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

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-29-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-29-2016**. This week we spend a great deal of time discussing the mysterious person of Melchizedek mentioned in a reading from Genesis. We dedicate so much time to this man because of the way his ministry prefigures the eternal intercession and finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. In the second reading we learn from Saint Paul's teaching about the celebration of communion and conclude this week's study with the miracle of our Lord's feeding of the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The context of the first reading is when Abraham was returning from battle with the forces that kidnapped his nephew Lot (Genesis 14:12). Earlier, Lot had separated himself from Abraham after he chose the well-watered, fertile Jordan River Valley towards the east. Not long afterwards, Lot found himself surrounded by war in the nations surrounding the Dead Sea (Genesis 14:3). Abraham mustered his troops and successfully rescued his nephew and all of his possessions (Genesis 14:14-16). Today's reading picks up during Abraham's return from this perilous rescue mission as he passed by the city of Salem, what we know by the modern name of Jerusalem (formerly Jebus, the land of the Jebusites).

First Reading:

Genesis 14:18-20 NAS95 18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he

was a priest of God Most High. 19 He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; 20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." He gave him a tenth of all.

In the reading, we are introduced to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High" (v. 18b). Melchizedek is perhaps one of the most important people in the entire Bible, second only to Jesus. In fact, some believe that Melchizedek was the preincarnate Christ Himself, a "Christophany" or appearance of Christ before His physical birth to Mary as recorded in the Gospels. Why is Melchizedek such an important person, and what application does his ministry have for our lives today? Before we answer this question, we will provide some background about him.

Who is this man Melchizedek, king of Salem? In today's reading we find Melchizedek bringing out bread and wine to greet Abraham who was returning from battle with the forces that kidnapped his nephew Lot. The New Testament provides more information about this mysterious person. In Hebrews chapter 7, in verse 1 the text reads, "Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him." Looking at the book of Hebrews as whole you can see that it's grounded in an explanation of Christ through the perspective of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood, thus the title given to the book "Hebrews" meaning Jews. In Genesis 14:3 Abram, later called Abraham, the father of the Jews, is called a Hebrew. We see back in Hebrews 7:1 that Melchizedek is three things: 1. the King of Salem, the area we now identify as Jerusalem, 2. A priest of the "Most High God," meaning a priest of the *only* true God, and 3. one to whom Abraham the father of the Jews gave tribute. The lesser person gives tribute to the greater. To summarize, Melchizedek was a king, and a priest worthy of tribute.

Going on in Hebrews 7 we find in verse 17, "You [Jesus Christ] are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek," quoted from the Old Testament Book of Psalms 110:4. According to the Book of Leviticus under what we call the Jewish Law, all of the Old Testament Priests had to come from the tribe of Levi, but Melchizedek was a priest before the separate tribes or Law even existed! Yet Abraham gave a tenth portion (or tithe) to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:4) as required under the later Law for all priests (verse 5). What is being explained here is that Melchizedek was one of a class of priests that foreshadowed the coming final, eternal (and final) High Priest, Jesus. Melchizedek, whose name means King of righteousness, could not have come from the line of Aaron (Levi) or Judah, because these did not exist during his lifetime. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the final sacrifice was Jesus' own death on the cross which did away with the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 10:11-14). Christ was from the "order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4, Hebrews 7:17), not the line of Aaron. This new order is made even more clear by reading beyond the quoted section of Psalm 110 to verse 7, "Therefore He will lift up his [Jesus Christ's] head." This eternal priest Jesus of the non-priestly line of Judah is and will be exalted by God. As a side note, Melchizedek was the first biblical personality to picture the reality of a priest/king.

Now, with this wisdom in mind let's answer the question we posited in the opening, why is

Melchizedek such an important person, and what application does his ministry has for our lives today? As Christians, we cannot underestimate the importance of what Melchizedek's priesthood teaches us. First, the "Melchizedekian" is eternal, in contrast to the Jewish sacrificial system that passed away after the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Truly, the Levitical priesthood died the moment that Jesus died and the veil was torn in two (Matthew 27:51) although the Jews nursed it along for another four decades. Second, the priesthood of Jesus is eternal and is not tied to the life of the priest. Hebrews says, "The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing," (Hebrews 7:23). This is a critically important point because the Scripture says regarding Jesus, "Therefore He is able also to save **forever** those who draw near to God through Him, since **He always lives to make intercession for them** (Hebrews 7:25, emphasis added). Bold text alone does not do provide this quote with enough emphasis, as the implications for the church and the Christian are enormous:

- Since Jesus lives eternally, He is always there for us. His intercession with the Father God is eternal on our behalf. In contrast, human priests died and their ministries ended with their passing.
- Regardless of whatever type of human priesthood was instituted after Jesus' death, the Scripture is clear that the sacrificial system and associated priesthood was eliminated by God forever. The sacrifice of lambs (Exodus 12:5, Numbers 28:7), wine (Numbers 28:7), or bread (Leviticus 7:13) was forever eliminated by Jesus willingly offering Himself and one perfect sacrifice forever, because "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). We can be thankful that Jesus' sacrifice cannot ever be repeated, and will never need to be.
- Jesus declared victor over sin, something whereas the Levitical priesthood left a memory of sin. We see this clearly in the Book of Hebrews.

  Hebrews 10:1-4 NAS95 1 "For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

- Jesus is the Victor of sin, and is nowhere in the Bible every portrayed as a victim but He chose to go the cross. Jesus is our Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the One Who suffered on our behalf. Jesus said, "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:18). Because Jesus was victorious over sin, we can be victorious over sin as well. The Bible says, "but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).
- Jesus instituted a new priesthood consisting of all believers, and the old, broken, bloody, corrupt (Matthew 21:13) sacrificial system of the Old Testament has passed away forever. The Scripture says, "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A

> PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). As believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we offer continual **spiritual** sacrifices to God. "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16).

In closing, was the man Melchizedek in the reading the preincarnate Christ? Hebrews 7:3 says about him that he was "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually." However, later in verse 15 the author make the point quite clearly that Melchizedek is a type of Christ, something that points to the later Messiah Jesus. "And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the **likeness** of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:15, emphasis added). So was Melchizedek Christ in the flesh? Maybe, though this isn't explicitly stated in the Scriptures. What we do know is that he points to Christ by representing an eternal priesthood that Jesus now carries for us.

As we move onto the second reading, hopefully each of us recognizes the principle of giving to God as demonstrated by Abram after his victory in rescuing Lot from the ungodly kings who surrounded him and took him captive. Our giving to the church, charities and those in need demonstrates that we understand the source of victory is God and He owns it all. We are to our time, talents, and treasures held loosely in our palms and let God take from them as He sees fit. As Christians we are not like the people of Pompeii who perished while grasping their possessions before trying to flee the volcano.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 1 Corinthians deals with Saint Paul's teaching on the celebration of communion.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NAS95 23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

In the reading, Saint Paul spoke about the celebration of the communion meal. He said, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26, emphasis added). This teaching placed a clear time limit on the celebration of this important ordinance. As we look forward to the return of the Lord we, like the Jews on the evening of the Passover, walk in obedience to the Lord's commandment to celebrate communion

until He returns.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a very important ordinance given to us by the Lord Jesus before He returned to heaven. Each time we celebrate communion we commemorate Jesus' death on the cross for us on which He gave his body and poured His blood for us. Jesus instituted the communion celebration during His Last Supper with the disciples on the eve of the Jewish holiday known as Passover. This important feast commemorated the Jews deliverance from the final plague brought against the Pharaoh as recorded in Exodus 12. On the solemn eve many millennia ago, the Hebrew people were instructed to slaughter a lamb and mark their doorway with its blood. On that evening, the Death Angel passed through the land and killed the firstborn of every living thing, both human beings and animals, except those whom had followed God's commandment in faith by marking their doorways with the symbol of the Lamb of God. The Feast of Unleavened Bread, in which the Jews eat bread without the yeast rising agent, follows Passover. The absence of leaven is symbolic of the Jew's rapid flight from Egypt immediately after that first Passover evening in which the lamb was slaughtered in obedience to God command for the salvation of each household. The absence of leaven also came to be associated in later Jewish thought with the purification from sin, i.e. leaven is sin, such as Jesus noted when He said to be on watch for the "leaven of the Pharisees" (Matthew 16:6). The symbolism is clear; Jesus is *our* Passover Lamb, the Lamb of God that takes away our sin. John the Baptist said about Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus is the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

What does this reading mean for our lives? First, God calls us not to forsake the assembly together in the communion service (Hebrews 10:25). As we celebrate communion from now until the day the Lord Jesus returns we look back to the one sacrifice that He made for our sins. Second, we can recognize that we are saved by grace through faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9) the same as Moses and the other believers in the Old Testament. They looked forward to Jesus through the symbols of God's supernatural provision through manna and the healing by faith in God by humbly kneeling before the bronze serpent. The elements of communion are the way in which we remember Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed to pay the debts for our sin. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). This truly is a celebration, for though our sins are scarlet, we have been washed as white as snow through this sacrifice. We now live in response to this great and precious gift. May you not only celebrate communion, but each day, with a joyful and thankful heart.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading from Luke 9 records Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. This is the only miracle that appears in all four of the Gospels. The total number of people fed would have likely been over ten thousand as the crowd numbered five thousand men not counting women and children.

Jesus' feeding of the five thousand along the shores of the Sea of Galilee marked the beginning of a series of turning points in His ministry that we can identify by following the parallel accounts from

the Gospel of John. One of these crucial points of decision for the crowds of followers is evident in the easy to remember verse 6:66 in John's Gospel, "As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." These turning points came about as the people began to determine in their hearts whether they are true followers of Jesus. Another of these is in the previous chapter of John where it says, "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18). This is where the rubber meets the road; the true followers of God are those that recognize Jesus as God in the flesh, the Messiah, rather than just a miracle doer who they thought would deliver them from their Roman oppressors.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:11-17 NAS95 11 But the crowds were aware of this and followed Him; and welcoming them, He began speaking to them about the kingdom of God and curing those who had need of healing. 12 Now the day was ending, and the twelve came and said to Him, "Send the crowd away, that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside and find lodging and get something to eat; for here we are in a desolate place." 13 But He said to them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish, unless perhaps we go and buy food for all these people." 14 (For there were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, "Have them sit down to eat in groups of about fifty each." 15 They did so, and had them all sit down. 16 Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke them, and kept giving them to the disciples to set before the people. 17 And they all ate and were satisfied; and the broken pieces which they had left over were picked up, twelve baskets full.

As the story progressed, we know from the parallel accounts that Jesus asked Philip (who was from this region) to provide for the crowd. We know from that account that Philip responded to Jesus stating that to buy that much food would require the amount of 200 days' wages. This was a significant amount but worthless that far away from the city and in light of the huge size of the crowd. Nevertheless, the people had followed Jesus some distance away from the city and saw Him as One Who would provide for them, so it was natural for Jesus to accommodate their needs through His disciples. In this case, the people found out that God was the true multiplier of things. Again, we know from the parallel account in John that the people did indeed recognize Jesus as a Prophet, seemingly the One prophesied about in Deuteronomy 18:15. However, they misunderstood the role of the Messiah (John 6: 14 – 15). The people saw in Jesus a political ruler Who could free them from their poverty and Roman oppression. In the end, twelve baskets were left over corresponding exactly to the count of Jesus' disciples. Each disciple was left with one basket to highlight Jesus' ability to provide in the midst of impossible circumstances. God provided the food regardless of the people's faith and used this sign to point to the True Messiah Jesus.

We too may have misunderstandings about how Jesus' power should be used in the world. Though we should ask God to provide for our circumstances we have to recognize that like the people of the biblical era we often want God to use His power for our comfort, security, and advancement. We need to be careful to let God be God and not expect Him to be our personal "Genie in the bottle"

performing miracles on demand. Nobody stands above Him for He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and His purposes are beyond understanding. Even though the people in this story wanted Jesus to become their civil King, Jesus ministered to them to meet their spiritual needs instead. One day Jesus will return to rule and reign on the earth and fulfil the expectations of a perfect ruler.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. The Book of Hebrews opens as follows. "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe*" (Hebrews 1:1-2). With this passage in mind, move forward in the Book and study the context of Hebrews before and after chapter 7. What do you find regarding how Jesus really is the eternal priest/king that fulfilled the requirements of the Law and how He is our eternal High Priest that makes intercession for us (1 Timothy 2:5). What impact should / does Jesus' intercession make on your perspective and response the challenges, blessings, and your inadequacies?

2. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus called upon God's miraculous power to perform a miracle to provide for people's basic needs and at the same time to confirm Himself as the Messiah. It is evident from reading the synoptic Gospels that His disciples didn't understand the miracle until Jesus explained it to them some time later after feeding a second large crowd. What ways have you missed understanding the miracles of God in your own life? List two or three ways in which God has recently provided for you that you may have taken for granted. Tell God your thankfulness for His provision and ask Him to point out to you ways in which He continues to do so.

Going Deeper

Another figure that prefigured this ministry was Joseph in the Book of Genesis, then later on King David, also of the tribe of Judah. Do your own study on these people and see what amazing parallels you can draw between them and Jesus.

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/052916.cfm

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Lectionary: 169

Source(s):

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

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Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 5-8-2016



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes for **5-8-2016**. This week we will see in the first reading the murderous reaction of the Jews to Stephen's message in the Book of Acts. Then we continue the study from previous weeks from the Book of Revelation and conclude with the Gospel reading where we see Jesus' prayer on our behalf.

Introduction to the First Reading:

This reading is from the Book of Acts and it shows the immense opposition the early church was under. In Acts 7:1-53, Stephen gave a courageous speech that pointed out the inconsistency of the Jewish people's ability to follow God. This is included at the end of this study in the Going Deeper section. Stephen was one of the seven men chosen from among the larger group of disciples to serve in the food service ministry because the twelve apostles felt that they "should not give up preaching

the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2). After Stephen's appointment, a group of Jews from the surrounding nations "rose up and disputed with [him]" (Acts 6:9) because "Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (v. 8). Evidently, Stephen had many other skills and spiritual gifts than just his food service ministry. Before we go to today's reading, let's read what happened after his convicting speech so that we better understand the context.

Acts 6:10-15 NAS95 10 But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13 They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." 15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

In verse 12, the "Council" to which Doctor Luke (the writer of Acts) is referring is the Sanhedrin, which is the supreme Jewish court of justice, the same one that falsely condemned the Lord Jesus (Matthew 26:59-66). The Council acted the same way they did during the "trial" (using the term loosely) of Jesus in that they rounded up false witnesses to testify against Stephen (v. 13a). During the hearing, the Council provided Stephen with the ability to make a very long and reasoned defense (Acts 7:1-53). "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him" (v. 54) which is where we pick up with today's reading. *Note: The complete text of Stephen's speech is included in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's study.*

First Reading:

Acts 7:55-60 NAS95 55 But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56 and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" 60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

The main point of the reading was the great similarities between the way Stephen died and the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the same way that Jesus' death was filled with miracles (earthquake, darkening of the sky) Stephen's death was also miraculous in that he told how he saw a vision of the Lord Jesus exalted at the right hand of the Father in heaven and graciously prayed for the forgiveness of his murderers. In both of these cases, the Council heard false testimony and then rushed to execute the death sentence upon them. Just as Jesus did (Luke 23:34), Stephen prayed right before his death for God's forgiveness of their great sin of killing him (v. 54). As the saying

goes, the apples don't fall far from the tree. As Jesus' devout apostle, Stephen followed closely the way of his master including forgiving his tormenters before his death. Ultimately, instead of having the Jews' desired effect of stopping the spread of the Christian message, the persecution of Stephen did quite the opposite. Stephen's example of bold testimony in the midst of persecution emboldened those that went after him as the growing church spread out across the globe.

There are three other points that emerge from the reading. The first is the introduction of Saul, who we know later as the Apostle Paul (v. 58). Here we see Saul assisting in the persecution of Stephen in guarding the cloaks of the people who were stoning Stephen to death. This was just a foretaste because we know that in the next chapter Saul began raging a holy war against the Christians. There Luke records, "But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). A second point in the reading that can be drawn is regarding the posture of the Lord Jesus in Stephen's vision. The author of Hebrews records about Jesus, "When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3c). However, as Stephen was being killed he saw a divine vision of Jesus "**standing** at the right hand of God" (v. 55c, emphasis added). Jesus' position "at the right hand of God" means He is exalted with God the Father in heaven. Jesus' standing position is as one commentator stated His "active interposition to help, as Mediator and King, or readiness to receive His persecuted servant" (Annotated Bible Notes). Hebrews says, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). In the same way that Stephen saw Jesus interceding for him before the Father, when we die we can expect to see Jesus standing and interceding for us with the Father God. It is only through the righteousness of Jesus that we will be able to enter into the presence of God the Father. Finally, note that as the Jewish mob rushed to murder Stephen they covered their ears (v. 57). This is indicative of their response to hearing the sin of blasphemy, which gives an indication of the crime of which they were accusing Stephen of committing since blasphemy carried with it the penalty of death (Leviticus 24:16). Jesus foretold of the coming of this day when He said, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2).

An application of the reading is that as believers we can expect to face persecution. Saint Paul said, "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). As we do, we should remember that the church often grows the most during these times, as well as we may experience the most personal growth in these circumstances. We should endeavor in advance to develop a philosophy of suffering under persecution to the extent that when it comes upon us we are prepared to respond in ways that lead us closer to God. The North African apologist Tertullian (c. 160 – 225) wrote much about suffering and persecution. He said, "But go zealously on, good presidents, you will stand higher with the people if you sacrifice the Christians at their wish, kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent" (Tertullian's *Apology*, Chapter 50).

Later in the Gospel lesson, we will see some insights that Jesus provided to us through the Holy Spirit's recording of Jesus' prayer to the Father on behalf of all believers. Interestingly, just prior to

this prayer Jesus warned His disciples about the coming persecution. But first we will hear from Jesus through His closing warning to the world in the Book of Revelation.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is a continuation of the study in Revelation that we have looked at for the past several weeks. The context of today's reading is Jesus' closing words to the world as delivered by the angel to John. When John saw the angel, his immediate response was to bow down and worship him (Revelation 22:8). Instead, the angel told John, "Do not do that. I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:9). Regardless of who brought the message, as you read the words that John recorded from the angel you will see that the message is directly from Jesus Christ Himself. Although the text doesn't state this outright as happens in the Old Testament prophets when they say, "Thus says the Lord," verse 16 says that the message is from Jesus.

Second Reading:

Revelation 22:12-20 NAS95 12 Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying. 16 I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. 17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost. 18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming quickly." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Jesus provides His seal of authority to the message by clearly identifying Himself as the sender of it in verse 16 ("I Jesus"). This crucial closing message of Jesus to the world opens with the phrase "I am" which also clearly identifies the speaker as God. This phrase is repeated no less than four times in this short section. This is indicative of the importance that readers should give to it because it reveals that the sender is explicitly identified as God, the "I am" of Exodus 3:14. The speaker uses many phrases in the reading to identify Himself as God including "the Alpha and Omega" (v. 13), "the root and descendant of David" (v. 16), and "the bright morning star" (v. 16), and most importantly the outright statement "I Jesus" (v. 16).

Jesus' closing message is full of important scriptural truths:

- His return will be quickly (v. 12) in the sense that when it begins to happen the events will unfold quickly. Jesus bookmarked today's reading by closing with this same admonition, "Yes, I

am coming quickly" (v. 20). Jesus said about this in the Gospel of Matthew, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34). When the end-times events begin to unfold they will be concluded within a single generation.

- Jesus will reward those who served Him by bringing their rewards to them when He returns (v. 12). Justice will be provided by "render[ing] to every man according to what he has done." This means at least in part that He will bring punishment to those who don't serve Him when He returns. Verse 15 makes this clear, "Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying." In contrast, believers "take the water of life without cost" (v. 17) since they thirst for the ways of God and are the eternal recipients of His grace (unmerited favor).
- Believers are those who "who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city" (v. 14). They are those who "hears the words of the prophecy of this book" without adding to or taking away from them (v. 18) as the false teachers were doing (and are doing today). Countless theological cults engage in practices that either nullify the Word of God (take away from it) or add legalistic, religious practices that their followers must observe in order to be saved (add to it). Jesus provides a clear warning not to do either of these things because otherwise they shall be forced along with all the other nonbelievers to enter into the Great Tribulation. This is the Day of the Lord's judgement spoken of in Revelation and previously by the Old Testament Prophets such as Jeremiah.
- Jesus, in His grace, sent this message specifically to the churches (v. 16) in order that they may receive and learn from Him the only way to the tree of life (v. 19). Those who resist His message of salvation through faith in Him alone (John 14:6) will find themselves eternally locked out of the holy city.

We can learn a lot from this closing section of Revelation. Jesus is faithful to us in that He continues to tell the world the truth about the only way to find peace with God in spite of the fact that the majority of the world has and will continue to reject His message. As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see Jesus' heart for His believers as we listen in on a prayer that He gave on our behalf to His disciples before He ascended back to heaven.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The context of the Gospel reading from John 17 is Jesus' high priestly prayer that He offered to God the Father just before His arrest and crucifixion. He opened the prayer in verse one of this chapter by "lifting up His eyes to heaven" and saying, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You. even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life" (John 17:1-2). This sets the tone as He continues the prayer on behalf of both His disciples and those that will come to believe in their testimony.

Gospel Reading:

John 17:20-26 NAS95 20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that

they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, although the world has not known You, yet I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me; 26 and I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus taught about the importance of a unified church in the reading. He said, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me **through their word**; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21 emphasis added). Unity does not come by coercion or oppression. It comes by individuals who understand their true identity in Christ. When believers in Jesus fix their attention upon Jesus and His glory, the petty issues that often divide followers will fade away. Jesus helps us to see that unity is the result of belief in Christ, who is one with the Father.

Jesus prayed on behalf of His disciples who had believed by firsthand knowledge ***and*** for those who believed through the *testimony* of His disciples (v.20b, "through their word"). Unity is important in the church because it's through this unified message that God's power is revealed. All of the believers after the era of the disciples have come to faith in Jesus through the testimony of "**the word"** and "**their word**." "The word" is the testimony of the disciples through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit written into what we call the New Testament Bible. "Their word" is both the testimony of the disciples, *and* the testimony of all believers. Jesus' purpose in this message was a calling for the church of God be unified in their proclamation of the Gospel so that the entire world may believe (John 17:21f). Jesus brought this out in verse 26, "I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

As we contemplate the three readings from today what stands out is the great value that we have in following Jesus regardless of what it may cost us. Knowing the Lord Jesus as our Savior empowers us to tell others about Him in spite of the fact that we may be ridiculed or even harmed because of our testimony. In the western world it is easy to take advantage of our religious freedom and forget the great sacrifices which Christians around the world are making for Jesus every day. As we live our lives we are called to pray for them that suffer for Jesus around the world, as well as to prepare for persecution in our own lives.

Bottom Line: Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways have you faced or are facing persecution for your faith? How does Stephen's example, which mirrors Christ and knowing the warnings about persecution in Scripture, help you to face it more strongly?

2. Choose one of the ways that Jesus is described in the second reading in Revelation 22 and reflect upon what this means and how this character quality can make a difference in your own life.

- Jesus is coming quickly
- Jesus is the rewarder
- Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end
- Jesus is the Root and descendent of David
- Jesus is the bright morning Star

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/050816-seventh-sunday-easter.cfm

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Lectionary: 61

Source(s):

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

Scripture quotations taken from the NASB

Going Deeper

The following is the text of Stephen's speech in the Book of Acts:

Acts 7:1-53 NAS95 1 The high priest said, "Are these things so?" 2 And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' 4 "Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5 "But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM. 6 "But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. 7 "'AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.' 8 "And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. 9 "The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God

was with him, 10 and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11 "Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. 12 "But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13 "On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph's family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14 "Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. 15 "And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16 "From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem. 17 "But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18 until THERE AROSE ANOTHER KING OVER EGYPT WHO KNEW NOTHING ABOUT JOSEPH. 19 "It was he who took shrewd advantage of our race and mistreated our fathers so that they would expose their infants and they would not survive. 20 "It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father's home. 21 "And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22 "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. 23 "But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24 "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25 "And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26 "On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, 'Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?' 27 "But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND JUDGE OVER US? 28 'YOU DO NOT MEAN TO KILL ME AS YOU KILLED THE EGYPTIAN YESTERDAY, DO YOU?' 29 "At this remark, MOSES FLED AND BECAME AN ALIEN IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN, where he became the father of two sons. 30 "After forty years had passed, AN ANGEL APPEARED TO HIM IN THE WILDERNESS OF MOUNT Sinai, IN THE FLAME OF A BURNING THORN BUSH. 31 "When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32 'I AM THE GOD OF YOUR FATHERS, THE GOD OF ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB.' Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33 "BUT THE LORD SAID TO HIM, 'TAKE OFF THE SANDALS FROM YOUR FEET, FOR THE PLACE ON WHICH YOU ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND. 34 'I HAVE CERTAINLY SEEN THE OPPRESSION OF MY PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND HAVE HEARD THEIR GROANS, AND I HAVE COME DOWN TO RESCUE THEM; COME NOW, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO EGYPT.' 35 "This Moses whom they disowned, saying, 'WHO MADE YOU A RULER AND A JUDGE?' is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. 36 "This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. 37 "This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, 'GOD WILL RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME FROM YOUR BRETHREN.' 38 "This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. 39 "Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to

Egypt, 40 SAYING TO AARON, 'MAKE FOR US GODS WHO WILL GO BEFORE US; FOR THIS MOSES WHO LED US OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT–WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM.' 41 "At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42 "But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL? 43 'YOU ALSO TOOK ALONG THE TABERNACLE OF MOLOCH AND THE STAR OF THE GOD ROMPHA, THE IMAGES WHICH YOU MADE TO WORSHIP. I ALSO WILL REMOVE YOU BEYOND BABYLON.' 44 "Our fathers had the tabernacle of testimony in the wilderness, just as He who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern which he had seen. 45 "And having received it in their turn, our fathers brought it in with Joshua upon dispossessing the nations whom God drove out before our fathers, until the time of David. 46 "David found favor in God's sight, and asked that he might find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. 47 "But it was Solomon who built a house for Him. 48 "However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 49 'HEAVEN IS MY THRONE, AND EARTH IS THE FOOTSTOOL OF MY FEET; WHAT KIND OF HOUSE WILL YOU BUILD FOR ME?' says the Lord, 'OR WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR MY REPOSE? 50 'WAS IT NOT MY HAND WHICH MADE ALL THESE THINGS?' 51 "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52 "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53 you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

Questions:

1. Synthesize Stephen's speech into one or two sentences.

2. Why do you think Stephen went into such great detail about Jewish history and did not mention Jesus by name?

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