

- In her famous autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, St. Thérèse of Lisieux mentions an incident in the confessional in which her confessor pronounced that she had never in her life committed a mortal sin.
- To think: the Little Flower never once forfeited the sanctifying grace given to us in baptism! It's extraordinary.
- Yet, even though St. Thérèse managed to live her life without committing a mortal sin and was, therefore, never in danger of going to hell, she still said at the end of her life that she would go to God with empty hands.
- What she meant by that is that she did not want to rely on any of her own merits to get into Heaven. St. Thérèse wanted to enter Heaven solely on account of God's goodness, love, and mercy. She wanted Him to have all the credit for her salvation.
- In this, St. Thérèse gives us some good food for thought about how we approach the question of our own salvation, and how we will get to Heaven.
- In our American minds, I dare say that so many of us think in terms of what I mentioned last Sunday re: our virtues and vices being akin to debits and credits that can be balanced against each other in some type of divine accounting system.
- But it's not true. We are saved by God's grace alone. We get to go to Heaven only because of God's mercy. And while our salvation does depend on our cooperation with God's grace, even our capacity to cooperate with God's grace *is* a grace from God.
- In short, we *need* God. And the more we recognize our utter need for God, the more likely we seek Him out and receive His love and mercy.
- Curiously, both our first reading and Gospel today mention the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. If we are going to understand the full import of these readings, we have to know just a little about these lands.
- Genesis 35 tells us that Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the sons of Jacob, who was also known as Israel. Israel had two wives: Leah and Rachel.
- Zebulun was born of Leah, while Naphtali was born of Rachel's handmaid, Bilhah. In turn, the descendants of these two men became two of the 12 tribes of Israel.
- These particular tribes settled in the northern part of Israel. Zebulun was in southern Galilee, while Naphtali was in eastern Galilee, right along the Sea of Galilee.
- Sadly, Zebulun and Naphtali were amongst the 10 tribes that gave up their faith in God and turned toward worldly things. Prophets preached and warned them about the evils they were committing, but they never converted back to the one true God.
- Eventually, the Lord degraded these lands, as both of these tribes were overrun by the Assyrians, with the survivors being scattered. This led to Gentiles coming to settle in Galilee, hence the term "Galilee of the Gentiles."
- Galilee became a land with a mixed population, a spiritually dark and confused place, whose people were thought to be backward and brutish.
- So, this is why Nathaniel asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" in John 1:46. It's why the Pharisees exclaimed in John 7:52 that no prophet arises from Galilee. The place was deemed to be a rather forsaken place, a land of darkness.

- And yet, as Isaiah prophesies in our first reading, God will have mercy and glorify those lands. For it was those people who walked in darkness, yet who saw a great light. “Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone.”
- In this we see one of the great biblical reversals, in which the wisdom of man cannot foresee or make sense of the wisdom of God. For the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the darkest, and seemingly unredeemable places in Israel.
- In man’s wisdom, we would allow Zebulun and Naphtali to remain in darkness and gloom, to suffer their just desserts for abandoning God. But not as man sees does God see – and thank goodness for that!
- God knows how much we need Him. In His wisdom God chose to become one of us and grow up in a place where the need for His mercy was greatest! And in this knowledge we are given a lesson.
- And the lesson is this: no one, absolutely no one is beyond redemption. Indeed, as our Lord told St. Faustina, the greatest of sinners have the greatest claim on His mercy.
- God is so intent on saving His people that He never writes off anyone, no matter how terrible or prolific their sins may be.
- He is the Good Shepherd, Who is willing to leave behind the 99 to find the lost 1 who has wandered away. He is the Light of the World that is willing to shine upon the darkest of hearts. Indeed, He is the *light that the darkness cannot overcome*.
- So, at their heart these readings are meant as an encouragement to us, especially those of us who have committed serious sin in our lives – which is most of us.
- There’s always a way back to God when we’ve sinned and severed, or at least damaged, our relationship with Him. As I’ve told you so many times before, God wants to save us more than we want to be saved – such is His love for us.
- We need God to heal us, and Jesus wants to cleanse and heal us, just as He cleansed and healed lepers in the Gospel.
- Yet, how many of us are fairly indifferent to Christ nonetheless? How many of us are lukewarm in our practice of the Faith, perfunctorily coming to Mass because we know we’re obliged to do so, rather than coming to Mass purely out of love for God?
- As we think about God’s love, which has been made so manifest to us through the Advent and Christmas cycle, how do we respond? What does God expect of us?
- Outside of repenting, of course, a couple of things come to mind. First, God wants us to have faith in Him. He wants us to believe in His love and mercy.
- He wants us to have the faith like that of the centurion, who exclaimed: “Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant shall be healed.”
- Our Lord also desires that we live with a fervent hope of our salvation, seeing Heaven as our true home, and prioritizing all of life’s demands such that the pursuit of Heaven is our number 1 priority.
- But God also wants us to love Him above all else and our neighbors as ourselves. And loving our neighbors as ourselves means that we must strive to look upon others as God looks upon them – with compassion and mercy, even those we perceive to be enemies.
- Remember: no one is beyond redemption. Jesus wants to save each and every person, and those who are the greatest sinners among us have the greatest claim on His mercy.

- Our Lord is both mighty and merciful. He can do all things, even save the worst among us. So, let's live with authentic faith, hope, and love, never rendering evil for evil, but always treating others with the mercy God wants to show us all.