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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 157: 11/15/2026



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Proverbs, which shows a godly woman's wise stewardship of God's resources. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with a kingdom parable from Saint Matthew, which also calls us to steward the resources He has given us carefully.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Proverbs. King Solomon wrote this Scripture, a book of wisdom on practical and godly living. The main theme is that a godly person carefully stewards the time, talents, and treasures God has given them. We will explore this same theme later in the Gospel lesson.

Note: We included all the skipped verses between 31:13-31 to provide full context.

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First Reading:

> *10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. 13 She looks for wool and flax And works with her hands in delight. 14 She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar. 15 She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household And portions to her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds herself with strength And makes her arms strong. 18 She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle. 20 She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22 She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land. 24 She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future. 26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. 27 She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: 29 "Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all." 30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. 31 Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:10-31)*

Among other things that emerge from the reading, the "Proverbs 31 woman" fears the Lord (v. 30). The big idea is that a godly person is a careful steward of the gifts they receive from God.

Many points arise from the text; here are a few.

- The godly woman works willingly, not under compulsion (v. 13, "in delight"). She also goes to great lengths in order to get things done (v. 13b-ff).

- The godly woman serves others, even her own servant (v. 15). She is not a sluggard; she works hard in serving others.

- She is an entrepreneur (v. 16). In that era, her husband would have had to make the actual transaction to purchase the land, but she instigated it and took care in planting and tending the vineyard.

- She understands that what she gains is from God (v. 18).

- She is optimistic about her future, because she knows that she belongs to God (v. 35, 30b).

The bottom line is that the godly woman is like Jesus: a servant, someone who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). She is a faithful steward of the gifts God has given her. Faithfulness and careful stewardship recur throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. We will see this theme continue later in the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Paul discusses the Day of the Lord, which we covered in a previous edition of Mass Notes. This is the time at the end of the tribulation when Israel finally returns to worship their Lord. Today's reading warns people living in that era to watch for the Lord's return. Watchfulness for the return of the Lord Jesus is a continuing theme in the New Testament.

Second Reading:

1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be

> *written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6)*

Like the parable of the virgins we will discuss in the introduction to the Gospel reading, everyone is called to watch for the Lord's return. They are to be certain that they find faith in Jesus Christ while they still have the opportunity to do so (Romans 13:11) because nobody knows the hour when the Lord will return (Matthew 24:36). As we move on to the Gospel lesson, we will see how God places a high value upon not only being watchful for His return, but also on being a good steward of the things that He has given to us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. Today's reading is part of what is called the Lord's "Olivet Discourse," which encompasses Matthew 24:1–25:46. In this Sermon, Jesus describes what will happen at the close of the church age. This portion of Matthew contains "kingdom parables" that begin with our Lord saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like." Today's reading begins in Matthew 25:14. The chapter begins with Jesus saying, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to . . ." (Matthew 25:1a). The Lord then tells the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), which shares the same theme of watchfulness as the second reading.

Being watchful for the Lord is closely tied to being prepared for His return, meaning we must already be citizens of the kingdom before He comes. In the parable of the ten virgins, the Lord described how five virgins were prepared for the bridegroom, and five were not. In Jewish culture, the groom was expected to come at an unexpected time. The application of this parable is that half of the virgins were prepared for the Lord Jesus' return (by study of the Scriptures and coming to a saving knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ), while the other five were lost and destined for eternal separation from God. In the context of chapter 25, the application is that at some point during the end times the Lord Jesus will return to gather His Church. Those left behind will enter God's

judgment, known as the Day of the Lord. Only God knows people's true hearts, so no one should wait to receive God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, because it may be too late.

The reading today opens with another of Jesus' "kingdom parable" introductions, "For it is just like" (v. 14a). What Jesus is saying is, "The Kingdom of God is like . . ." As you read, try to determine the main theological idea that emerges from the reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *14 For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18 But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 29 For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)*

The big idea that emerges from the reading is that stewardship depends on knowing and trusting the Master's heart. A misguided understanding of the Master's heart leads to self-protective, ungodly use of one's talents, as with the man who buried his talent. Those who understood and trusted the Master's generous heart could take risks and multiply what was entrusted to them. Notice the misconception of the "wicked and lazy slave." He miscalculated the Master's heart when he revealed his deep distrust of him: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground" (verses 24-25). He was blaming his wickedness and laziness on the Master's seemingly unpredictable and untrustworthy character. But the Master smartly revealed the inconsistency in his argument. If he was truly afraid, he would at least have been wise enough to show some interest, even if only out of fear. The man made an eternal miscalculation by not trusting the Master's heart.

This kingdom parable is very relevant to our lives today. Here are some ways understanding and applying Jesus' teaching helps us accomplish the plans He has for us.

- Knowing and trusting the Master's heart is essential. We should spend our time and energy on this endeavor, so we become wise stewards. We look forward to the day when we will enter into our Master's joy. We can trust that hearing these words of affirmation will be worth it.

- Although people in this age are entrusted with different levels of abilities and worldly goods, faithful stewards are equally rewarded and entrusted with more responsibilities in heaven. Jesus said to the servant that gained five talents from the original five invested, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21, emphasis added). Likewise, He told the one entrusted with only two and who gained two, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 23, emphasis added).

- The world is a profitable place to invest God's gifts, both for God and for the people entrusted with them. The five talents God invested in the world became ten (v. 20), and the two talents became four (v. 22). This magical doubling comes from God, even though it came through the agents to whom He entrusted it.

- Faithful servants have "gifts" to present to their masters, while unfaithful servants have only

what God gave them, and He owns it all in the first place. As believers, we are called to invest our time, talents, and treasures in serving God, so we have something to present to him when we, too, stand before him in judgment. Our judgment won't be for salvation, but for rewards.

- Believers come to understand that everything they have comes from God, as we saw in the first reading about the godly woman in Proverbs 31. In contrast, unbelievers never come to this understanding, because they are carnally minded (Romans 8:6). Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

- The world's resources flow through a worldly power structure of ungodly masters (v. 24b). Although exceptions exist, the richest people in the world are almost universally nonbelievers (with the exception of John Rockefeller). Although they don't understand their responsibility for stewardship of God's resources during their lives, they will after they die.

The reading closes with Jesus' teaching that Hell is real, just as heaven is real. Unbelievers will be far worse off in Hell than they are on earth (v. 29). They will be very worried (v. 25) when they stand before the Lord, who will judge them for how they used the resources that he gave to them. Though the unfaithful servant in the parable was worried about giving his report to his master, his judgment will ultimately be far worse.

These are some sobering words from our Lord. They are far from the only time that He warned anyone who would listen about the reality of Hell. Jesus spoke about it in Matthew 11:23, where he described the place as "Hades." In Matthew 5:23, the word for hell is rendered from the Greek "Gehenna," while in today's reading the term is "outer darkness" (v. 30a). In the Bible, we count some 38 times where this dark destination is designated as the future home of the wicked, beginning with Psalm 9:17 and ending with Revelation 21:8. Jesus implores people to take radical steps to prevent them from entering this place. In Mark chapter 9, Jesus told the people to even cut off their hands if it causes them to stumble, for "it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43).

As believers who trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins, we

have no need to worry about going to hell. Saint John reminds us of this through the firm authority of God's word. God says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). Jesus said in the John's Gospel, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God testifies to us through His word that we can never suffer our way to heaven. Suffering is part of life, but we can merit heaven only through a foreign righteousness, that of Jesus Christ, which is placed on us the moment we believe (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Today's readings remind us of the urgency of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are perishing. God calls us to bring light to the lost generation who, without faith in the Lord Jesus, will enter the place He described in the Gospel with no hope of escape. My readers may remember a story that I once told about a deeply troubling dream I had many years ago about such a place. I believe that God gave me this to remind me of the urgency in reaching people for the Lord Jesus Christ. In my dream, I was in a faraway place, and I felt deep hopelessness and doom. I felt I was in a place I would never leave, without hope. I pray nobody ever has to experience such a dream, and even more that nobody enters such a place for real at the end of their life on earth. The media may make light of hell as a place guarded by a man in a red suit with a pitchfork in his hand, but the reality of hell is all too real for those who enter there. I pray that through today's study, we may all remember our mission to reach people with the good news of the Gospel.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you view the Master's heart? Is He generous and gracious, freeing you from self-protective ways so you can take risks with what He has entrusted to you? Or do you see Him like the one-talent servant, who saw God as a harsh taskmaster and blamed God for his own laziness and wickedness?

2. The world we live in is unpredictable. We don't know what each new day will bring, but God has given us some landmarks of the end times. How does the Proverbs 31 woman face the future? How did Paul encourage the Thessalonians to face the future? What truths about the Master's heart and the future will allow you to face the near and eternal future with confidence?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 159: 11/16/2025



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The Bible teaches throughout both the Old and New Testaments the importance of recognizing the imminency of the coming of the Lord Jesus and His eventual return. Later in this lesson, we will look at readings from the Old Testament Book of Malachi and the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament that address these topics. Despite these frequent teachings, it's easy to get caught up in our daily lives and overlook the possibility of meeting the Lord ourselves at any moment. I write about that in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's notes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Malachi. Malachi was a prophet who wrote around the time of the closing of the Old Testament Canon. He is one of the Minor Prophets, meaning their book is

shorter than the Major Prophets. This Minor Prophet who wrote one of what I call the "index books," because you shouldn't feel bad if you need to use the index at the front of your Bible to locate them. Malachi is a bit easier to find because it is the very last Book in the Old Testament, just before the New Testament Book of Matthew. Malachi's message to Israel was a call to repentance concerning the corrupt priesthood, rampant divorce among the people, their lack of tithing, and poor social justice. The reading for today is from the first two verses in Chapter 4 (some versions mark the verses differently). Looking back to Chapter 3 we see that Malachi predicted both the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). In verse 5, we see the promise of God's future judgment of His people, but in an interesting way. "Then I will draw near to you for judgment" (v.5a). God says He will be near the people of Israel, but it's for judgment. This verse is helpful because it should remind us that as God judges His people, He is still near to them, and His judgment is ultimately for their good. Let's read the text from the first reading in Chapter 4, but continue until the end of the chapter.

First Reading:

> *1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.*

Omitted Verses:

> *3 You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." Malachi 4:1-6 NASB (Malachi 3:19-24 in the Lectionary).*

Some insights from this text are as follows. When Malachi said "the Day," he referred to the Day of

the Lord (abbreviated DOL), which we have spoken about previously. The DOL is the future period of judgment which commences at the midpoint of the time known as the Tribulation Period and marks the beginning of the Great Tribulation (Rev 13:5). The purpose of the Great Tribulation is to bring the Jewish people back to communion with God. Malachi conditioned his prophecy of this terrible time period with a blessing to those who turned to the Lord and repented of their fallen condition. "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth . . . "(v2a, b). Malachi also said another remarkable prophecy when he quoted God: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD" (v5). One of the tribulation period's marks will be the Prophet Elijah's return. John said in the Book of Revelation, "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth" (Rev 11:3). Although it's not explicitly stated in Revelation that one of these witnesses is Elijah, Malachi predicts his return and this does seem to align with the text in Revelation.

What is the relevance of Malachi's teaching for us in the Church today? As discussed in previous Mass Notes, we find in the teachings of Saint Paul that God has granted an escape to all believers alive at His second coming. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). Malachi called for the people to repent their sins and turn to the Lord. This is precisely the call for everyone alive today, from every tribe and nation. Malachi's message serves as both a warning for people to heed the call to turn to the One True God and to let the believers know that God hasn't forsaken His people, Israel. God will work actively to redeem His people and show them the need to turn their hearts to Him, even if it means subjecting them to terrible judgment. He will leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is missing (Luke 15:4). If God loves his people Israel so much to go to this length to save them, how much more does He desire that everyone alive today turns to him through faith in Jesus? Saint Paul said, "But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart' –that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 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" Romans 10:8-10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 2 Thessalonians is Paul's teaching on avoiding fellowship with anyone holding to false teachings. Believers, Paul said later in this same chapter, were to warn these people, not associate with them, but attempt to win them back to correct teaching (see 2 Thess 3:14 – 15).

Second Reading:

> *2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 NASB (plus skipped verse 6)*
> *6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.*

Paul advises the Thessalonians who were struggling with persecution (2 Thess 1:4-6) to break fellowship with those who didn't follow God's teaching (v. 6) and emulate Paul's behavior in serving without an expectation of payment. Although Paul had the right to work as a paid minister, he chose not to so as to set an excellent example for others to follow (v. 9). The principle he gave was, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat" (v. 10b). Paul had heard that some among them were not working but were instead "acting like busybodies" (v. 11c). Paul admonished these people with a word from the Lord to emulate him and "work quietly" (v. 12).

Paul's connection between work and worship is an important point, which is also closely tied to godly stewardship. Paul's admonishment is relevant for us today in that God calls all of us to serve Him and be good stewards of the gifts that He has given us. God calls us to offer our bodies up to Him as "living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). Through this we offer ourselves through our work to God as our "spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1e). Thinking of our work as a form of worship helps us to understand better God's holistic picture and plan that He has for our lives. Perhaps this view is easier for those employed, such as musicians, who can clearly visualize how they serve God through the beautiful music they make flow through their instruments. But Paul's admonition to connect work with worship goes beyond the musician, even those who clean streets for a living or run parts in a machine shop.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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In today's Gospel lesson, God provided a message that continued the theme of the coming great and terrible Day of the Lord. Let's read the Gospel text from Luke Chapter 21.

Gospel Reading:

> *5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." 7 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" 8 And He said, "See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is near'. Do not go after them. 9 When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." 10 Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, 11 and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. 16 But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, 17 and you will be hated by all because of My name. 18 Yet not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:5-19*

In this text, as with many Old Testament prophets, when Jesus told the story, he used a theological construct known as "prophetic foreshortening." This means that when he spoke of events in the near term (as we look back in history), he combined them with events in the distant future such that the two events appear stacked together in the Gospel narrative. This was also the case in the first reading from Malachi today, when he said, "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (4:2), just one chapter after he predicted the first coming of Jesus in 3:1. What Jesus was predicting was actually two events. However, they may appear at first glance to be just one period of time. First, the temple would be destroyed. We know that this was fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Second, He was predicting the coming of the Great Tribulation period. In between these two events, Jesus said certain other events would happen, and it's this in-between period in which we find ourselves today. The events typifying this period, according to Jesus, will include:

1. The appearance of false Christs (v.8),
2. Wars, earthquakes, and famines all over the earth (vv. 9-11), and

3. Persecution of believers for Jesus' name (vv. 13-19.

What's the importance of Saint Luke's teaching for believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? First, we should expect to see the types of events that Jesus mentioned during this period. We should be surprised to be persecuted for our faith. Second, we must not be surprised to hear about false messiahs such as cult leaders who claim to be Jesus or start whole religious movements through new ways of interpreting the Bible. Many false religious movements have arisen, such as the interpretation of secret "Bible codes." Jesus said not to be surprised by these events. Third, we should expect to see terrible natural disasters on an unprecedented scale.
Note: As I was writing this, news was coming in about the awful destruction caused by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Another implication of this text for our lives is to provide comfort and trust in God that He knows what He is doing. When life is chaotic (inside and out) it is helpful to remember that nothing is out of His control. We must often turn to Him for help and hope.

Yet, there is hope. As we saw in the first reading from Malachi, "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (v6a). Jesus said in the reading today, "Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives (vv. 18-19). If He was offering physical protection, then the Apostles wouldn't have had to give their lives to defend the Gospel. No, He wasn't saying that we might not be harmed physically, but that we will be protected spiritually.

Have you trusted the Lord Jesus for the promise of eternal life through faith in Him? Hearing about all the bad things going on in the world doesn't give us much hope in this life, but there is much hope for the life to come.

Reflection Questions

1. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you almost faced the Lord? Were you a believer in the Lord Jesus when this happened? If you were, did the event lead you to a closer walk with Jesus? In what ways was it possible that this event was a means of God's judgment in such a way as to draw you closer to Him?

2. In our modern age, we have often compartmentalized our lives, thinking that worship belongs to Sunday while work is a Monday to Friday kind of thing. Have you ever considered your work as a form of worship? As we saw in the second reading, Saint Paul calls us to emulate his godly behavior in working without burdening others while continuing to serve without an expectation of reward. In what ways can you reconsider your work life as worship? How would taking on this new mindset help you to
A. Relate to others at your workplace, and
B. Have a more accurate view of your service to God, even if you are not engaged in full-time ministry?

Going Deeper

It was a breezy afternoon when, after church, I decided to travel from Metro Detroit to a place called Kettle Point in Canada to do some windsurfing. This spot at the southern end of Lake Huron was famous for having huge waves on windy days. This day was no exception, and the waves were forecasted to be ten feet tall! Even though it was not normal for him, my brother decided to ride along to watch. I had an excellent afternoon riding the large, smooth waves in the bay. Just before I was going to stop for the day, I came in for a brief rest and decided to go out for just one more run. I had an uneasy feeling as I was carrying the windsurf board back to the water and was compelled to pray very hard for God to keep me safe on this final run.

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I turned on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board, which sent it flying in one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile, that same large wave crashed on top of me with my sail! I let go of the sail and soon realized that I was drowning. I quickly noticed that I could not float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves, and soon got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray. As I continued fighting, I had a strange realization and began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real and is challenging to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me. Yet I continued to fight and pray.

As I was fighting for my life in Lake Huron that day, two things came immediately into my mind. First, I made the vivid realization that I wasn't in control of the timing of when I would meet the Lord; it was up to God! It had been easy to think I was the master of every element of my life.

However, when my close call with death happened, God used the opportunity to show me that He was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He was in control of my life and had already set the exact day I would meet Him. Who was I to say that I would be alive when he returned, as the Bible taught? Second, life-threatening times like this were not a very good time to search out a new relationship with God. You either have one, with Jesus as the Lord of your life and your only hope of salvation, or you don't. The Bible says, "Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

My story ended well. Somehow, I realized that if I pulled on my wetsuit, I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. Against all odds, I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot-long mast with a flag attached. Between the enormous waves, I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and eventually someone riding a jet ski spotted me and came over and yanked me out of the water. As I walked back up the beach, I praised God, and someone offered me a ride in their truck so I could hurry back to tell my brother the fantastic story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition. Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario, I had my first meal as a truly "born from above" man.

Although I am much more careful while windsurfing, I recognize that I don't have the choice to know when I will meet the Lord Jesus. It's up to Him and could happen at any time. We must be prepared, for we never know the day or the hour.

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-17-2024

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Daniel 12 in which we study the combined event known as the rapture of the church, the return of the Lord, and the resurrection of the dead. Then we examine in the second reading how Jesus died for our sins once and for all, which is so much superior than the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament that had to be repeated twice a day and never took away the people's sins. Finally, we close with another view of the same event described in the first reading from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Daniel, chapter 12. The context of the message is a prophecy about the end of the world as we know it when the man of sin, known as the Antichrist, rules the world. The Antichrist will be in power when God pours out His final judgments on the earth and Jesus returns to reign on earth. The reading today describes the resurrection of the dead, some of whom go to eternal life with God and others go to eternal damnation. Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS'" (Matthew 7:22-23).

The reading from Daniel promises that the people of God will be "rescued" from this time of unprecedented distress. In the New Testament, we have further corroboration of this, which Saint Paul calls the "rapture," where the Lord Jesus comes to take His church to heaven before God pours the judgments chronicled in the Book of Revelation (see especially Revelation 16:1, the "seven bowls of the wrath of God"). We will read more about this later in the Gospel lesson regarding the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), a very dark time for those left on the earth after Jesus' return for His church. The "catching up" of the church to heaven was predicted by Saint Paul in response to someone in Thessalonica who had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here, Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17) as follows. "*15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 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.*" Paul reassured the believers that the Lord's return will be very obvious and recognizable. No one will "miss it." This corresponds to the teaching in Daniel 12, which is the focus of the first reading.

First Reading:

> *Daniel 12:1-3 NAS95 1 "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."*

The reading opens with the phrase, "Now at that time" (v. 1a). The previous verses in Daniel 11, chronicle a time of wars and violence that will consume the earth. This will bring in a "time of distress" that is referred to later in the verse. Michael, one of only two angels mentioned by name in the Bible who follow God, will somehow superintend the activity during this time. As we said in previous studies, the time leading up to this event will be a time of increasing and terrible persecution of God's people. Although a small remnant of Jews will be divinely sealed for God's protection throughout this time (Revelation 7:4-8), the Antichrist will pursue Christians with great vengeance just before the Lord returns and "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (v. 2). Saint John said in Revelation, "So the dragon was enraged with the woman (Israel), and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Christians)" (Revelation 12:17 with parenthetical explanations added). Verse two says that

"many" will rise, meaning not everyone, but many people have yet to die on the earth. The exception to this is that the believers who are alive at that time will be taken up to be with the Lord. "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord*" (1Th 4:16-17).

During this time, "everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." What is this book? The book that Daniel refers to is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Philippians 4:3 says that people who labored by Paul's side had their names written in the book of life. Revelation 3:5 shares a promise to those who overcome, that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. Revelation 20:12 describes two books, one that has all the deeds of every person (implying judgment for misdeeds) and another book, the book of life, which, if one's name is written there, will cancel out the judgment recorded in the other book. Revelation 20:15 says: "And if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 21:27 describes it as the Lamb's book of life and says that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter the New Jerusalem, God's eternal heaven. The Bible makes it very clear that the book of life is a place that records those who are going to be saved from the eternal lake of fire, the just consequences for those who live contrary to God and apart from His life. How does one know if his or her name is written in the book of life? Another way to ask the same question based on the passage in Daniel: how can we know which group we are in, the ones who will rise to everlasting life or those who rise to disgrace and everlasting contempt? Once we recognize that we are a sinner, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we can turn our hearts to the Lord Jesus as the only remedy. The Bible tells us that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1a), and later John said, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:12). Further, it says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Salvation is a free gift that comes about **only** by belief in Jesus Christ, it can never be earned. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you have put your faith in Jesus to save you, then you can have the assurance that you will be "rescued" from eternal disgrace and contempt.

Daniel also explains that the people "who have insight" and who "lead the many to righteousness" will be prominent in the eternal kingdom of God, shining brightly "like the stars forever and ever" (v. 3c). Being involved in gaining wisdom and pointing others to deeper faith in Christ is a valuable focus for our lives. You may have a ministry of evangelism, introducing people to a relationship with Jesus. Or you may have a ministry of discipleship, helping those who have put their faith in Jesus grow in their new life in Christ. Either way, it is important to continue growing in your own faith to

have insight and to be equipped to lead others to righteousness.

Interestingly, God gave us a glimpse into a precursor to the resurrection of the dead, which happened at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. He is the only one of the four writers that recorded this event. Matthew said that after Jesus had given up His life on the cross, "The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:52-53). This is one example of how powerful God is and is evidence of the deity of Christ.

What does this reading mean for us today? First, if anyone is sitting on the fence regarding Jesus as Lord, today is the day to trust in Him. Saint Paul said, "*AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). As Peter told the people in Jerusalem about Jesus, "*He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Second, although we as Christians should expect increasing persecution leading up to Jesus' return, we can have hope that Jesus will fulfill His promise to return "in the same way in which [they] saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Finally, we can have confidence in the fact that God's mighty angelic beings are fighting the spiritual battle against the demonic forces allied against us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading is from Hebrews chapter 10, a treatise on how Jesus died one time for sins forever, which means this sacrifice can never be repeated. At this time, the Hebrew people were still conducting the Old Testament sacrifices required by the Law. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer provides a running contrast to the old manner of things compared to Jesus. The verdict is that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, and greater than the sacrificial system. In this reading, we see a culminating point of the author's conclusion that Jesus is greater than the priestly system of the Old Testament.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 15–16 which were omitted from the reading were included below.

> *Hebrews 10:11-18 NAS95 11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

The author said that by "one offering He has perfected [forever] those who are sanctified" (v. 14). The word "once" follows a string of uses of this same word that first appears in this context in chapter 7. "*For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself*" (Hebrews 7:26-27). To make his point that Jesus died once for sins forever, in contrast to the sacrifices offered repeatedly by the Levitical priests, the author continued repeating this word four more times before today's reading, and twice more in the actual reading. The writer presented extremely compelling evidence as to the importance of understanding the concept of Jesus' single sacrifice for sins forever. He said, "[H]aving offered one sacrifice for sins for all time," (v. 12) then again, he said in verse 14, "For by one offering." Interestingly, the phrase indicating Jesus' single sacrifice is repeated seven times between the end of chapter seven and today's reading in chapter 10. Anytime the Bible repeats something we need to pay special attention to it, and especially if the concept is repeated seven times! The reading clearly tells us, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (v. 18). The only thing that can take away our sin is Jesus' willful sacrifice of His life as a Victor on the cross for our sins (see John 10:18). Jesus is a Victor, not a Victim.

What does this mean for our lives? The value of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins is of inestimable value. Compared with the sacrificial system of the Jews about which God said "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4), Jesus' single sacrificial giving of Himself as a Victor on the cross provided the means for believers in Him to be reconciled to God forever. Jesus will never have to offer Himself as a sacrifice again, ever. When we celebrate communion, we look back at His finished work on the cross. This was always God's plan, as Jesus was the "Lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). When we break the bread of communion and drink from the cup, we remember the body that he allowed to be broken for us and His blood poured out as the final offering for sin forever (1 Corinthians 11:26). We do not need to work for our

salvation, for Jesus' work on the cross is finished (John 19:30). I'll end this with one last exclamation point, for Jesus has "appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"(Hebrews 9:26)! What a wonderful Savior!

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will return to eschatology (pronounced es·ka·tol·a·gee), a word that means the study of the last things. The events in the reading will sound very familiar from your study in the first reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson from Mark 13 is from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse. The parallel passage in Matthew 24 goes into some greater details than that of Mark's account. The context of the message is after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the temple of the money changers during the preparation for the Passover. Upon the disciples telling Jesus about the "wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings" (Mark 13:1) of the temple complex, Jesus told them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down" (verse 2). Afterwards, Peter, James, John and Andrew approached Jesus privately and asked Him, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled" (v. 4). Jesus then explained to them what was to come, including many deceivers (Matthew 13:6), "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 13:7), famines and earthquakes (Matthew 13:8), yet these were just the beginning of the times of the end (v. 8). Then would come persecution (Matthew 13:9, 11), including death (v. 12), and the spread of the Gospel to the extent of the known world (v. 10, with final fulfillment in Revelation 14:6). After the "beginning of the birth pains" (v. 8e), the Antichrist will be revealed and bring an end to the restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem (Matthew 13:14). Although this prophecy was partially fulfilled by the Roman general Titus during the siege of Jerusalem during AD 70, the text is clear that another siege is in sight since Jesus warning is a global one, not just a local one concerning the city of Jerusalem. He said, "if the Lord had not cut short the days no human being would be saved" (v. 20). This and the corresponding testimony in the Book of Revelation make it clear that these events are yet future. This brings us up to today's reading, which details events which begin after or during the unveiling of the first six seals in the Book of Revelation. The "gathering of the elect" (v. 27) about which we will read is the same event that we studied in the first reading from Daniel 12.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 13:24-32 NAS95 24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE

> *DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."*

The opening verse of the reading is nearly the same as what John described in the opening of the sixth seal in the Book of Revelation. "*12 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; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places*" (Revelation 6:12-14). At the time just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus, the world will experience miraculous cosmic signs revealing God's power (vv. 24 – 25). At some point during the mid-point of a seven year period counting from a peace treaty made with Jerusalem to settle the worldwide chaos surrounding control over that tiny but religiously important region, Jesus Christ "will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds" (v. 27). While there is much speculation about the sequence of events, this is the event we discussed in the first reading that, in my opinion, includes the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54), the return of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:11), and the resurrection of the dead up until that time (Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29). Beyond this point, the period known as the Great Tribulation or the Day of the Lord will commence during which God will bring an end to the Antichrist's religious and commercial systems of mystery Babylon and Babylon the Great (Revelation 18). Although we don't yet understand what form this Babylon will take, we know that it will exalt itself against God much in the same way as the people did with the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

As the reading continued, Jesus explained to His disciples how to discern the signs of the times by telling them the parable of the fig tree. In the same way that they could discern the ripeness of the fig tree and that the summer was near they would also be able to discern that the end times were at their doorstep when the signs He gave them were at hand. He told them that once people (not necessarily them) saw these signs that the current generation would see the whole process completed during their lifetime (v. 30). Finally, through the mystery of the functions of the Three Persons of the Godhead, Jesus explained that the timing of the events was known only to God the Father (v. 32).

What does all of this talk about the horrible events of the end times mean to us today? Jesus calls us to live with an expectation of His imminent return. We are to be good stewards of the gifts that He has given to us. He said in Matthew's retelling of the Olivet Discourse, "*For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes*" (Matthew 24:44-46). We too must learn to discern the times by studying the imminent signs that will precede the return of the Lord, as you did today. Although the study of the end times may seem daunting, the Bible lays out a clear pattern of events that people alive during that time should expect to see. As time marches closer and closer to the fulfillment of these events, we should expect to see the "beginning of birth pains" described in Mark 13:8. We must expect to be persecuted on an increasing level for our faith, even to the point of death. The point of Jesus' teaching about His imminent return was to provide us with the comfort that He is not far away, and He will return soon in fulfillment of His promises to us and to Israel. Saint Paul said, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) regarding the catching up of the church to heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you find comforting about the words from the first and third readings? How can you encourage and challenge others with your faith in Jesus' imminent return?

2. When you think about the fact that Jesus has paid fully for your sin debt, what inner response does this evoke? What outer response seems fitting for you to reflect this reality in your life this week? How can you live in light of this reality?

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First Reading:

Daniel 12:1-3 NAS95 1 "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."

The reading opens with the phrase, "Now at that time" (v. 1a). The previous verses in Daniel 11, chronicle a time of wars and violence that will consume the earth. This will bring in a "time of distress" that is referred to later in the verse. Michael, one of only two angels mentioned by name in the Bible who follow God, will somehow superintend the activity during this time. As we said in previous studies, the time leading up to this event will be a time of increasing and terrible persecution of God's people. Although a small remnant of Jews will be divinely sealed for God's protection throughout this time (Revelation 7:4-8), the Antichrist will pursue Christians with great vengeance just before the Lord returns and "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (v. 2). Saint John said in Revelation, "So the dragon was enraged with the woman (Israel), and went off to make

war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Christians)" (Revelation 12:17 with parenthetical explanations added). Verse two says that "many" will rise, meaning not everyone, but many people have yet to die on the earth. The exception to this is that the believers who are alive at that time will be taken up to be with the Lord. "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord*" (1Th 4:16-17).

During this time "everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." What is this book? The book that Daniel refers to is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Philippians 4:3 says that people who labored by Paul's side had their names written in the book of life. Revelation 3:5 shares a promise to those who overcome, that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. Revelation 20:12 describes two books, one that has all the deeds of every person (implying judgment for misdeeds) and another book, the book of life, which, if one's name is written there, will cancel out the judgment recorded in the other book. Revelation 20:15 says: "And if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 21:27 describes it as the Lamb's book of life and says that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter the New Jerusalem, God's eternal heaven. The Bible makes it very clear that the book of life is a place that records those who are going to be saved from the eternal lake of fire, the just consequences for those who live contrary to God and apart from His life. How does one know if his or her name is written in the book of life? Another way to ask the same question based on the passage in Daniel: how can we know which group we are in, the ones who will rise to everlasting life or those who rise to disgrace and everlasting contempt? Once we recognize that we are a sinner, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we can turn our hearts to the Lord Jesus as the only remedy. The Bible tells us that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1a), and later John said, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:12). Further, it says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Salvation is a free gift that comes about **only** by belief in Jesus Christ, it can never be earned. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you have put your faith in Jesus to save you, then you can have assurance that you will be "rescued" from eternal disgrace and contempt.

Daniel also explains that the people "who have insight" and who "lead the many to righteousness" will be prominent in the eternal kingdom of God, shining brightly "like the stars forever and ever" (v. 3c). Being involved in gaining wisdom and pointing others to deeper faith in Christ is a valuable focus for our lives. You may have a ministry of evangelism, introducing people to a relationship with

Jesus. Or you may have a ministry of discipleship, helping those who have put their faith in Jesus grow in their new life in Christ. Either way, it is important to continue growing in your own faith to have insight and to be equipped to lead others to righteousness.

Interestingly, God gave us a glimpse into a precursor to the resurrection of the dead which happened at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. He is the only one of the four writers that recorded this event. Matthew said that after Jesus had given up His life on the cross, "The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:52-53). This is one example of how powerful God is and is evidence of the deity of Christ.

What does this reading mean for us today? First, if anyone is sitting on the fence regarding Jesus as Lord, today is the day to trust in Him. Saint Paul said, "*AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). As Peter told the people in Jerusalem about Jesus, "*He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Second, although we as Christians should expect increasing persecution leading up to Jesus' return, we can have hope that Jesus will fulfill His promise to return "in the same way in which [they] saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Finally, we can have confidence in the fact that God's mighty angelic beings are fighting the spiritual battle against the demonic forces allied against us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading is from Hebrews chapter 10, a treatise on how Jesus died one time for sins forever, which means this sacrifice can never be repeated. At this time, the Hebrew people were still conducting the Old Testament sacrifices required by the Law. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer provides a running contrast to the old manner of things compared to Jesus. The verdict is that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, and greater than the sacrificial system. In this reading, we see a culminating point of the author's conclusion that Jesus is greater than the priestly system of the Old Testament.

Second Reading:

Note: Verses 15–16 which were omitted from the reading were included below.

Hebrews 10:11-18 NAS95 11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

The author said that by "one offering He has perfected [forever] those who are sanctified" (v. 14). The word "once" follows a string of uses of this same word that first appears in this context in chapter 7. "*For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He died once for all when He offered up Himself*" (Hebrews 7:26-27). To make his point that Jesus died once for sins forever, in contrast to the sacrifices offered repeatedly by the Levitical priests, the author continued repeating this word four more times before today's reading, and twice more in the actual reading. The writer presented extremely compelling evidence as to the importance of understanding the concept of Jesus' single sacrifice for sins forever. He said, "[H]aving offered one sacrifice for sins for all time," (v. 12) then again, he said in verse 14, "For by one offering." Interestingly the phrase indicating Jesus' single sacrifice is repeated seven times between the end of chapter seven and today's reading in chapter 10. Anytime the Bible repeats something we need to pay special attention to it, and especially if the concept is repeated seven times! The reading clearly tells us, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (v. 18). The only thing that can take away our sin is Jesus' willful sacrifice of His life as a Victor on the cross for our sins (see John 10:18). Jesus is a Victor, not a Victim.

What does this mean for our lives? The value of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins is of inestimable value. Compared with the sacrificial system of the Jews about which God said "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4), Jesus' single sacrificial giving of Himself as a Victor on the cross provided the means for believers in Him to be reconciled to God forever. Jesus will never have to offer Himself as a sacrifice again, ever. When we celebrate communion, we look back at His finished work on the cross. This was always God's plan, as Jesus was the "Lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). When we break the bread of communion and drink from the cup, we remember the body that he allowed to be broken for us and His blood poured

out as the final offering for sin forever (1 Corinthians 11:26). We do not need to work for our salvation, for Jesus' work on the cross is finished (John 19:30). I'll end this with one last exclamation point, for Jesus has "appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"(Hebrews 9:26)! What a wonderful Savior!

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will return to eschatology (pronounced es·ka·tol·a·gee), a word that means the study of the last things. The events in the reading will sound very familiar from your study in the first reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson from Mark 13 is from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse. The parallel passage in Matthew 24 goes into some greater details than that of Mark's account. The context of the message is after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the temple from the money changers during the preparation for the Passover. Upon the disciples telling Jesus about the "wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings" (Mark 13:1) of the temple complex, Jesus told them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down" (verse 2). Afterwards Peter, James, John and Andrew approached Jesus privately and asked Him, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled" (v. 4). Jesus then explained to them what was to come, including many deceivers (Matthew 13:6), "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 13:7), famines and earthquakes (Matthew 13:8), yet these were just the beginning of the times of the end (v. 8). Then would come persecution (Matthew 13:9, 11), including death (v. 12), and the spread of the Gospel to the extent of the known world (v. 10, with final fulfillment in Revelation 14:6). After the "beginning of the birth pains" (v. 8e), the Antichrist will be revealed and bring an end to the restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem (Matthew 13:14). Although this prophecy was partially fulfilled by the Roman general Titus during the siege of Jerusalem during AD 70, the text is clear that another siege is in sight since Jesus warning is a global one, not just a local one concerning the city of Jerusalem. He said, "if the Lord had not cut short the days no human being would be saved" (v. 20). This and the corresponding testimony in the Book of Revelation make it clear that these events are yet future. This brings us up to today's reading, which details events which begin after or during the unveiling of the first six seals in the Book of Revelation. The "gathering of the elect" (v. 27) about which we will read is the same event that we studied in the first reading from Daniel 12.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 13:24-32 NAS95 24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."

The opening verse of the reading is nearly the same as what John described in the opening of the sixth seal in the Book of Revelation. "*12 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; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places*" (Revelation 6:12-14). At the time just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus, the world will experience miraculous cosmic signs revealing God's power (vv. 24 – 25). At some point during the mid-point of a seven year period counting from a peace treaty made with Jerusalem to settle the worldwide chaos surrounding control over that tiny but religiously important region, Jesus Christ "will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds" (v. 27). While there is much speculation about the sequence of events, this is the event we discussed in the first reading that, in my opinion, includes the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54), the return of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:11), and the resurrection of the dead up until that time (Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29). Beyond this point the period known as the Great Tribulation or the Day of the Lord will commence during which God will bring an end to the Antichrist's religious and commercial systems of mystery Babylon and Babylon the Great (Revelation 18). Although we don't yet understand what form this Babylon will take, we know that it will exalt itself against God much in the same way as the people did with the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

As the reading continued, Jesus explained to His disciples how to discern the signs of the times by telling them the parable of the fig tree. In the same way that they could discern the ripeness of the fig tree and that the summer was near they would also be able to discern that the end times were at their doorstep when the signs He gave them were at hand. He told them that once people (not necessarily them) saw these signs that the current generation would see the whole process completed during their lifetime (v. 30). Finally, through the mystery of the functions of the Three Persons of the Godhead, Jesus explained that the timing of the events was known only to God the

Father (v. 32).

What does all of this talk about the horrible events of the end times mean to us today? Jesus calls us to live with an expectation of His imminent return. We are to be good stewards of the gifts that He has given to us. He said in Matthew's retelling of the Olivet Discourse, "*For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes*" (Matthew 24:44-46). We too must learn to discern the times by studying the imminent signs that will precede the return of the Lord, as you did today. Although the study of the end times may seem daunting, the Bible lays out a clear pattern of events that people alive during that time should expect to see. As time marches closer and closer to the fulfillment of these events, we should expect to see the "beginning of birth pains" described in Mark 13:8. We must expect to be persecuted on an increasing level for our faith, even to the point of death. The point of Jesus' teaching about His imminent return was to provide us with comfort that He is not far away, and He will return soon in fulfillment of His promises to us and to Israel. Saint Paul said, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) regarding the catching up of the church to heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you find comforting about the words from the first and third readings? How can you encourage and challenge others with your faith in Jesus' imminent return?

2. When you think about the fact that Jesus has paid fully for your sin debt, what inner response does this evoke? What outer response seems fitting for you to reflect this reality in your life this week? How can you live in light of this reality?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 11-15-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Proverbs in which we see the wise stewardship of God's resources by a godly woman. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with a kingdom parable from Saint Matthew in which we also see God's call for careful stewardship of the resources He has given to us.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Proverbs. This Scripture was written by King Solomon and is a book of wisdom regarding practical and godly living. The main theme in the reading is how a godly person is a careful steward of their time, talents, and treasures given to them from God. This is the same theme that we will explore later in the Gospel lesson.

Note: All the skipped verses between 31:13-31 were included in order to provide the full context.

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First Reading:

10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. 13 She looks for wool and flax And works with her hands in delight. 14 She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar. 15 She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her household And portions to her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds herself with strength And makes her arms strong. 18 She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle. 20 She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22 She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land. 24 She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future. 26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. 27 She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: 29 "Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all." 30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. 31 Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Among other things that emerge from the reading, foremost among them we see that the "Proverbs 31 woman" is one who fears the Lord (v. 30). The big idea from the reading is that a godly person is a careful steward of the gifts they receive from God.

Many points arise from the text, here are a few.

- The godly woman works willingly, not under compulsion (v. 13, "in delight"). She also goes to great lengths in order to get things done (v. 13b-ff).
- The godly woman is a servant to others, even to her own servant (v. 15). She is not a sluggard, but works hard in her service to others.
- She is an entrepreneur (v. 16). In that era her husband would have had to make the actual transaction for the purchase of land, but she was the instigator of it and the one who took care in planting and tending the vineyard.
- She understands that what she gains is from God (v. 18).
- She is optimistic about her future, because she knows that she belongs to God (v. 35, 30b).

The bottom line is that the godly woman is like Jesus, a servant, Someone who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). She is a faithful steward of the gifts that God has given to her. Faithfulness and careful stewardship are common themes throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. We will see this theme continue later in the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's discussion of the Day of the Lord that we discussed in a previous edition of Mass Notes. This is the period of time at the end of the tribulation period in which Israel finally returns to worship of their Lord. The reading today is a warning to the people living in that era to be watchful for the Lord's return. Watchfulness for the return of the Lord Jesus is a continuing theme in the New Testament.

Second Reading:

1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6)

Just like the parable of the virgins that we will discuss in the introduction to the Gospel reading, everyone is called to be watchful for the return of the Lord. They are to be certain that they find faith in Jesus Christ while they still have the opportunity to do so (Romans 13:11) because nobody knows the hour when the Lord will return (Matthew 24:36). As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God places a high value upon not only being watchful for His return, but also in being a good steward of the things that He has given to us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The reading today is part of what is called the Lord's "Olivet Discourse" which encompasses Matthew 24:1 – 25:46. In this Sermon Jesus describes what is going to happen at the close of the church age. This portion of Matthew contains "kingdom parables" that begin with our Lord using the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like." Today's reading begins in chapter 25 verse 14. The chapter starts with Jesus saying, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to . . ." (Matthew 25:1a). The Lord then goes on to tell the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), which has the same theme of watchfulness seen in the second reading.

Being watchful for the Lord is closely related to being **prepared** for His return, meaning we must already be a citizen of the kingdom before He comes. In the parable of the ten virgins, the Lord described how five of the virgins were prepared for the bridegroom and five were not. In Jewish culture the practice was for the groom to come at an unexpected time. The application of this parable is that half of the virgins were prepared for the Lord Jesus' return by studying the Scriptures and coming to a saving knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ, while the other five were lost and destined for eternal separation from God in Hell. In the context of chapter 25, the application is that at some point during the end times the Lord Jesus will return to gather His Church. Those who are left behind will enter into the time of God's judgment known as the Day of the Lord. Only God knows people's true hearts so no one should wait to receive God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because it may end up being too late.

The reading today opens with another of Jesus' "kingdom parable" introductions, "For it is just like" (v. 14a). What Jesus is saying is, "The Kingdom of God is like . . ." As you read, try to determine the main theological idea that emerges from the reading.

Gospel Reading:

14 For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18 But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were

faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 29 For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)

The big idea that emerges from the reading is that stewardship is based on knowing and trusting the heart of the Master. Misguided understanding of the Master's heart leads to living in self-protective, ungodly ways with one's talents, as was the case with the man who buried his talent. The ones who understood and trusted the Master's generous heart were able to take risks and multiply what was entrusted to them. Notice the misconception of the "wicked and lazy slave." He miscalculated the Master's heart when he revealed his deep distrust of him: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground" (verses 24-25). He was blaming his wickedness and laziness on the Master's seemingly unpredictable and untrustworthy character. But the Master smartly revealed the inconsistency in his argument. If he was truly afraid, it seems that he would have at least been wise enough to produce some interest, even if out of fear, if nothing else. The man made an eternal miscalculation when he did not trust the Master's heart.

This kingdom parable is very relevant to our lives today. Here are some ways in which understanding and applying Jesus' teaching to our lives helps to accomplish the plans He has for us.

- Knowing and trusting the Master's heart is of utmost importance. We should be spending our time and energy on this endeavor so that we become wise stewards of what is entrusted to us. We look forward to the day when we will enter into our Master's joy. We can trust that it will all be worth it to hear these words of affirmation.
- Although people in this age are entrusted with different levels of abilities and worldly good, if they are faithful in being good stewards of them they are equally rewarded and entrusted with more responsibilities in heaven. Jesus said to the servant that gained five talents from the

original five invested, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21, emphasis added). Likewise, He told the one that was entrusted with only two and gained two, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 23, emphasis added).

- The world is a profitable place for investing God's gifts, both for God and for the people who are entrusted with them. The five talents that God invested in the world became ten (v. 20) and the two talents became four (v. 22). This magical doubling is from God even though it came through the agents to whom He entrusted it.
- Faithful servants have "gifts" to present to their masters, while unfaithful servants have only that which was given to them by God who owns it all in the first place. As believers we are called to invest our time, talents, and treasures in the service of God so that we may have something to present to him when we too stand in judgment before him. Our judgment won't be for salvation, but for rewards.
- Believers come to the understanding that all that they have is from God, as we saw in the first reading about the godly woman in Proverbs 31. In contrast, unbelievers never come to this understanding, because they are carnally minded (Romans 8:6). Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).
- The world's resources flow through a worldly power structure of ungodly masters (v. 24b). Although there are exceptions to this principle, the richest people in the world are almost universally nonbelievers (with an exception being John Rockefeller). Although they don't understand their responsibility of stewardship of God's resources during their lives, they will after they die.

The reading closes with Jesus' teaching that Hell is real, just as heaven is real. Unbelievers will be far worse off in Hell than they are on earth (v. 29). They will be very worried (v. 25) when they stand before the Lord who will judge them for how they used the resources that he gave to them. Though in the parable the unfaithful servant was nagged with worry about giving his report to his master, in the end his judgment will be far worse.

These are sobering words from our Lord and are far from the only time that He warned anyone who would listen about the reality of Hell. Jesus spoke about it in Matthew 11:23 where he described the place with the name "Hades." In Matthew 5:23 the word for hell is rendered from the Greek "Gahenna" while in today's reading the term in "outer darkness" (v. 30a). In the Bible we count some 38 times where this dark destination is designated as the future home of the wicked beginning with Psalm 9:17 and ending with Revelation 21:8. Jesus implores people to take radical steps to prevent themselves from entering this place. In Mark chapter 9 Jesus told the people to even cut off

their hand if it causes them to stumble, for "it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43).

As believers who trust upon the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins we have not to worry about going to hell. Saint John reminds us of this through the firm authority of God's word. God says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). Jesus said in the John's Gospel, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God testifies to us through His word that we can never suffer our way to heaven. Suffering is a part of life but the only way that we can merit heaven is through a foreign righteousness, that of Jesus Christ that is placed upon us the moment we believe (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Today's readings remind us of the urgency of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are perishing. God calls us to bring light to the lost generation who without faith in the Lord Jesus will enter the place He described in the Gospel with no hope of escape. My readers may remember a story that I once told about a deeply troubling dream I had many years ago about such a place. I believe that God gave me this to remind me of the urgency in reaching people for the Lord Jesus Christ. In my dream I was in a place that was far away and I felt an utter sense of hopelessness and utter doom. I felt that I was in a place that I would never leave, and was without hope. I pray that nobody would ever have to experience such a dream, and even more that nobody would enter such a place for real at the end of their life on earth. The media may make light of hell as a place guarded by a man in a red suit with a pitchfork in his hand, but the reality of hell is all too real for those who enter there. I pray that through today's study all of us may remember our mission in reaching people with the good news of the Gospel.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you view the Master's heart? Is He generous and gracious, thereby freeing you from self-protective ways, so that you can take risks with what He has entrusted to you? Or do you view Him like the one talent servant, who saw God as a harsh task-master, blaming God for his own laziness and wickedness?

2. The world we live in is unpredictable. We don't know what each new day will bring, but God has given us some landmarks of the end times. How does the Proverbs 31 woman face the future? How did Paul encourage the Thessalonians to face the future? What truths about the Master's heart and the future will allow you to face the near and eternal future with confidence?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 01-26-2020



Welcome back to the Study Note for the Sunday Mass. This week we will again return to Isaiah and see in the Gospel lesson how the prophecy was fulfilled through Jesus. As in Isaiah's day, we too are living in a land of deep spiritual darkness, one in which we need both spiritual and physical healing through our Savior Jesus. After Jesus' First Advent, Scripture says that the best is yet to come when He returns to set up His Kingdom rule on earth. During this time there will no longer be any darkness because the Lord our God will be our Light (Revelation 22:5). As the believers during Isaiah's time celebrated because of his prophetic message of hope, we too can celebrate because of his prophecy of the coming Light through the return of the Lord Jesus. As we see evil men grow

worse and worse (2 Timothy 3:13), similar to what was happening in Isaiah's time, we can look forward to the coming King who will reverse the curse placed upon the world through the sin of Adam (Genesis 3:17).

This week we are going to begin with the second reading and then cover the first reading and Gospel lesson last since the content on those two are closely related.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The first reading is from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Last week we looked at the introduction to this Letter that Paul wrote to the crossroads city, a place entrenched in immorality and worship of a plurality of gods. To review, Paul's overall purposes of the Letter were to deal with some divisions in the church, address some serious moral issues, defend his apostolic authority, and to specifically answer several questions from a letter they sent to him (1 Corinthians 7:1).

As you read, what is one word that best summarizes Paul's concern for the Corinthians in this section?

Second Reading:

> *10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. 12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." 13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. 16 Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. (1 Corinthians 1:10-17)*

What word came to your mind which best summarized Paul's concern? For me it was "disunity." Paul was calling the local church in Corinth to unite for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel. Look at verses 17 and 18, just past where the reading stopped. Here we see an insight into why unity was important in the church. Paul said, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 17-18). In other words, Jesus sent him to preach the good news so that the minds of

the unbelievers would be transformed such that they recognized the power of God. Later in First Corinthians Paul said, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, **so that they may be saved**" (1 Corinthians 10:32-33, emphasis added).

Second, Paul was warning the local church in Corinth *not to unite* along the lines of a "cult of personality" (as has happened in so many churches since then). Paul provided specific examples of how this disunity was happening in the church through the practice of baptism of family members in the house churches of the region. Someone may have said something like, "I am more spiritual than you because **I** was baptized by Paul but you were only baptized by Apollos."

Paul stood in good company with those that called the local church to unity. Jesus said in His prayer about the church, "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). 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).

Introduction to the First Reading:

As we leave the second reading, we will move to the Old Testament reading and the Gospel message. The first reading is from Isaiah, the prophet whom we have studied extensively over the past several months. The context of this section of Isaiah was just after his warning to the Northern Kingdoms that they would be overtaken by Assyria. This was a time of gloom and anguish for the Nation of Israel. He wrote the prophecy and delivered it to Uriah the priest and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah so that there would be two witnesses as required by the Law such that when the event was fulfilled his authority as God's spokesman would be confirmed (Isaiah 8:2).

Let's read the Scripture, and as you do it will become apparent who the Galilean is about whom Isaiah is speaking.

First Reading:

> *1 But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. 2 The people who walk in darkness Will see a great light; Those who live in a dark land, The light will shine on them. 3*

> *You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; They will be glad in Your presence As with the gladness of harvest, As men rejoice when they divide the spoil. 4 For You shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders, The rod of their oppressor, as at the battle of Midian. (Isaiah 9:1-4 – Verse markings differ in this NASB version.)*

Clearly, Isaiah spoke about Jesus of Galilee (Mark 1:9). He said that people "will see a great light" (v.2b) in the future sense, yet he saw through a telescopic lens of prophecy through which he recorded near term and distant events together. In this case, he saw both the First and the Second Advent of Jesus together as the accomplishment of God's deliverance from their oppressor. Those that are in a state of spiritual darkness will rejoice when their oppressors have been broken (v.4). The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were distant areas just to the west of the Jordan in Galilee that were easily subject to invasion from the foreign enemies. It was in this area that the Lord Jesus called His first disciples, as we will see next in the Gospel message. The Battle of Midian referred to Gideon's victorious battle with his small army of just 300 men waged against the Midianites in Judges 7:22-21:25. It's also important to note that the prophecy of the multiplication of the Nation of Israel (Genesis 22:17) will be fulfilled in the yet future (v.3a).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel message Jesus began assembling his first disciples after John the Baptist had been arrested. You will see how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy from the Old Testament reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; 13 and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. 14 This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 15 "THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES– 16 THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED." 17 From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." 18 Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. 19 And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. 21 Going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him. 23 Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom,*

> *and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:12-23)*

In this message, Saint Matthew confirmed that Jesus did in fact fulfill Isaiah's prophecy and quoted it directly as proof. Since the Law required two witness (Deuteronomy 19:15, Isaiah 8:2), God satisfied this requirement through the testimony of both the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of the Father at Jesus Baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). Jesus took up where John the Baptist left off, saying the same thing as John, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17). Then he settled in the same region that Isaiah prophesied would see a great light (v.16). Here Jesus called four men into discipleship and ministry: Simon Peter, Andrew, and finally James and John, called the "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). As He began his ministry he went about teaching, proclaiming the Good News, and healing (v.23). How wonderful would it be to have Jesus with us in his human presence so that we could avail ourselves of His powerful ministry? The truth of the New Covenant is that He does live with us each day through the Holy Spirit – teaching us, proclaiming the Good News, and healing us of our destructive ways. May we learn to listen and receive the ministry of Jesus in our daily lives.

Reflection Questions

In the second reading from 1 Corinthians we mentioned the "transformation of the mind" for the purpose of spreading the Gospel message to the world through the power of God. Read the following verses and then answer the question below.

> *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2).*

> *Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)*

> *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. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:16-18)*

What are the prerequisites for someone to have his or her mind be transformed in order to be able to recognize the power of God? According to the Scriptures, what role does a person's active, actual calling upon the name of the play?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-17-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. The Bible teaches throughout both the Old and New Testaments the importance or recognizing the immanency of the coming of the Lord Jesus and His eventual return. Later in this lesson we will look at readings from the Old Testament Book of Malachi and in the New Testament the Gospel of Luke that address these topics. In spite of these frequent teachings it's easy to get caught up in our daily lives and overlook the possibility of meeting the Lord ourselves at any given instant. I write about that in the Going Deeper section at the end of today's notes.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Malachi. Malachi was a prophet who wrote around the time of the closing of the Old Testament Canon. He is one of the Minor Prophets, meaning their Books are shorter than the Major Prophets. This Minor Prophet who wrote one of what I call the "index books," because you shouldn't feel bad if you need to use the index at the front of your Bible to locate them.

Malachi is a bit easier to find because it is the very last Book in the Old Testament just before the New Testament Book of Matthew. Malachi's message to Israel was a call to repentance concerning the corrupt priesthood, rampant divorce among the people, their lack of tithing, and poor social justice. The reading for today is from the first two verses in Chapter 4 (some versions mark the verses differently). If we look back to Chapter 3 we see that Malachi predicted both the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus. "'Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,' says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 3:1). In verse 5 we see the promise of God's future judgment of His people, but in an interesting way. "Then I will draw near to you for judgment" (v.5a). God says that He will be near to the people of Israel but it's for the purpose of judgment. This verse is helpful because it should remind us that as God judges His people He is still near to them, and His judgment is ultimately for their good. Let's read the text from the first reading in Chapter 4 but continue until the end of the chapter.

First Reading:

> *1 "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the LORD of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.*
>
> *Omitted Verses:*
>
> *3 You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing," says the LORD of hosts. 4 "Remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel. 5 Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. 6 He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse." Malachi 4:1-6 NASB (Malachi 3:19-24 in the Lectionary).*

Some insights from this text are as follows. When Malachi said "the Day" he was referring to the Day of the Lord (abbreviated DOL) which we spoken about before (link). The DOL is the future period of judgment which commences at the midpoint of the time known as Tribulation Period and marks the beginning of the Great Tribulation (Rev 13:5). The purpose of the Great Tribulation is to bring the Jewish people back to communion with God. Malachi conditioned his prophecy of this terrible time period with a blessing to those who turned to the Lord and repented of their fallen condition. "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth . . . "(v2a,b). Malachi also told another remarkable prophecy when he quoted God stating,

"Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD" (v5). One of the marks of the tribulation period will be the return of the Prophet Elijah. John said in the Book of Revelation, "And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophecy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth" (Rev 11:3). Although it's not explicitly stated in Revelation that one of these witnesses is Elijah, his return is predicted by Malachi and this does seem to align with the text in Revelation.

What is the relevance of Malachi's teaching for us in the Church today? As we discussed in those previous lessons, we find in the teachings of Saint Paul that God has granted an escape to all believers alive at His second coming. "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever" (1Th 4:15-17). Malachi's call was for the people to repent of their sin and turn the Lord. This is precisely the call for everyone alive on the earth today, from every tribe and nation. Malachi's message serves as both a warning for people to heed the call to turn to the One True God but also to let believers know that God hasn't forsaken His people Israel. God will work actively to redeem His people and show them the need to turn their hearts to Him, even if it means subjecting them to terrible judgment. He will leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is missing (Luke 15:4). If God loves his people Israel so much to go to this length to save them, how much more does He desire that everyone alive today turn to him through faith in Jesus? Saint Paul said, "But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart' –that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 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" Romans 10:8-10).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading from 2 Thessalonians is Paul's teaching on avoiding fellowship with anyone holding to false teachings. Believers, Paul said later in this same chapter, were to warn these people, not associate with them, but attempt to win them back to correct teaching (see 2 Thess 3:14 – 15).

Second Reading:

> *2 Thessalonians 3:7-12 NASB (plus skipped verse 6)*
>
> *6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; 9 not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer*

> *ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. 10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.*

Paul provides advice to the Thessalonians who were struggling with persecution (2 Thess 1:4-6) to break fellowship with those who didn't follow God's teaching (v. 6) but instead to emulate Paul's behavior in serving without an expectation of payment. Although Paul had the right to work as a paid minister he chose not to so as to set an excellent example for others to follow (v. 9). The principle he gave was, "if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat" (v. 10b). Paul had heard that some among them were not working but were instead "acting like busybodies" (v. 11c). Paul admonished these people with a word from the Lord to emulate him and "work in quiet fashion" (v. 12).

An important point that Paul makes is his connection between work and worship, which is also closely tied to godly stewardship. Paul's admonishment is relevant for us today in that God calls all of us to serve Him in order to be good stewards of the gifts which He has given us. We are called by God to offer our bodies up to Him as "living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). Through this we offer ourselves through our work to God as our "spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1e). Thinking of our work as a form of worship helps us to better understand God's holistic picture and plan that He has for our lives. Perhaps this view is easier to understand for those employed say as musicians in which they can clearly visualize how they are serving God through the beautiful music that they make flow through their instruments. But Paul's admonition to connect work with worship goes beyond the musician even to those who clean streets for a living or run parts in a machine shop.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

In the Gospel lesson today, God provided a message which continued the theme of the coming great and terrible Day of the Lord. Let's read the Gospel text from Luke Chapter 21.

Gospel Reading:

> *5 And while some were talking about the temple, that it was adorned with beautiful stones and votive gifts, He said, 6 "As for these things which you are looking at, the days will come in which there will not be left one stone upon another which will not be torn down." 7 They questioned Him, saying, "Teacher, when therefore will these things happen? And what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" 8 And He said, "See to it that you are not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is near'. Do not go after them.*

> *9 When you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end does not follow immediately." 10 Then He continued by saying to them, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, 11 and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. 12 But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My name's sake. 13 It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony. 14 So make up your minds not to prepare beforehand to defend yourselves; 15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your opponents will be able to resist or refute. 16 But you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death, 17 and you will be hated by all because of My name. 18 Yet not a hair of your head will perish. 19 By your endurance you will gain your lives." Luke 21:5-19*

In this text, as was also the case with many of the Old Testament prophets, when Jesus told the story he used a theological construct known as "prophetic foreshortening." This means that when he spoke of events which were in the near term (as we look back in history) he combined them with events in the distant future such that the two events appear stacked together in the Gospel narrative. This was also the case in the first reading from Malachi today when he said, "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (4:2) just one chapter after he predicted the first coming of Jesus in 3:1. What Jesus was predicting was actually two events, though they may appear from first glance to be just one period of time. First, the temple would be destroyed. We know that this was fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Second, He was predicting the coming of the Great Tribulation period. In between these two events, Jesus said certain other events would happen, and it's this in-between period in which we find ourselves today. The events typifying this period, according to Jesus, will include, 1. The appearance of false Christs (v.8), 2. Wars, earthquakes, and famines all over the earth (vv. 9-11), and 3. Persecution of believers for Jesus' name (vv. 13-19.

What's the importance of Saint Luke's teaching for us as we live our lives as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ? First, we should expect to see the types of events that Jesus spoke of as happening during this period. We should be surprised to be persecuted for our faith. Second, we must not be surprised to hear about false messiahs such as cult leaders who claim to be Jesus or start whole religious movements through new ways of interpreting the Bible. Many false religious movements have arisen such as the interpretation of secret "Bible codes." Jesus said not to be surprised by these events. Third, we should expect to see terrible natural disasters on an unprecedented scale. As I'm writing this the news is coming in about the awful destruction brought about by Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

Another implication of this text for our lives is to provide comfort and trust in God that He knows what He is doing. When life is chaotic (inside and out) it is helpful to remember that nothing is out of

His control. We must turn often to Him for help and hope.

Yet, there is hope. As we saw in the first reading from Malachi, "He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers (v6a). Jesus said in the reading today, "Yet not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives (vv. 18-19). . If He were offering physical protection, then the Apostles wouldn't have had to give their lives for the defense of the Gospel. No, He wasn't saying that we might not be harmed in the physical sense, but that spiritually we will be protected.

Have you placed your trust in the Lord Jesus for the promise of eternal life through faith in Him? Hearing about all of the bad things going on in the world doesn't provide us for much hope in this life, but there is much hope for the life to come.

Reflection Questions

1. Has there ever been a time in your life in which you almost faced the Lord? Were you a believer in the Lord Jesus when this happened? If you were, did the event lead you to a closer walk with Jesus? In what ways was it possible that this event was a means of God's judgment in such a way as to draw you closer to Him?
2. In our modern age we have often compartmentalized our lives thinking that worship belongs to Sunday while work is a Monday to Friday kind of thing. Have you ever considered your work as a form of worship? As we saw in the second reading, Saint Paul calls us to emulate his godly behavior in working without being a burden on others while continuing to serve without an expectation of reward. In what ways can you reconsider your work life as worship? How would taking on this new mindset help you to A. Relate to others at your workplace, B. Have a more accurate view of your service to God even if you are not engaged in full time ministry?

Going Deeper

It was a breezy afternoon when after church I decided to travel from Metro Detroit to a place called Kettle point in Canada to do some windsurfing. This spot on the southern end of Lake Huron was famous for having very large waves on windy days. This day was no exception and the waves were forecasted to be ten feet tall! Even though it was not normal for him, my brother decided to ride along to watch. I had an excellent afternoon riding the large, smooth waves in the bay. Just before I was going to stop for the day, I came in for a brief rest, and then decided to go out for just one more run. I had a very uneasy feeling as I was carrying the windsurf board back to the water and was compelled to pray very hard for God to keep me safe on this final run.

As I proceeded out into the bay where the largest waves were crashing into a bowl-shaped area to the east of the beach, I made a turn on the face of a very large wave. This was like heaven! Suddenly, my sail separated from the mast base on the board which sent it flying one direction while my sail remained in my hands. Meanwhile that same large wave crashed on top of me with my sail! I

let loose of the sail and soon realized that I was drowning. I quickly noticed that I was unable to float in the bubbly water caused by the constant crashing of the waves and soon got very tired in my attempts to grab small amounts of air in between the waves. I knew that I was going to die right there, with my precious brother only a half a mile away on the shore. Once again, I began to pray. As I continued fighting I had a strange realization and began to visualize my dead body washing up on the beach. This was very real, and is difficult to put into words. I visualized my body from a viewpoint some distance away, above me. Yet I continued to fight and pray.

As I was fighting for my life in Lake Huron that day, two things came immediately into my mind. First, I made the vivid realization that I wasn't in control of the timing of when I would meet the Lord, it was up to God! It had been easy for me to think that I was the master of every element of my life. However, when my close call to death happened God used the opportunity to show me that **He** was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He was in control of my life and he had already set the exact day I would meet Him. Who was I to say that I would be alive when he returned as the Bible taught? Second, life-threatening times like this were not a very good time to search out a new relationship with God. You either have one, with Jesus as the Lord of your life and your only hope for salvation, or you don't. The Bible says, "Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

My story ended well. Somehow, I came to realize that if I pulled on my wet suit, I could create a small air bubble in my chest area that slightly increased my buoyancy. Also, I saw a white flag on a small floating buoy a few yards away. And there were some jet skiers in the area. Against all odds I managed to swim over to the buoy and break the fiberglass rod attaching the flag. This left me with a two-foot long mast with a flag attached. Between the huge waves I was able to wave the flag. After about five minutes of waving, I had still not moved any distance towards the shore, although my board and sail had long ago washed away. I continued to pray, and eventually someone riding a jet ski spotted me and came over and yanked me out of the water. As I walked back up the beach, I praised God, and someone offered me a ride in their truck so I could hurry back to tell my brother the amazing story. My equipment washed up on the beach a few minutes later in perfect condition. Later that evening at a restaurant in Sarnia, Ontario I had my first meal as a truly "born from above" man.

Although I am much more careful while windsurfing, I recognize that I don't have the choice to know when I will meet the Lord Jesus. It's up to Him and could happen at any time. We must be prepared for we never know the day or the hour.

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-18-2018



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from Daniel 12 in which we study the combined event known as the rapture of the church, the return of the Lord, and the resurrection of the dead. Then we examine in the second reading how Jesus died for our sins once and for all, which is so much superior than the sacrificial system described in the Old Testament that had to be repeated twice a day and never took away the people's sins. Finally, we close with another view of the same event described in the first reading from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Prophet Daniel, chapter 12. The context of the message is a prophecy about the end of the world as we know it when the man of sin, known as the Antichrist, rules the world. The Antichrist will be in power when God pours out His final judgments on the earth and Jesus returns to reign on earth. The reading today describes the resurrection of the dead, some of whom go to eternal life with God and others go to eternal damnation. Jesus said, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS'" (Matthew 7:22-23).

The reading from Daniel promises that the people of God will be "rescued" from this time of unprecedented distress. In the New Testament, we have further corroboration of this, which Saint Paul calls the "rapture," where the Lord Jesus comes to take His church to heaven before God pours the judgments chronicled in the Book of Revelation (see especially Revelation 16:1, the "seven bowls of the wrath of God"). We will read more about this later in the Gospel lesson regarding the "Day of the Lord's judgment" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), a very dark time for those left on the earth after Jesus' return for His church. The "catching up" of the church to heaven was predicted by Saint Paul in response to someone in Thessalonica who had been teaching the false doctrine that the Lord had already returned (2 Thessalonians 2:2). Here Paul introduced the concept that the church would be taken up into the air along with church saints who had already died (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17) as follows. "*15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 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*." Paul reassured the believers that the Lord's return will be very obvious and recognizable. No one will "miss it." This corresponds to the teaching in Daniel 12, which is the focus of the first reading.

First Reading:

> *Daniel 12:1-3 NAS95 1 "Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever."*

The reading opens with the phrase, "Now at that time" (v. 1a). The previous verses in Daniel 11, chronicle a time of wars and violence that will consume the earth. This will bring in a "time of distress" that is referred to later in the verse. Michael, one of only two angels mentioned by name in the Bible who follow God, will somehow superintend the activity during this time. As we said in previous studies, the time leading up to this event will be a time of increasing and terrible persecution of God's people. Although a small remnant of Jews will be divinely sealed for God's protection throughout this time (Revelation 7:4-8), the Antichrist will pursue Christians with great vengeance just before the Lord returns and "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (v. 2). Saint John said in Revelation, "So the dragon was enraged with the woman (Israel), and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Christians)" (Revelation 12:17 with parenthetical explanations added). Verse two says that "many" will rise, meaning not everyone, but many people have yet to die on the earth. The exception to this is that the believers who are alive at that time will be taken up to be with the Lord. "*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the*

trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1Th 4:16-17).

During this time "everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued." What is this book? The book that Daniel refers to is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Philippians 4:3 says that people who labored by Paul's side had their names written in the book of life. Revelation 3:5 shares a promise to those who overcome, that their names will not be blotted out of the book of life. Revelation 20:12 describes two books, one that has all the deeds of every person (implying judgment for misdeeds) and another book, the book of life, which if one's name is written there, will cancel out the judgment recorded in the other book. Revelation 20:15 says: "And if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 21:27 describes it as the Lamb's book of life and says that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter the New Jerusalem, God's eternal heaven. The Bible makes it very clear that the book of life is a place that records those who are going to be saved from the eternal lake of fire, the just consequences for those who live contrary to God and apart from His life. How does one know if his or her name is written in the book of life? Another way to ask the same question based on the passage in Daniel: how can we know which group we are in, the ones who will rise to everlasting life or those who rise to disgrace and everlasting contempt? Once we recognize that we are a sinner, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we can turn our hearts to the Lord Jesus as the only remedy. The Bible tells us that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1a), and later John said, "He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life" (1 John 5:12). Further it says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may **know** that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). Salvation is a free gift that comes about **only** by belief in Jesus Christ, it can never be earned. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). If you have put your faith in Jesus to save you, then you can have assurance that you will be "rescued" from eternal disgrace and contempt.

Daniel also explains that the people "who have insight" and who "lead the many to righteousness" will be prominent in the eternal kingdom of God, shining brightly "like the stars forever and ever" (v. 3c). Being involved in gaining wisdom and pointing others to deeper faith in Christ is a valuable focus for our lives. You may have a ministry of evangelism, introducing people to a relationship with Jesus. Or you may have a ministry of discipleship, helping those who have put their faith in Jesus grow in their new life in Christ. Either way, it is important to continue growing in your own faith to have insight and to be equipped to lead others to righteousness.

Interestingly, God gave us a glimpse into a precursor to the resurrection of the dead which happened at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. He is the only one of the four writers that recorded this event. Matthew said that after Jesus had given up His life on the cross, "The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to

many" (Matthew 27:52-53). This is one example of how powerful God is and is evidence of the deity of Christ.

What does this reading mean for us today? First, if anyone is sitting on the fence regarding Jesus as Lord, today is the day to trust in Him. Saint Paul said, "*AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU." Behold, now is "THE ACCEPTABLE TIME," behold, now is "THE DAY OF SALVATION*" (2 Corinthians 6:2). As Peter told the people in Jerusalem about Jesus, "*He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Second, although we as Christians should expect increasing persecution leading up to Jesus' return, we can take hope that Jesus will fulfill His promise to return "in the same way in which [they] saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Finally, we can have confidence in the fact that God's mighty angelic beings are fighting the spiritual battle against the demonic forces allied against us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

This reading is from Hebrews chapter 10, a treatise on how Jesus died one time for sins forever, which means this sacrifice can never be repeated. At this time, the Hebrew people were still conducting the Old Testament sacrifices required by the Law. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer provides a running contrast to the old manner of things compared to Jesus. The verdict is that Jesus is greater than angels, greater than Moses, and greater than the sacrificial system. In this reading, we see a culminating point of the author's conclusion that Jesus is greater than the priestly system of the Old Testament.

Second Reading:

> *Note: Verses 15 – 16 which were omitted from the reading were included below.*
>
> *Hebrews 10:11-18 NAS95 11 Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; 12 but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, 16 "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, 17 "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." 18 Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

The author said that by "one offering He has perfected [forever] those who are sanctified" (v. 14). The word once follows a string of uses of this same word that first appears in this context in chapter 7: "For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up

sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He died once for all when He offered up Himself" (Hebrews 7:26-27). To make his point that Jesus died once for sins forever, in contrast to the sacrifices offered repeatedly by the Levitical priests, the author continued repeating this word four more times before today's reading, and twice more in the actual reading. The author presented extremely compelling evidence as to the importance of understanding the concept of Jesus' single sacrifice for sins forever. He said, "[H]aving offered one sacrifice for sins for all time," (v. 12) then again he said in verse 14, "For by one offering." Interestingly the phrase indicating Jesus' single sacrifice is repeated seven times between the end of chapter seven and today's reading in chapter 10. Anytime the Bible repeats something we need to pay special attention to it, and especially if the concept is repeated seven times! The reading clearly tells us, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (v. 18). The only thing that can take away our sin is Jesus willingly sacrificing His life as a Victor on the cross for our sins (see John 10:18).

What does this mean for our life? The value of Jesus' sacrifice for our sins is of inestimable value. Compared with the sacrificial system of the Jews about which God said "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin" (Hebrews 10:4), Jesus' single sacrificial giving of Himself as a Victor on the cross provided the means for believers in Him to be reconciled to God forever. Jesus will never have to offer Himself as a sacrifice again, ever. When we celebrate communion we look back at His finished work on the cross. This was always God's plan, as Jesus was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). When we break the bread of communion and drink from the cup, we remember the body that he allowed to be broken for us and His blood poured out as the final offering for sin forever (1 Corinthians 11:26). We do not need to work for our salvation, for Jesus' work on the cross is finished (John 19:30). I'll end this with one last exclamation point, for Jesus has "appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"(Hebrews 9:26)! What a wonderful savior!

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will return to eschatology (pronounced es·ka·tol·a·gee), a word that means the study of the last things. The events in the reading will sound very familiar from your study in the first reading.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson from Mark 13 is from Jesus' message known as the Olivet Discourse. The parallel passage in Matthew 24 goes into some greater details than that of Mark's account. The context of the message is after Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and His cleansing of the temple from the money changers during the preparation for the Passover. Upon the disciples telling Jesus about the "wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings" (Mark 13:1) of the temple complex, Jesus told them, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down" (verse 2). Afterwards Peter, James, John and Andrew approached Jesus privately and asked Him, "when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are going to be fulfilled" (v. 4). Jesus then explained to them what was to come, including many deceivers (Matthew 13:6), "wars and rumors of wars" (Matthew 13:7), famines and earthquakes (Matthew

13:8), yet these were just the beginning of the times of the end (v. 8). Then would come persecution (Matthew 13:9, 11), including death (v. 12), and the spread of the Gospel to the extent of the known world (v. 10, with final fulfillment in Revelation 14:6). After the "beginning of the birth pains" (v. 8e), the Antichrist will be revealed and bring an end to the restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem (Matthew 13:14). Although this prophecy was partially fulfilled by the Roman general Titus during the siege of Jerusalem during AD 70, the text is clear that another siege is in sight since Jesus warning is a global one, not just a local one concerning the city of Jerusalem. He said, "if the Lord had not cut short the days no human being would be saved" (v. 20). This and the corresponding testimony in the Book of Revelation make it clear that these events are yet future. This brings us up to today's reading which details events which begin after or during the unveiling of the first six seals in the Book of Revelation. The "gathering of the elect" (v. 27) about which we will read is the same event that we studied in the first reading from Daniel 12.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 13:24-32 NAS95 24 "But in those days, after that tribulation, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, 25 AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. 26 Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. 27 And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven. 28 Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 Even so, you too, when you see these things happening, recognize that He is near, right at the door. 30 Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. 32 But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."*

The opening verse of the reading is nearly the same as what John described with the opening of the sixth seal in the Book of Revelation. "*12 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; 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree casts its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. 14 The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places*" (Revelation 6:12-14). In the time just prior to the return of the Lord Jesus, the world will experience miraculous cosmic signs revealing God's power (vv. 24 – 25). At some point during the mid-point of a seven year period counting from a peace treaty made with Jerusalem to settle the worldwide chaos surrounding control over that tiny but religiously important region, Jesus Christ "will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds" (v. 27). While there is much speculation about the sequence of events, this is the event we discussed in the first reading that, in my opinion, includes the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 15:50–54), the return of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:11), and the resurrection of the dead up until that time (Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29). Beyond this point the period known as the Great Tribulation or the Day of the Lord will commence during which God will bring an end to the Antichrist's religious and commercial systems of mystery Babylon and Babylon the Great

(Revelation 18). Although we don't yet understand what form this Babylon will take, we know that it will exalt itself against God much in the same way as the people did with the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

As the reading continued, Jesus explained to His disciples how to discern the signs of the times by telling them the parable of the fig tree. In the same way that they could discern the ripeness of the fig tree and that the summer was near they would also be able to discern that the end times were at their doorstep when the signs He gave them were at hand. He told them that once people (not necessarily them) saw these signs that the current generation would see the whole process completed during their lifetime (v. 30). Finally, through the mystery of the functions of the Three Persons of the Godhead, Jesus explained that the timing of the events was known only to God the Father (v. 32).

What does all of this talk about the horrible events of the end times mean to us today? Jesus calls us to live with an expectation of His imminent return. We are to be good stewards of the gifts that He has given to us. He said in Matthew's retelling of the Olivet Discourse, "*For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes*" (Matthew 24:44-46). We too must learn to discern the times by studying the imminent signs that will precede the return of the Lord, as you did today. Although the study of the end times may seem daunting, the Bible lays out a clear pattern of events that people alive during that time should expect to see. As time marches closer and closer to the fulfillment of these events, we should expect to see the "beginning of birth pains" described in Mark 13:8. We must expect to be persecuted on an increasing level for our faith, even to the point of death. The point of Jesus' teaching about His imminent return was to provide us with comfort that He is not far away, and He will return soon in fulfillment of His promises to us and to Israel. Saint Paul said, "Therefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18) regarding the catching up of the church to heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. What do you find comforting about the words from the first and third readings? How can you encourage and challenge others with your faith in Jesus' imminent return?
2. When you think about the fact that Jesus has paid fully for your sin debt, what inner response does this evoke? What outer response seems fitting for you to reflect this reality in your life this week? How can you live in light of this reality?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 01-21-2018



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

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Jonah. Jonah was a Prophet who came from the region near Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. The context of the reading is the fulfillment of God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach to his foreign Gentile enemy. You may be familiar with what transpired in the first two chapters before Jonah finally obeyed God. His disobedience included getting on a ship going in the opposite direction at which point a fierce storm arose that threatened the lives of all of those on the ship. The sailors threw Jonah overboard where he was swallowed by a great fish. After being in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights it finally vomited him up on the shore. This is where we enter the story. *Note: All of the verses in the range from 1-10 have been included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

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

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

Jonah was reluctant to bring this message of salvation to the Gentiles who were also his enemies. This story provides insight to the human heart. Even though Jonah had received a direct revelation from God as a prophet, he was at first unwilling to share that message with those whom he deemed unworthy. There is a little bit of this in all of our hearts, it is called spiritual pride. In contrast to Jonah's hard heartedness we see the surprise responsive hearts of the Ninevites (Gentile enemies of Israel). The Lord is no respecter of persons. We have this concept corroborated in Acts 10, "Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). The story of Jonah reminds us to reflect God's heart, which loves all people (John 3:16).

Introduction to the Second Reading:

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

Second Reading:

29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives

should be as though they had none; 30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; 31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

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

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

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

Gospel Reading:

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

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

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

What we can see about God's heart from this passage is that He reaches out to the least likely candidates. First, Jesus proclaimed the Good News to the common person. One would believe that

the Messiah would choose an elite class of religious leaders who show great promise in leading the kingdom. Instead, just as we saw in the first reading, God is no respecter of persons. The prerequisite for life in the kingdom is repentance and belief, not religious pedigree. In addition, God chose the lowly to be His representatives.

In my life, I have had to reconsider my beliefs regarding who would or would not come to believe in Jesus Christ. I worked in a state prison where I saw convicted criminals give their heart to the Lord that provoked deep change in their lives. Someone who would have been manipulative and self-seeking became trustworthy and sacrificial. One man in particular was a practicing Muslim and had even adopted a Muslim name. Over the years, his heart became softened and one day another of the professors led him to express faith in the Lord Jesus. This is just one example of people who are often marginalized by the Christian society thinking that they will never come to the Lord. How we treat people is a reflection of God's heart for them and that He wants all men to come to the knowledge of everlasting life in Him (2 Peter 3:9).

Reflection Questions

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

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

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 11-19-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with the first reading from Proverbs in which we see the wise stewardship of God's resources by a godly woman. Then we move to the second reading from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. Finally, we close with a kingdom parable from Saint Matthew in which we also see God's call for careful stewardship of the resources He has given to us.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Proverbs. This Scripture was written by King Solomon and is a book of wisdom regarding practical and godly living. The main theme in the reading is how a godly person is a careful steward of their time, talents, and treasures given to them from God. This is the same theme that we will explore later in the Gospel lesson.

Note: All the skipped verses between 31:13-31 were included in order to provide the full context.

First Reading:

10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain. 12 She does him good and not evil All the days of her life. 13 She looks for wool and flax And works with her hands in delight. 14 She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar. 15 She rises also while it is still night And gives food to her

household And portions to her maidens. 16 She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard. 17 She girds herself with strength And makes her arms strong. 18 She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night. 19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle. 20 She extends her hand to the poor, And she stretches out her hands to the needy. 21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet. 22 She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple. 23 Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land. 24 She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen. 25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future. 26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. 27 She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. 28 Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying: 29 "Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all." 30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised. 31 Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates. (Proverbs 31:10-31)

Among other things that emerge from the reading, foremost among them we see that the "Proverbs 31 woman" is one who fears the Lord (v. 30). The big idea from the reading is that a godly person is a careful steward of the gifts they receive from God.

Many points arise from the text, here are a few.

- The godly woman works willingly, not under compulsion (v. 13, "in delight"). She also goes to great lengths in order to get things done (v. 13b-ff).
- The godly woman is a servant to others, even to her own servant (v. 15). She is not a sluggard, but works hard in her service to others.
- She is an entrepreneur (v. 16). In that era her husband would have had to make the actual transaction for the purchase of land, but she was the instigator of it and the one who took care in planting and tending the vineyard.
- She understands that what she gains is from God (v. 18).
- She is optimistic about her future, because she knows that she belongs to God (v. 35, 30b).

The bottom line is that the godly woman is like Jesus, a servant, Someone who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28). She is a faithful steward of the gifts that God has given to her. Faithfulness and careful stewardship are common themes throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. We will see this theme continue later in the Gospel lesson.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians. The context is Paul's discussion of the Day of the Lord that we discussed in a previous edition of Mass Notes. This is the period of time at the end of the tribulation period in which Israel finally returns to worship of their Lord. The reading today is a warning to the people living in that era to be watchful for the Lord's return. Watchfulness for the return of the Lord Jesus is a continuing theme in the New Testament.

Second Reading:

1 Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. 2 For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. 3 While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. 4 But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; 5 for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; 6 so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:1-6)

Just like the parable of the virgins that we will discuss in the introduction to the Gospel reading, everyone is called to be watchful for the return of the Lord. They are to be certain that they find faith in Jesus Christ while they still have the opportunity to do so (Romans 13:11) because nobody knows the hour when the Lord will return (Matthew 24:36). As we move onto the Gospel lesson we will see how God places a high value upon not only being watchful for His return, but also in being a good steward of the things that He has given to us.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel lesson is from Saint Matthew. The reading today is part of what is called the Lord's "Olivet Discourse" which encompasses Matthew 24:1 – 25:46. In this Sermon Jesus describes what is going to happen at the close of the church age. This portion of Matthew contains "kingdom parables" that begin with our Lord using the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like." Today's reading begins in chapter 25 verse 14. The chapter starts with Jesus saying, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be comparable to . . ." (Matthew 25:1a). The Lord then goes on to tell the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), which has the same theme of watchfulness seen in the second reading.

Being watchful for the Lord is closely related to being **prepared** for His return, meaning we must already be a citizen of the kingdom before He comes. In the parable of the ten virgins, the Lord described how five of the virgins were prepared for the bridegroom and five were not. In Jewish culture the practice was for the groom to come at an unexpected time. The application of this parable is that half of the virgins were prepared for the Lord Jesus' return by studying the Scriptures and coming to a saving knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ, while the other five were lost and destined for eternal separation from God in Hell. In the context of chapter 25, the application is that at some point during the end times the Lord Jesus will return to gather His Church. Those who are left behind will enter into the time of God's judgment known as the Day of the Lord. Only God knows people's true hearts so no one should wait to receive God's plan of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ because it may end up being too late.

The reading today opens with another of Jesus' "kingdom parable" introductions, "For it is just like" (v. 14a). What Jesus is saying is, "The Kingdom of God is like . . ." As you read, try to determine the main theological idea that emerges from the reading.

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Gospel Reading:

14 For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. 16 Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. 17 In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. 18 But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 22 Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' 24 And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. 25 'And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.' 26 But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. 27 'Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. 28 'Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.' 29 For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30)

The big idea that emerges from the reading is that stewardship is based on knowing and trusting the heart of the Master. Misguided understanding of the Master's heart leads to living in self-protective, ungodly ways with one's talents, as was the case with the man who buried his talent. The ones who understood and trusted the Master's generous heart were able to take risks and multiply what was entrusted to them. Notice the misconception of the "wicked and lazy slave." He miscalculated the Master's heart when he revealed his deep distrust of him: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground" (verses 24-25). He was blaming his wickedness and laziness on the Master's seemingly unpredictable and untrustworthy character. But the Master smartly revealed the inconsistency in his argument. If he was truly afraid, it seems that he would have at least been wise enough to produce some interest, even if out of fear, if nothing else. The man made an eternal miscalculation when he did not trust the Master's heart.

This kingdom parable is very relevant to our lives today. Here are some ways in which understanding and applying Jesus' teaching to our lives helps to accomplish the plans He has for us.

- Knowing and trusting the Master's heart is of utmost importance. We should be spending our

time and energy on this endeavor so that we become wise stewards of what is entrusted to us. We look forward to the day when we will enter into our Master's joy. We can trust that it will all be worth it to hear these words of affirmation.

- Although people in this age are entrusted with different levels of abilities and worldly good, if they are faithful in being good stewards of them they are equally rewarded and entrusted with more responsibilities in heaven. Jesus said to the servant that gained five talents from the original five invested, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 21, emphasis added). Likewise, He told the one that was entrusted with only two and gained two, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of **many** things; enter into the joy of your master" (v. 23, emphasis added).
- The world is a profitable place for investing God's gifts, both for God and for the people who are entrusted with them. The five talents that God invested in the world became ten (v. 20) and the two talents became four (v. 22). This magical doubling is from God even though it came through the agents to whom He entrusted it.
- Faithful servants have "gifts" to present to their masters, while unfaithful servants have only that which was given to them by God who owns it all in the first place. As believers we are called to invest our time, talents, and treasures in the service of God so that we may have something to present to him when we too stand in judgment before him. Our judgment won't be for salvation, but for rewards.
- Believers come to the understanding that all that they have is from God, as we saw in the first reading about the godly woman in Proverbs 31. In contrast, unbelievers never come to this understanding, because they are carnally minded (Romans 8:6). Saint Paul said, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).
- The world's resources flow through a worldly power structure of ungodly masters (v. 24b). Although there are exceptions to this principle, the richest people in the world are almost universally nonbelievers (with an exception being John Rockefeller). Although they don't understand their responsibility of stewardship of God's resources during their lives, they will after they die.

The reading closes with Jesus' teaching that Hell is real, just as heaven is real. Unbelievers will be far worse off in Hell than they are on earth (v. 29). They will be very worried (v. 25) when they stand before the Lord who will judge them for how they used the resources that he gave to them. Though in the parable the unfaithful servant was nagged with worry about giving his report to his master, in the end his judgment will be far worse.

These are sobering words from our Lord and are far from the only time that He warned anyone who would listen about the reality of Hell. Jesus spoke about it in Matthew 11:23 where he described the place with the name "Hades." In Matthew 5:23 the word for hell is rendered from the Greek "Gahenna" while in today's reading the term in "outer darkness" (v. 30a). In the Bible we count some 38 times where this dark destination is designated as the future home of the wicked beginning

with Psalm 9:17 and ending with Revelation 21:8. Jesus implores people to take radical steps to prevent themselves from entering this place. In Mark chapter 9 Jesus told the people to even cut off their hand if it causes them to stumble, for "it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire" (Mark 9:43).

Today's readings remind us of the urgency of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are perishing. God calls us to bring light to the lost generation who without faith in the Lord Jesus will enter the place He described in the Gospel with no hope of escape. My readers may remember a story that I once told about a deeply troubling dream I had many years ago about such a place. I believe that God gave me this to remind me of the urgency in reaching people for the Lord Jesus Christ. In my dream I was in a place that was far away and I felt an utter sense of hopelessness and utter doom. I felt that I was in a place that I would never leave, and was without hope. I pray that nobody would ever have to experience such a dream, and even more that nobody would enter such a place for real at the end of their life on earth. The media may make light of hell as a place guarded by a man in a red suit with a pitchfork in his hand, but the reality of hell is all too real for those who enter there. I pray that through today's study all of us may remember our mission in reaching people with the good news of the Gospel.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you view the Master's heart? Is He generous and gracious, thereby freeing you from self-protective ways, so that you can take risks with what He has entrusted to you? Or do you view Him like the one talent servant, who saw God as a harsh task-master, blaming God for his own laziness and wickedness?

2. The world we live in is unpredictable. We don't know what each new day will bring, but God has given us some landmarks of the end times. How does the Proverbs 31 woman face the future? How did Paul encourage the Thessalonians to face the future? What truths about the Master's heart and the future will allow you to face the near and eternal future with confidence?

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