, just like any shepherd, and they look the same on the outside, His sheep bear distinctive markings on the inside. These markings display themselves in their **behavior**, which is a way that even the worldly people can recognize them. This becomes clear in verses 35 -40. **Some** of the good works of a believer flow from a heart that has been changed by God (John 3:3), as James said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:14). The sheep indulge in a variety of "sheeplike" behaviors. They feed the hungry (v. 35a), give drink to the thirsty (v. 35c), clothing to those without (v. 36a), visit the sick (v. 36b), and visit those in prison (v. 36b-c). Jesus then went on to explain that anytime you do these things for others it was as if you were doing it directly for Him (vv. 37-40, 42-45). Jesus also made it clear that the eternal destination (v. 46) for nonbelievers is the "eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). It's interesting to note that Jesus' sheep sit at His right hand, while Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (1 Peter 3:22).

The Gospel lesson helps us to prioritize and value what God cares about. In this world, attending to the needs of those who are marginalized in society is an opportunity for us to display what's really in our hearts. Do we have the love and compassion of God or ware we still living only for ourselves? Jesus shares specific types of needs that were commonplace in His day and age including hunger, thirst, lack of sufficient clothing, and imprisonment. You might be encountering other types of needs that God is asking you to meet (helping a child learn how to read, sacrificing some of your income to provide a home for someone, giving a friend a ride to work while their car is being repaired. The opportunities to meet other people's needs are endless. So we'll need to ask for wisdom to know what needs are our opportunity to love Christ by serving others.

What does all of this mean in our lives? First, we can trust that the Good Shepherd Who was the first to rise from the dead will also come for us one day when we enter eternity (John 14: 3). Second, even though we may be tortured by the ungodly behavior of people in the world, we can trust that God knows the intentions of our heart and those who are His. God will work it out, "Vengeance is mine says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Second, We can rest in the fact that our good works flow out of a heart changed by God (Ephesians 2:8-9, John 3:3) and these are evident to those who are unknowingly (2 Corinthians 4:3-4) on the broad road to destruction (Matthew 7:13). Our good works will be evident to them and will shed light on their evil works (John 3:20). Finally, we can trust that since we are believers we can trust in the fact that when we sit before the Lord in judgment it will be for the basis of rewards and not to determine our eternal destination.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the Bible the word translated "faith" brings with it the idea of expecting to have the things hoped for or living in light of an unseen reality. In your life, what does it mean to have faith? How does faith play into obedience? Are these two separate things in your mind or are they connected?

2. The Greek word translated "obedience" (hupakoe) according to Strong's Concordance (5218, drawn from 5219) means "attentive hearkening, i.e. (by implication) compliance or submission." Read the following Scripture and answer the question that follows.

> *25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to* ***obedience of faith****; 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, emphasis added)*

In light of what you learned today along with Paul's teaching above on obedience of faith, what does it mean for you to walk in obedience of faith? How is your faith evident to others?

Readings for the Week

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Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/112314.cfm

First Reading EZ 34:11-12, 15-17

Second Reading 1 COR 15:20-26, 28

Gospel Reading MT 25:31-46

Source(s):

Online Scripture verses for most Bible versions can be found at: http://www.biblegateway.com/

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Mass Study Notes for Sunday January 5, 2014



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

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.

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

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

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

being covered today in the first reading, which with the benefit of history we find that this was in the context of Jesus' Second Advent. "And **nations** will come to your light, And **kings** to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3, emphasis added). The square pegs of the Gentiles will then fit nicely into round holes through God's mysterious unveiling of His divine plan of the Church. If you are not of Jewish heritage, but consider yourself a part of God's family through faith in Jesus Christ, then you can thank God for using the life of St. Paul to bring about this paradigm shift. Yes, even the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

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.

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

Isaiah said that God would use "deep darkness" (v.2a) to bring Gentiles (the nations, v.3a) to Him. The Old Testament Prophets referred to this time of deep darkness as the "Day of the Lord," something which we discussed at length in the study for November 2, 2013. The timing of the Day of the Lord was hidden from the Prophets, but what we know is that it occurs just before Jesus' Second Coming and in the context of the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Book of Revelation Chapters 6 – 18. During this period God will accomplish two objectives. First, He will complete His disciplining of the Nation of Israel, bringing them to return to Him, and second He will judge the godless, unbelieving Gentiles remaining on the earth. After this time, Jerusalem will become the capital city of the universe. The Prophet Ezekiel said, "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her'" (Ezekiel 5:5) and about the Jews "who live at the center of the world" (Ezekiel 38:12e). God will use the tribulation of the end-time period to bring believers from all nations to Him, while the unbelievers will be permanently excluded from God's eternal Kingdom (Revelation 22:15).

Note the types of gifts that the future Gentile leaders will bring to King Jesus. "They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD" (Isaiah 60:6d). Throughout history, gold has been the most valuable of all metals. It's a rare and valuable treasure, and the perfect commodity that never degrades – making it an excellent gift to bring to Jesus, who is

reigning as LORD. Frankincense is something very familiar to any Catholic, as this material produces a most pleasant aroma when burned and has the smell of perfume in its native form. I was an altar boy for most of my younger years and was frequently in close proximity to the priest burning this sweet swelling material. The burning of incense is symbolic of the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven (Revelation 5:8). The future world leaders will present their gifts of gold and incense directly to the Source of their salvation, the Lord Himself! What a joyous occasion this will be!

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.

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

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

The Jewish priests and scribes told the Magi the prophecy from the Prophet Micah, which they evidently weren't aware of, that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). This must be

the case or they would have gone directly to Bethlehem in the first place and avoided King Herod. Verse 9 said, "And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they **had seen** in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was" (emphasis added). Then, the star reappeared! So what did they do? Did they stop and ask for further directions? No, followed it and went to Bethlehem! Now they had both the prophetic prophesy from the Jews, and the star to guide them. Therefore, they kept going on the journey, but had to BELIEVE God's revelation and follow it.

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

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

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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.

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Readings for the Week

Note: For a listing of readings for the Roman Catholic Mass visit this web site: http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/010514.cfm Third Sunday of Advent

First Reading Isaiah 60:1-6

Isaiah 60:1-6 NASB 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.

Second Reading Ephesians 3:2-3A, 5-6

Ephesians 3:1-6 NASB 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,

Gospel Reading MT 2:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12 NASB 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.

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