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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 7-3-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **7-3-2016**. This week we learn something about how to find peace and comfort from God during hard times by resting upon His future promises of peace and prosperity in the closing chapter of Isaiah. We learn about the value of humility and how God calls us to reflect upon His works and not our own. In the Gospel reading we see God's early missionary force sent out before His crucifixion in order to spread the word of the kingdom being ushered in through the Messiah Jesus and about coming judgment for those who ignored His promises.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the message from the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah is God's closing message to Judah concerning the ultimate future restoration of Jerusalem, the city of God's own choosing given to the people of his choosing – the Nation of Israel. Chapter 66 provides important insights to the contemporary audience who were facing threats from the Assyrian Empire who soon took over the Northern Kingdom and also the Babylonians who later took over Judah itself.

First Reading:

Isaiah 66:10-14 NAS95 10 "Be joyful with Jerusalem and rejoice for her, all you who love her; Be

exceedingly glad with her, all you who mourn over her, 11 That you may nurse and be satisfied with her comforting breasts, That you may suck and be delighted with her bountiful bosom. 12 For thus says the LORD, "Behold, I extend peace to her like a river, And the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; And you will be nursed, you will be carried on the hip and fondled on the knees. 13 As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; And you will be comforted in Jerusalem. 14 Then you will see this, and your heart will be glad, And your bones will flourish like the new grass; And the hand of the LORD will be made known to His servants, But He will be indignant toward His enemies.

In the opening verses God taught Isaiah how Jerusalem was as a holy mother to God's people, a place of safe dwelling and nourishment full of bounty (vv. 10 – 11). Jerusalem, which was at that time still standing and had yet to face the utter destruction promised to it (Isaiah 22:1-14), had been since the conquering of the Jebusites and the placing of the temple there been a beacon of God's glory to the world. The city in which God dwelled served to reveal Himself to the Hebrew nation as well as the surrounding Gentiles. It is no coincidence that the name Jerusalem itself means "city of peace" since it was (and will be in some future age) the representation of God's presence and rule on earth. In verse 12 we see this aspect of the City of Peace extolled, where God says, "Behold, I extend peace to her like a river." The next part of this verse reveals the future, universal significance of the City of God not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. God says that He will bring the glory of the nations into Jerusalem, with the coming of the nations is shown by Him to be a good thing. These would have been strange words to Isaiah's contemporary audience since they would have viewed anything from the Gentiles as unclean and dangerous. This was especially in light of the fact that the Gentile Assyrian army was posed ready to strike down the Jewish Northern Kingdom very shortly. The reading concludes by continuing the expression of God's peace and comfort to His people (vv. 13 – 15). God said their hearts would be glad (14a), that they would flourish physically like "new grass" (14b), and that He would conquer their enemies (14c).

This message of hope given by Isaiah the Prophet of Judah would have been very comforting to the people who had only to look to God for their ultimate deliverance from their enemies and future peace. Little did they know that the ultimate peace would not come until after they had killed their promised Messiah and waited while God fulfilled His divine plan by bringing the Gentiles to faith in Him through the mystery of the church (Ephesians 5:32). In our day we can look to Isaiah's message and find a similar application. We can trust that in the end God will vanquish our enemies, bring eternal peace to us as spiritual prosperity and ultimately will fulfil all of the prophetic promises that He has made to us. When we read about the "nations" in the Old Testament passages such as we saw in Isiah, we can trust that God has a plan for us and that we are a people grafted into the nation of his choosing, Israel. As in-grafted believers we share not only in the responsibilities of God's people, but also in the current and promised blessings.

The Scriptures teach us about the importance of focusing upon God both in the good times and the bad. I remember once a few years back while I was windsurfing on the eastern coast of Florida when the boom which held the sail to the mast suddenly broke in two and I was forced to swim a long

distance back to the shore. My readers may recognize that many of the illustrations I include are often drawn from my experiences windsurfing! As I made my way back towards shore with a side-stroke while grasping onto my board and broken rig and kept my focus upon the distant shoreline. I found it helpful to focus upon my goal as I made progress towards it at a snail's pace. It is during these times when keeping the goal in sight is helpful and how promises never to leave us or forsake us. During the easy times it's easy to place our beliefs on a shelf and not retrieve them again until the next hard thing comes along. But during our difficult struggles God becomes paramount in our minds. This isn't necessarily a bad thing because we do indeed turn more closely to God when hard times come rather than to fall away and feel that God has left us during our challenges. As I continued my long swim that day as I got closer to the shore the lifeguard who earlier been blowing his whistle at me for being too close to the guarded area began watching me through binoculars to see if I needed any help. With the whistle blowing exercise fresh in my mind I happily scurried onto the grassy shoreline of the public park quickly rather than waiting around for him to question me. I thought, how dare I break down in the guarded area where windsurfing was prohibited, and there was nothing that the lifeguard could do about it! These lessons have taught me reliance upon God and the value of focusing upon Him during the good times and the bad.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading picks up where we left off last week in Galatians. Here Paul continues his explanation of salvation by faith alone and not through the works of the Law. Earlier, Paul had just finished explaining the danger of the believers falling into the trap of conforming to religious Jewish practices for the sake of preventing persecution for their faith. Paul said, "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (Galatians 6:12). Some in the church were urging conformance to religious practices including circumcision and the boasting about it as though they were the religious police, judge, and jury (v. 13). Paul's opposition to their boasting is the subject of today's reading.

Second Reading:

Galatians 6:14-18 NAS95 14 But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. 16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. 17 From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus. 18 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

In this short message, Saint Paul extolled the value of boasting only in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for us rather than in anything that we do, even if it be of great religious or spiritual value. God promises the peace will fall upon those that walk humbly in light of this admonition although they may endure persecution for Him (v. 17, the "brand marks of Jesus"). Paul closes the reading and the entire Book of Galatians with a closing blessing in which he calls for

God's blessing while affirming the brotherhood of those whom he had addressed so sternly throughout his message.

Paul's words from the reading reminds us of the Prophet Micah's message from God to the people of his era. Near the end of his Book he wrapped up the entirety of the calling God was placing upon the people in one short sentence: "He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). As we saw in the first reading God calls us to focus upon His works and promises and through this we find comfort through our difficult times. In today's second reading Paul added to this by reminding his readers the value of walking in humility and boasting only in what God has done for them rather in what they have done for Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the Gospel reading from Luke is Jesus' sending of the seventy, an early missionary group who went out across the land in pairs to present the message that "the kingdom of God [had] come near to [them" (v. 9). This group was given spiritual power for healing along with this message which also included an admonition for those who turned against God's provisions of the kingdom.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 10:1-12 NAS95 1 Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. 2 And He was saying to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. 3 Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. 4 Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. 5 Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' 6 If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. 8 Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; 9 and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10 But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' 12 I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than for that city."

Luke 10:17-20 NAS95 17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name." 18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. 19 Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. 20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

God sent the seventy in pairs with very specific instructions, the first of which was to discern the receptiveness of the house in which they were preparing to enter. Jesus had earlier warned His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount about "not casting their pearls before swine" (Matthew 7:6),

meaning not to attempt to preach godly things to those persisting in ungodliness and unwilling to listen. Jesus expanded upon this admonition by promising to His missionary force that those who don't listen will be subject to severe and eternal discipline. Jesus told them that the destruction of those who reject the message would be worse than the destruction experienced by the unrepentant sinners in Sodom which the Lord destroyed by divine fire from heaven (v. 12). This missionary force returned after the conclusion of their assignment with the astounding news of divine power over Satanic forces (v. 17). Jesus then told them about how He had already seen Satan fall from his exalted position and how He had given them this divine authority which they experienced during their journey (v. 19). In closing, Jesus pointed them to His higher purpose. They were not to boast about the power that He had given them for their missionary responsibilities but rather to rejoice in the fact that, unlike Satan and the nonbelievers, their names were written in Book of Life in heaven (v. 20).

By application, the power to which Jesus extended to His first ministry force of seventy people extends to us in a certain extent today. As missionaries of Jesus we are called to use discernment in gaging the receptiveness of our audience. We are also to recognize that like the seventy we too possess divine power that comes from God according to the spiritual gift which is given to us (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; and 1 Corinthians 12:28). We are also reminded to keep in mind the urgency of this message because nonbelievers will be judged with a worse fate than those at Sodom. And like we saw in the second reading we need to walk humbly before the Lord and exalt in His works rather than our own. We are to "rejoice that [our] names are recorded in heaven" (v. 20) while using the example of the seventy as guidance in how we are to approach that that may be highly resistant to the Gospel.

A few things to keep in mind regarding the reading are:

- There is a great need for missionaries in our world today.
- God places a great intrinsic value upon each person where He wishes that none would perish (2 Peter 3:9).
- The consequences of rejecting Jesus are real and eternal.
- Jesus demonstrated the value of community in accomplishing His missionary work by sending the missionaries in pairs. We don't need to accomplish our "scary" ministry alone but rather we can follow Jesus' example and work in teams to achieve the greater glory of God.
- There is a fantastic spiritual battle that is happening behind the scenes in the heavenly realm. As believers we enter the "second heaven" which is invisible domain but which is very real in terms of the spiritual battles being waged.
- Through all of these things we need to remember Jesus' Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

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1. In the Gospel reading we learned about Jesus' first missionary force of seventy people sent out as "lambs in the midst of wolves (v. 3). In what ways do you feel as a lamb among wolves in the work that God has called for you to do today?

2. In what ways to God's promises empower you to accomplish His work, including the Great Commission? How does gaining a better understanding of God's promises help you? What are some ways in which you could learn more about God's promises and create future reminders about what you have learned?

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/070316.cfm

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 102

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-01-2016

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **05-01-2016**. This week's study is long, but important. We challenge our readers to stick through it as we think that you will find great rewards in following the study.

The first reading from Acts we look at records the findings of an important meeting in the church called the Jerusalem Council. After this, we continue the study in Revelation in which we see how God presents a new, perfect Holy City that was made in heaven for the saints to dwell in forever. Then we close with the Gospel of John in which we see Jesus' foretelling of the promise to send the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of all believers.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Acts and records the event known as the Jerusalem Council. Leading up to the reading Paul had endured some tremendous persecution to the extent that while in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20). It's possible that during this time Paul experienced his visions of heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). After Paul's miraculous recovery, he traveled with Barnabus back to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch and "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23). Here Paul said, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (v. 22c). Thus, Paul continued his leadership of the Gentile church and next journeyed to Jerusalem for a very important ecumenical council, meaning a gathering of all of the church leaders from both the Gentile and Jewish realms.

First Reading:

Acts 15:1-2 NAS95 1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And when Paul and

Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

[If you would like to read the section that was omitted it is included at the end of this week's study.]

Acts 15:22-29 NAS95 22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas–Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

As the reading opens, Doctor Luke records how some men from Judea began teaching that as Christians they must adhere to the practices of the Mosaic Law especially concerning the matter of circumcision (v. 1). This was the reason that Paul and Barnabas went down to Jerusalem, to discuss this extremely important issue. (The complete text of the ecumenical council meeting is included at the end of this study in the "Going Deeper" section). Evidently, James was the leader of the meeting; this is the James who wrote the biblical Book of the same name and a relative of Jesus. His leadership is implied since, at the conclusion of the council, he stood up unopposed and made the pronouncement that we see in verses 22 – 29. While this was an important finding of the council, we must remember the occasion that led to the initiation of the important gathering as well as the culture in which the events happened. Without saying it, James' bottom line gave believers confidence that they did not have to be circumcised according to the Mosaic Law. But they were to hold to other "essentials" including abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from the eating of blood, eating of meat from animals that had been strangled, and from the sexual sin of fornication (v. 29). These things were so repulsive to Jewish Christians who had just come out of Judaism that the Gentile believers were asked to be considerate in these ways for the sake of unity. Obviously when we read over this list, we understand the degree to which the Jewish and pagan cultures clashed and the context in which the early believers were immersed. This cultural context greatly influenced the findings of the leaders in the meeting. If converted Jews and pagans were going to get along in the family of God, these bare essentials would help them achieve unity. We know later, Saint Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 8 that eating food sacrificed to idols was acceptable only if it did not violate one's conscience and that of those around them (1 Corinthians 8:10-13). The principle elicited by Paul in First Corinthians would seemingly also apply to the practices of eating strangled food and blood. However, the prohibition of sexual sin stands out on the list as a universal principle for believers of all time (for Old Testament believers and New Testament believers).

One of the big ideas in the reading is how God entrusted the ministry of the church to frail, imperfect believers to safeguard the treasury of truth with great diligence. The leaders of the church back then in this very crucial era in which the New Testament Scriptures were recorded were tasked with many great responsibilities. They were responsible for both keeping the church pure from false teachings while at the same time balancing the important cultural factors of their day including the movement of the church away from a purely Jewish organization to one containing a large proportion of Gentiles. The findings of the Council were important because it showed how the church leaders were willing to subjugate the Mosaic Law through their acceptance of Jesus' fulfillment of it through His death and resurrection. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). To the extent that the Law served to safeguard the conscience of the Jewish believers, it was important to them for conscience sake, but they were not to foist these legalistic practices upon the Gentile church.

Some application points that you could consider are regarding how cultural "baggage" affects our Christian walk and how that influences other believers. In what ways do we foist a list of requirements upon other believers around us who don't come from exactly the same cultural context as ourselves? Perhaps a good case would be a Christian who worships in a way that is different than your style (maybe they raise their hands, maybe they pray a spontaneous prayer) or a believer who votes for a different political candidate than you do. Is it possible to still be united in Christ, but differ on some of the unique expressions of faith? A good principle to follow, coined by St. Augustine in this matter: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from the continuing study of the Book of Revelation. The context of the reading is after the conclusion of Jesus' one thousand year (millennial) reign on earth, a period during which Satan will be bound. Just prior to Jesus beginning this reign on earth, some three and one half years before, He had returned to the earth in fulfillment of Acts 1:11 and gathered all of the believers both living and dead with him to heaven. Believers that were already dead were rejoined with their bodies and given new glorified ones. Believers alive at Jesus' coming were gathered to Jesus in their living bodies after which they received their glorified bodies as well. Jesus had told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:3). It's evident that the New Jerusalem is the place that Jesus went to prepare and this perfect city is now being presented to the believers of all time as an eternal dwelling place. After the return of the Lord Jesus all believers now have real (but glorified), physical bodies so they require a real place to live. In contrast, when saints die in the current age they go to heaven without their physical bodies and without the need for physical lodging. Therefore, Scripture seems to indicate that God provides them the New Jerusalem as their dwelling place from the moment they receive their glorified bodies at the time of the return of the Lord Jesus to earth. In summary, people with only a spiritual body in heaven rest in that spiritual place, whereas when they rejoin their physical bodies they will again require a physical resting place. This is in spite of the fact that the New Jerusalem is somehow built in heaven!

After Jesus' thousand-year reign on earth, Satan was released from his bonds and allowed to lead

one last rebellion against God. In this huge battle of Gog and Magog (Revelation 20:8), he allied himself with the non-believers who had secretly held out during the millennial reign of Christ on earth. As these demonic forces surround the great city (Jerusalem), fire came down from heaven and devoured them (v. 9). Afterwards, every non-believer in the universe from all time stood before the "great white throne judgment" (Revelation 20:11). First, the devil joined the beast and the false prophet who were already in the lake of fire. Then the Scripture makes a very sobering statement concerning the universal judgment of non-believers, "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15). The lake of fire is called "the second death" (v. 14) about which Jesus said in the next chapter, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8). God describes everyone who fails to trust in the Lord Jesus for salvation by these characteristics, regardless of how "good" they may have perceived themselves to be before the judgment against God's standard of perfection. As believers we understand that our perfection comes only through our acceptance of Jesus' finished work on the cross for us.

As the cataclysmic events grind to a sudden halt John records how the earth as we know it will be destroyed and replaced by a new creation in which there will no longer be any sea (Revelation 21:1). At this point one of the angels that poured out the last seven plagues introduced the bride of Christ, the group that we know as the church (v. 9). Today's reading opens with the New Jerusalem descending from the sky down towards the new earth. How the New Jerusalem that descends from the sky and the new earth relate to one another is unknown. We don't know if the city "touches down" or remains a heavenly dwelling place but within sight of the new earth, a form of "satellite city" in the sky.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 24-27 which were omitted are included below.

Revelation 21:10-14 NAS95 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. 12 It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. 13 There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Revelation 21:22-27 NAS95 22 I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of

the earth will bring their glory into it. 25 In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; 26 and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; 27 and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

John described the New Jerusalem coming down out of the sky as a city with twelve gates marked by the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, signifying that the Old Testament pointed the way to this eternal city. The foundation of the city, though, was laid by the "twelve apostles of the Lamb" (v. 14) identifying that this beautiful city was built on the testimony of the New Testament disciples (learners), who later were called apostles (sent ones). In the intervening verses that were omitted from the reading (vv. 15-21) John provides greater details about the gates of the holy city, the walls as well as the size, some fifteen hundred miles square (v. 16). He described the street of the city as "pure gold, like transparent glass," (v. 21) something which is hard to understand. How can gold be like transparent glass? Suffice it to say that our categories of beauty can't contain the world that is to come.

Rejoining the reading in verse 22, John describes how there is no need for a temple in the New Jerusalem because, "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." In verse 24 the Gentile nature of the church is specifically mentioned when John says, "The **nations** will walk by its light, and the **kings of the earth** will bring their glory into it," something about which we read in the first reading. The city is by definition a pure place in which "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (v. 27). We saw a similar list of prohibited people in the introduction. The principle of repetition marks this as an important point. "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8) The "holy city, Jerusalem" (v. 10) will be just that, holy, forever and nothing unholy will enter it forever.

We can find rest in the fact that in spite of the current difficult circumstances we may be experiencing, or the haunting memories of things that have happened to us in the past, we will find eternal rest in a perfect place prepared by God for us. We will never again have to question whether someone is walking with the Lord, for everyone will be in perfect harmony with God. We won't be living in some ephemeral city consisting of wafting clouds as depicted in the media about heaven, but rather we will live in a perfect, physical city with a perfect, holy God forever. In this place we will find perfect fellowship with people from all walks of life, both Jews and Gentiles, and this will mark the perfect end of discrimination forever in ways that the civil laws could never do.

An important take away point is for us to remember that this world is not our home and it's not all there is. The world will tell us that the one with the most toys wins, but we are not playing their "game." We are live with an eternal perspective that is not satisfied with the finite and dead end satisfactions of this world. When these things are in their right place, we can enjoy them. What is eternal about this world is the human soul. That is why it is important to settle the question of our

eternal destiny now. This passage tells us how we can know if we are permitted into the New Jerusalem, God's eternal city. "Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" will be allowed to enter. How do we know if our name is written there?

The Bible tells us that it is the Lamb's book, which is significant. Who is the Lamb? None other than Jesus Christ (John 1:29 tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away sins of the world). When sin entered the world through Adam, a blood sacrifice was required for the forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22). All through the Old Testament, lambs were sacrificed in place of the person who deserved to die for the sins they committed. Jesus' death and shed blood, as the Lamb of God, was the final and complete sacrifice to provide forgiveness for sins (Hebrews 10:12). First Peter 1:3-5 and 1:18-21 explain the importance of Jesus' sacrificial death for the salvation of our souls:

1 Peter 1:3-5 NAS95 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:18-21 NAS95 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, 19 but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. 20 For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you 21 who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Therefore, you can have assurance that your name is written in His book of life if you are trusting in the Lamb of God to take away the penalty for your sin and looking to Him to give you a new life that is eternal. If you have not consciously made this choice to trust in Jesus' sacrificial death to cover the payment for your sin, you can pray right now to tell Him that you would like this free gift, which provides forgiveness of the debt you owe God and assurance that your name is written in the Lamb's book of life.

The Gospel reading will teach us more about belief in Jesus, for Jesus told His disciples about how they could demonstrate their belief and love for Him.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from John chapter 14. Jesus had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them (John 14:3), which was mentioned in the discussion on the second reading. Jesus also told His disciples that He wouldn't leave them as orphans, that He would come to them through the promise of a Helper, "that He may be with you forever" (John 14:16). In today's reading, we learn about this Helper Jesus promised to the disciples and to all believers who trust in His name. This discussion was prompted by the question in 14:22: "Lord, what then has happenedthat You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?"

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Gospel Reading:

John 14:23-29 NAS95 23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. 24 He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. 25 These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful. 28 You heard that I said to you, 'I go away, and I will come to you.' If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. 29 Now I have told you before it happens, so that when it happens, you may believe."

The reading opened with Jesus clarifying why He is disclosing certain things to the disciples and not to others. Jesus explains that those who love Him will keep His commandments (v. 23a). He is telling those closest to Him, the twelve disciples, these things so that they might no longer be slaves, but instead, be intimate, like friends, knowing the will of God (John 15:15). He says, *IF* you love me, then you will keep my word (meaning obey Him from the heart and have His value system become your value system). Loving God naturally leads us to keeping the commandments of God; it is love in action: loving God leads to godly actions. It seems that one of God's love languages is following Him, instead of following our own inclinations and misguided desires.

Next, Jesus, who had just told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them, told them how both the Father and the Son would "make Our abode with him"—him being the one who loves Jesus and keeps His word (v. 23d). So while Jesus was predicting His physical departure from this world, He reassured His disciples that He would still be with them, by making their hearts His new home.

He would make their hearts His home by sending the Holy Spirit to live inside of them. Jesus reminded them that this promise of the sending of the Holy Spirit weren't just His words, but the Word of the Father Who sent Him (v. 24), therefore all three Persons of the Godhead were involved. Jesus' promise was that He would send the Holy Spirit to them to "teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (v. 26). This was to comfort them and bring them peace (v. 27) because He had earlier told them that He was going to be leaving them (John 14:3). Looking back on what Jesus said, it is important to note that the Holy Spirit can't teach us all things or bring things to our remembrance if we are not putting His Word in our heart. We know that the Holy Spirit is the person who inspired the Bible, since Saint Peter said, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). We cooperate with God's work in our lives when we read, study and integrate the truth of God's Word in our daily lives.

Jesus told them all of this ahead of time so that when the Holy Spirit came, they would remember His promise of sending Him to them and be comforted. This is exactly what we find in the Book of

Acts. After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, many of His followers were confused and discouraged. But then, the promised Holy Spirit came, launching the Church in Jerusalem during the feast of Pentecost. The disciples, who had cowered in an upper room a few weeks earlier were now emboldened and spoke new and unlearned languages to preach the good news of salvation through Jesus. Such strange things were happening that Peter had to give an explanation to a large crowd who had gathered inquiring about the disciples. Peter's explanation was that Jesus had sent the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit, was the "culprit" for these signs and wonders: "Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The sending of the Holy Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had predicted when He said that he wouldn't leave the believers as orphans (John 14:18) and that the Holy Spirit would teach them and bring to remembrance all things. He stands ready to do the same for us. The Holy Spirit is the Person of the Godhead who empowers believers for ministry.

The big idea in the reading is that Jesus promises not to leave any of us as orphans; but rather, He promises to give us peace through the presence of His Holy Spirit. We cannot overstate the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives as believers in Jesus Christ. The Spirit's ministry to the hearts in whom He dwells is important not only for spreading the Gospel around the world but also for empowering us to accomplish all of the purposes of God in our lives. There are many Christians who are trying to live the Christian life on their own strength, living as an orphan. That is not God's intention. He specifically tells us that we are to rely on the Spirit to live the Christian life. If we don't know how to do this, we can ask Him to teach us. When we read Scripture, we can look for what it tells us about walking in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:18) relying on the Spirit to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), being filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), and having our mind set on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8).

There are manifold ministries of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer; here are just a few of the things the Holy Spirit gives us:

- A second birth, a spiritual birth, making us "born from above" or "born again" (John 3:3) with a regenerated soul (Titus 3:5).
- Confirmation that as a believer we are an heir of God and fellow heir with Christ (Romans 8:15-17).
- Membership in God's universal church, which is baptism with the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- The ability to understand and apply the Scriptures to our lives (1 Corinthians 2:12).
- Intercession on our behalf in prayer (Romans 8:26–27).
- A seal or guarantee until the day that we are redeemed in heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14).

We encourage you to look up each of the verse references and ponder how the Holy Spirit empowers you to accomplish God's purposes in your life.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In the first reading we considered how one's cultural background impacted their Christian beliefs and how these beliefs affected the other believers around them. When was there a time in which you met another Christian from a much different cultural context than your own? In what ways did you need to reexamine your core beliefs in order to provide them with the grace or leeway to accept them as brothers or sisters in the Lord?

2. In what ways can you identify with Jesus' disciples who were discouraged when He said He was going to leave them? How have you felt like an orphan? Identify which characteristics of living as an orphan or living as a child of God in the table below resonate with you. Talk to God and other solid Christians about your desire to be shored up in the areas you are still living like an orphan. Praise God for the confidence He has given you as a child of God.

Orphan	**Child of God**
Anxious and worried about needs: no sense of God's infinite resources. It feels like I have to make life work on my own and who I am is not enough.	Content about God's provisions: Has a sense that my God shall supply all my needs according to His riches in glory (Phil. 4:11-19).
Infused with a sense of conditional love and acceptance; you're only as good as your last performance.	Infused with a sense of unconditional love and acceptance; failure is not fatal (1 John 3:1).
Highly defended from a sense of vulnerability; needs to be safe, secure and right. Criticism either demolishes me or propels me to show them wrong. Either way, I protect myself from the gnawing voices of criticism. Shrinks back in fear and resists taking God-directed risks.	Learns that feeling inadequate is a natural consequence of the Fall. Instead of turning to self-protection, I try to find my adequacy in Christ (2 Cor. 3:5). This allows me to be realistic about my weaknesses and honest about my vulnerabilities with God and others. It allows me to overcome fear and take God-directed risks.
Prays when "on" or in crisis.	Prays throughout the day, knowing that the Spirit dwells in me and wants to relate to me (1 Thess. 5:17).

Uses "Christian freedom" to indulge the flesh, such as biting and devouring each other, being conceited, provoking and envying others. Gal. 5: 19-21 says: "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality,impurity and debauchery;[20] idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions[21] and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."	Uses "Christian freedom" to "serve one anotherhumbly in love" (Gal. 5:13). Starting to see the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23): [22] "But the fruitof the Spirit is love,joy, peace,forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,[23] gentleness and self-control." These are coming from the inside of my being, not just being imposed from the outside or merely trying to conform to Christian standards.
Needs to be in control and persuade people to see things my way. I am controlled by a need to impress people.	Becoming Spirit-controlled, which frees me up to submit to God-given authority, to let other people be "right" and to care more about incarnating Christ than impressing people.

3. Review the list of the ministries of the Spirit given in the Gospel lesson. How does the Holy Spirit help you overcome your feelings of separation and loneliness?

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/050116.cfm

Sixth Sunday of Easter Lectionary: 57

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Keywords:

Ecumenical Council, lake of fire, Great White Throne Judgment, circumcision, eating of food sacrificed to idols, Gentile Church, New Jerusalem

Going Deeper:

The following is the text of the ecumenical council event that was omitted from the reading.

Acts 15:3-21 NAS95 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through

both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." 12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, 17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' 18 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. 19 "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

List the important truths this council tells us about the following:

- God
- Gentiles
- Jews
- Salvation

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 4-17-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **4-17-2016**. This week we will study readings from the Book of Acts, Revelation and the Gospel of John. We will go into some great depth on the first two readings. We hope that you both enjoy and learn something this week from our study and that you are forever spoiled for the ordinary.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Acts. Paul and Barnabus were on their first missionary journey to share the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues (Acts 13:4). So much happened in Jerusalem that they wanted others to know – Jesus Christ's death, resurrection and ascension had defined the Jewish faith in a whole new way. The Holy Spirit had been sent to the believers to empower them to be witnesses all over the world (Acts 1:8). Paul's and Barnabus were "set apart" to be witnesses to Who Jesus what and what He had taught them (Acts 13:1-3). They were also sent to help those who were lost in darkness such that they could see the light of the Good News that their sins could be forgiven and a new relationship with God could be established through faith in Jesus (Acts 13:38-39).

On their travels they often went to the Jewish synagogue to share how Jesus was the fulfillment of the promised long awaited Messiah (Acts 13:33-39). They gave convincing evidence to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles that Jesus matched the description of the One from God Who would provide salvation. Jesus had risen from the grave, therefore, sealing the case that He was the Christ (Acts

13:32-33). In today's reading, we find Paul and Barnabus being invited back to the synagogue to continue sharing their insights about God's work through Christ.

First Reading:

Note: Paul's speech in Antioch was omitted from the reading. If you would like to read the speech it is included at the end of the study in the "Going Deeper" section.

Acts 13:14 NAS95 14 But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

Acts 13:43-52 NAS95 43 Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God. 44 The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. 45 But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. 46 Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH.'" 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. 50 But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51 But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

As a result of Paul's speech the previous week, a large group from the city gathered such that they didn't miss Paul's second address. The Jews received this second message of Paul very jealously which resulted in them instituting persecution of Paul and Barnabus by "incit[ing] the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city" (v. 50) such that they were driven out of the city. However, many of the Gentiles in the mixed crowd heard Paul's speech and responded in faith (v. 48). Paul and Barnabus did as Jesus had commanded the disciples (Matthew 10:14) and shook the dust of the feet in protest while they left that city and went on to Iconium (v. 51).

The reading marks the transition point of Paul's ministry from the Jews to the Gentiles (v. 46) which then became his primary ministry (see Galatians 1:16, Romans 15:15-16). Paul said later about this in Romans, "But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous" (Romans 11:11b). The outpouring of God's Spirit on the Gentiles was something that the prophets predicted long ago. Isaiah said, "I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). This marks the dawn of a new and unseen era, the church age. Paul spoke about this later in his ministry:

25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,

26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,

27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:25-27).

The big idea in the reading is that in the midst of rejection and persecution, the Word of the Lord is still able to penetrate and transform hearts.

Next, we move onto the second reading in which we will see the eternal impact of Paul's ministry on the eternal lives of believers from around the world.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The context of the reading from the Book of Revelation is a "parenthesis," or pause in John's revealing of the seven seal judgments being unveiled by Jesus. We cannot overstate the importance of understanding the context of any reading, but especially when we are dealing with the end-time events portrayed here in the Book of Revelation. When reading Revelation one has to understand that the story moves between visions of events happening on earth to things happening in heaven. Along the way there are frequent pauses in the action, or "parenthesis," where the vision shifts from earth to heaven or vice versa.

Looking back from today's reading in chapter 7, beginning in chapter 6 Jesus pours out a series of judgments on the earth (Revelation 6:1-17). With the unleashing of the sixth seal, great signs are seen in the sky (Revelation 6:12). This accords with what Jesus spoke about in Matthew 24:29-30. John said, "I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood" (Revelation 6:12). Jesus said about this in Matthew, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matthew 24:29). The next verse in this section of Mathew provides is with strong clue as to the overall context of the signs as it relates to Jesus' promised return (Acts 1:11). Jesus said, "And **then** the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory" (Matthew 29:30, emphasis added). Jesus said that He would return after the display of the signs in the sky, which is just before the seventh seal judgment is poured out on the earth. This brings us to the parenthesis in the text from which we find today's reading, after the revelation of the six seal, but before the return of the Lord Jesus and the unveiling of the seventh seal.

The event that happens before the parenthesis of today's reading is another tangential pause in

which John records the gathering of 12 groups of elect saints (meaning believers) from within Israel. John records the details of this event in the opening of chapter 7:

1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel: (Revelation 7:1-4).

The angels divinely mark 12 "tribes" of Israelites consisting of a large number of 12,000 from each group. The value of 12,000 is perhaps not a literal number but rather indicative of the fullness or total completion of the task. Regardless, this marking is such that these people are set apart in a way that they receive God's divine protection during the balance of the tribulation period, some three and half years. John makes this clear later in Chapter 12. "But the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she could fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent" (Revelation 12:14). This "sealing of the bondservants of our God" is also indicated in the parallel passage in Matthew. Jesus says in that Gospel about this event, "And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other" (Matthew 24:31). This divine sealing, marking or protecting occurs just before Jesus' return and the unleashing of the final judgements upon the earth including the seventh seal, seven trumpet judgements and seven bowl judgments. The bowl judgments conclude the wrath that God has stored out to pour out upon the unbelieving world at the end of the age. "Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous, seven angels who had seven plagues, which are the last, because in them the wrath of God is finished" (Revelation 15:1).

After the divine "sealing" is completed, the story moves to John's parenthetical vision of a large group of believers in heaven, which is where we pick up at today's reading.

Second Reading:

Note: Verse 13, which was omitted from the reading, is included separately.

Revelation 7:9 NAS95 9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands;

Omitted verse:

Re 7:13 ¶ Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes,

who are they, and where have they come from?"

Revelation 7:14-17 NAS95 14 I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. 16 They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

In the reading John said, "After these things," meaning after the sealing of the "144,000" (Revelation 7:4) and the outpouring of the first six seal judgments upon the earth. The scene now shifts back from events happening on the earth to events happening in heaven. We must be cautious in our interpretation of the events in heaven because those occur outside of the space / time domain to which we are bound to on earth. However, John's juxtaposition of this parenthesis in this exact spot in Revelation is significant because it indicates the source of the great cloud of believers about which John is speaking in the reading. Verse 14 reveals that the source of the "great multitude" (v. 9a) are "the ones who come out of the great tribulation." These "tribulation saints" are the believers who are killed for their faith as the end of age grinds to a halt during the reign of the Antichrist on earth. Later John says about this wicked person, "It was also given to him to **make war with the saints and to overcome them**, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him" (Revelation 13:7, emphasis added). During this terrible time, the reign of the Antichrist will be so strong as to almost fatalistically determine the outcome of each person alive on earth at the time. "If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints" (Revelation 13:10). The saints that are killed during this time will be divinely protected in heaven forever; in contrast to the "144,000," we saw who are divinely protected on earth during the tribulation period. This group in heaven will no longer hunger or thirst, or be too hot or too cold" (v. 16) "for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd" (v. 17a). We will read more about Jesus' role as Shepherd in the Gospel lesson. Many of the Christian saints on earth during this time will be martyred for their faith, while the "144,000" will enter the Millennial Kingdom alive to repopulate the earth. When Jesus returns He will gather the saints (believers) that have survived up until that point as well as those saints that died in the Lord. Saint Paul said about this, "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 4:17). This is the return of the Lord promised in Acts 1:11 and the rapture (or catching up) of all believers both alive and dead as stated in this verse from 1 Thessalonians.

The big idea in the reading is that even though this world does not recognize and treat God's people (saints) well, these verses reassure us that there will be justice and provision in the life to come with a sense of eternal comfort. We see how Jesus acted as the divine Shepherd of His sheep in heaven.

As we move onto the Gospel reading, we will see how Jesus portrays Himself as the Shepherd of His sheep on earth.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint John. The Book of John casts Jesus as the Son of God and speaks of eternal life in terms of knowing Him. The context of today's reading is Jesus' teaching on His role as the Shepherd of the true sheep in contrast to the false sheep and false shepherds that abounded in Israel during this time of extreme satanic activity surrounding Jesus' ministry.

Gospel Reading:

John 10:27-30 NAS95 27 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; 28 and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

The big idea in the reading is that God offers security to believers through the Great Shepherd Jesus Christ. Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God pictures Himself as the "Shepherd of the Sheep," and this occurs early in the Bible. 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). 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, the about whom Jesus says of Himself, "I and the Father are one" (v. 30).

As believers in Jesus, we can find great comfort from John's writing. First, God will never lose any of His sheep, meaning that God Himself places a calling upon our lives to come to faith in His Son Jesus Christ (v. 28). 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, 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. We can trust that God's judgment will be correct in that as we enter eternity He will judge between the lost sheep and evil shepherds in our land and differentiate between the ones that do good in serving Him.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How does the reading from the Gospel of John give you assurance that you are one of God's sheep? Some characteristics of His sheep are:

- His sheep hear His voice,
- Jesus assures us that He knows us, and
- His sheep follow him.

How can you use this Scripture to help you know that you are in the sheepfold and to counteract the doubts that the enemy uses against you to make you question your faith.

2. Looking at the first reading, how does the fact that Paul and Barnabus were met with rejection and violence while at the same time experiencing a degree of welcome give you an interpretative framework for your own experiences of sharing the Word of God with others?

Going Deeper

The following is Paul's speech to the Jews and Jewish converts (proselytes, Acts 13:43) in Antioch:

Acts 13:15-42 NAS95 15 After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." 16 Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17 "The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. 18 "For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. 19 "When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance–all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. 20 "After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. 21 "Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22 "After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, 'I HAVE FOUND DAVID the son of Jesse, A MAN AFTER MY HEART, who will do all My will.' 23 "From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24 after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 "And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.' 26 "Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. 27 "For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. 28 "And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. 29 "When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. 30 "But God raised Him from the dead; 31 and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. 32 "And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, 33 that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.' 34 "As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE blessings OF DAVID.' 35 "Therefore He also says in another Psalm, 'YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY.' 36 "For David, after he

had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; 37 but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. 38 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39 and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses. 40 "Therefore take heed, so that the thing spoken of in the Prophets may not come upon you: 41 'BEHOLD, YOU SCOFFERS, AND MARVEL, AND PERISH; FOR I AM ACCOMPLISHING A WORK IN YOUR DAYS, A WORK WHICH YOU WILL NEVER BELIEVE, THOUGH SOMEONE SHOULD DESCRIBE IT TO YOU.'" 42 As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath.

Study Questions:

1. Trace the history of God's work in the world to bring people to reconcile people to Himself. For example:

- God chose the Jews and made them great in a foreign land (v. 17)
- . . .

2. List all of the evidence given by Paul in this passage to prove Jesus' Messiahship.

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/041716.cfm

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Mass Study Notes for Sunday 8-17-2014



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for 8-17-2014. The readings this week all follow a central theme, God's revelation of the mystery of salvation being given to the Gentiles in addition to the Jews. The Jews were always God's chosen method of bringing light to the Gentile world. We will see that in the first reading from Isaiah 56 and the second reading from Romans 11. Finally, in the Gospel lesson we will see Jesus' interaction with a Gentile woman and how her faith in Jesus' ability to heal her daughter provided a glimpse into God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles.

The first reading is from the Prophet Isaiah. Chapter 56 is in the closing section of the Book of Isaiah, where God revealed important spiritual truths including the importance of His Word (Isaiah 55:10-11) as well as some further information about His plan of salvation for the Gentiles. In the section immediately prior to today's reading, God outlined His promises that He made to the covenant people, the Jews. As you read, note that verses 2-5 which were skipped in the mass lectionary have been added in order to provide the reader with a fuller understanding of the text.

> *1 Thus says the LORD, "Preserve justice and do righteousness, For My salvation is about to come And My righteousness to be revealed. 2 How blessed is the man who does this, And the son of man who takes hold of it; Who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And keeps his hand from doing any evil. 3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people." Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." 4 For thus says the LORD, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, And choose what pleases Me, And hold fast My covenant, 5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, And a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an*

> *everlasting name which will not be cut off. 6 Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, To minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD, To be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath And holds fast My covenant; 7 Even those I will bring to My holy mountain And make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar; For My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." (Isaiah 56:1-7)*

Several important points arise from Isaiah's prophecy. First, in light of the previous chapters in which God recounted His promises to the Jews, He announced a charge to them to maintain a clear conscience. In verse one He tells them to "preserve justice and do righteousness" because His salvation would come in the future and at that point His righteousness would be revealed. For a Jew, keeping the Law meant honoring the sabbath as well as "keep[ing] [their] hands from doing any evil" (v. 3).This is a calling to all believers to walk uprightly with the knowledge of salvation that they possess, whether Jew or Gentile. This is clear because in verse three God began to lay out further details about his plan of salvation for the Gentiles. Second, everyone would be welcomed into God's kingdom who walked in faith with God including the Gentiles (foreigners) or those who felt unwelcome in it such as the childless eunuchs. Large families were considered a blessing of God in the Jewish world. God said that he would "give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off" (v. 5c) and that he would "bring [them] to [His] holy mountain and make them joyful in [His] house of prayer" (v. 7). Finally, God revealed through Isaiah that anyone could join the Jewish community of believers and partake in their worship and celebration of God. He said, "[His] house [would] be called a house of prayer for **all** peoples" (v. 7c, emphasis added).

Although Isaiah provided additional information about God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through the Jews this was not a new concept in the Bible. Even in the very first Book of the Bible God spoke about salvation coming to all people through Abraham the father of all believers. God told Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (Genesis 22:18). King David said some three hundred years earlier, "All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, And all the families of the nations will worship before You" (Psalm 22:27). Earlier in Isaiah's record he provided insight into the ultimate method that God would use to bring salvation to the whole world. He said regarding the future Messiah Jesus, "The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them" (Isaiah 9:2). Though the Jews were always a light that pointed to salvation through faith in God, the ultimate light would be the Lord Jesus.

As we turn to the second reading, we will find additional information about God's plan of salvation to the Gentiles that came through the Jews. In this portion of Romans, Paul uses an analogy of an olive tree to describe God's saving ways. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, some of the original branches (the Jews) had been broken off. This grieved Paul to no end. But this made room for the wild branch (that of the Gentiles) to be grafted into the pure olive tree (the Life of Christ). Our hope is in God's ability to take what is broken and make it whole again (both Jews and Gentiles). And if He is able to do that at the macro-level, can we not trust Him to do that at the micro-level of our lives?

As you read please note that a large section of the text was omitted in the mass reading (verses 16-28 shown separated from the rest) but have been included in order to provide the full meaning of the text.

> *13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*

> *16 If the first piece of dough is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are too. 17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, 18 do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. 22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. 23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? 25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery–so that you will not be wise in your own estimation–that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; 26 and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." 27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." 28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;*

> *29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. 32 For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Romans 11:13-32)*

The big idea in the reading is the revelation of the "mystery" (v. 25a) that God has allowed the Jews to be disobedient to Him for a period of time such that the Gentile believers may be "ingrafted" into God's plan of salvation. Paul affirmed that as the "apostle to the Gentiles" (v. 13) he hoped that

through his ministry to them that he may motivate his fellow Jews to trust in Jesus (v. 14). He said that at some future date that all of Israel would be saved (v. 25). As Gentiles without the knowledge of God we are being shown God's mercy during what some commentators refer to as the "church age." The church was something that wasn't reveled to the Old Testament Prophets, or even to Jesus' own disciples until close to the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. In the Old Testament the Hebrew people were distinct from the surrounding nations because of their Law, culture, food, temple, and their worship practices. In the New Testament, Jesus' vision for the church would be for us to be "in the world, but not of it" (John 17:15-16). In the reading Paul stated how the people of God (both Jews and Gentiles) were now one.

Saint Paul revealed more revelation from God about the mystery of the church. Later in Ephesians, God used the analogy of the love that exists between a man and a woman to show how He loves the church. Paul said that husbands are to "love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it" (Ephesians 5:25). He continued, "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32, emphasis added). Paul said more about the mystery of the church:

> *4 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 3:4-6)*

How could God allow the hardness of the Jewish people's hearts and to set them aside until the last Gentile that desired salvation would find faith in Jesus Christ? This is one of the deep mysteries with which Paul was wrestling. The answer, at least partially, is found in the last verse of the second reading. "For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all" (v. 32). God loves us so much that He is willing to endure the hardness of the Jews hearts until all of us Gentiles that desire salvation find faith in Jesus Christ. The point that Paul makes throughout his letters and the passage in Romans in particular is that we can trust God's mercy, even if we don't fully understand His ways.

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, remember that at this point the church age was still hidden and God's plan of salvation for the Gentiles through faith in Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the cross wasn't in view yet. The context of the Gospel reading is just after Peter (and Jesus) walked on the waters of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:25-31) that we studied last week. After Jesus had calmed the wind and the waves they crossed the lake and came to the region of Gennesaret (14:34) located on the northwest shore of the lake. A series of events preceding this caused Jesus to leave this Jewish region. This included the unwillingness of the Jewish people to repent (Matthew 11:20-24), the rejection of Jesus by the people in his own hometown of Nazareth (Matthew 13:53-58), and the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-10). Jesus' movement to this region spoke symbolically of the future ministry to the Gentiles that some of the disciples would have.

We drop in on the story of the Caananite woman right Matthew highlighted the hardness of the hearts of the Pharisees. This story provides a sharp contrast between the Jewish religious leaders' response to Jesus and the non-religious Gentile response to Jesus. In the previous verses, Jesus was grilled by the Pharisees and then He shows them to be the frauds that they are. Then in contrast, we read a story about the real journey of faith.

> *21 Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed." 23 But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us." 24 But He answered and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" 26 And He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." 27 But she said, "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus said to her, "O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed at once. (Matthew 15:21-28)*

The Gentile woman was from a group of people who had always troubled Israel. The Canaanites were first mentioned in the Bible way back in Genesis Chapter 10 (v. 18). They were among the people groups that God promised to drive out during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt (see Exodus 33:2 and 34:11). They were a people that in Old Testament times lived in the lowland regions west of the Jordan River. Mark called her "a Gentile, of the Syrophoenician race" (Mark 7:26), indicating that she was a Greek. Jews had always been separated from the Greeks (or Gentiles) although the Jews were immersed in a thoroughly Greek culture. As the story plays out the Gentile woman called out to Jesus by using a respectful title, "Lord, Son of David" (v.22) and one which elicited that she had some understanding of Jesus. She called Jesus by the name "Lord" three times. The word "Lord" means master and the one using the term would be implying their submission to His authority in their life. Certainly, she had heard about his healing powers, but now she used a title that was reserved for the Messiah. She was a persistent woman, and Jesus' disciples implored him to send her away "because she keeps shouting at us" (v. 23c). Then Jesus addressed her and said that His ministry was only to the Jews (v. 24). Next, the woman bowed down before Jesus and He used a metaphor and told her that "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (v. 27). The "children's bread" referred to God's covenant people the Jews. This meant that since she wasn't a Jew she was not technically Jesus' first **priority** during his short earthly ministry, which was to the Jews, not to the Gentiles. Her answer to him was very surprising and was an indication of the faith that she had in the Lord Jesus. "Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). Jesus rewarded her faith by immediately healing her daughter. The Bible is clear that God commends those with faith, He is a "rewarder of those that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). The Gentile woman was rewarded by having her daughter healed. One can only imagine what became of the woman afterwards since Jesus absolutely made a tremendous impression upon her.

What do the readings this week mean to us in our lives? First, God emphasizes the necessity of faith

in the perfect, finished work or Jesus Christ for all people, whether Jew or Gentile, and is no respecter of persons. He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). God provided the plan of salvation through Jesus and made this available to everyone. "For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God said "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation" Romans 10:9-10).

Second, we should love and respect the Jews who although their hearts are hardened are the ones who brought salvation to us through Jesus Christ. We should "not be conceited, but fear; 21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either" (Romans 11:20). God has made Israel to be a blessing to the world, and all the way back in Genesis He cautioned us about how we should treat them. He said, "And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Finally, with the privilege of faith we also have great responsibility to share with everyone the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Jesus didn't give us many commands when He left but did leave a clear message about what should be our priority in life. This is called the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. How do you personally respond to God's call to salvation?

- Have you made a decision to accept His call and be grafted into the life of Christ?
- What does God's inclusion of Gentiles into the salvation story tell you about His character and heart?
- How does God's longing to see all people saved encourage you to reach out to others with His good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

2. How does the faith of the Canaanite woman challenge or affirm you in your own faith journey? Have you seen anyone model this type of faith? Who is God using you to encourage with this type of faith?

Readings for the Week

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

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http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/081714.cfm

First Reading IS 56:1, 6-7

Second Reading ROM 11:13-15, 29-32

Gospel Reading MT 15:21-28

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