



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

The Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 22, 2017

St. Mary of the Assumption

Today's Themes in Scripture

The people of God belong to many communities - kingdom, nations, states, ethnic and cultural groups, and church communities. Each of these entities makes a claim on their individual members, but the people of God live in two worlds. We live in a temporal world with its many social orders but also in the kingdom of God into which we were called at our baptism. Today's Scriptures challenge us to think about our responsibilities and loyalties to the worlds in which we live and to consider how we find and maintain a balance between what we owe to God and to everyone else.

In the First Reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks in the voice of God, to Cyrus, the Persian king who ruled over Babylon and the conquered, exiled Jews. Cyrus was a pagan and in his time, every nation had its own god to whom the people appealed for favor and protection. Cyrus did not know the God of Israel, but when God spoke to him, he informed Cyrus that it was he who had chosen Cyrus to be king. It was he who had granted Cyrus his authority as ruler, and he who supported and protected him as king. God repeatedly told Cyrus that he, the Lord, is the one and only God; all the local deities are false gods with no power or authority. With his authority over all of creation, God can choose whomever he pleases to achieve his will and purpose. God chose Cyrus, a pagan, to execute his will on behalf of his chosen people of Israel. Though he did not know the God of Israel, Cyrus would obey God's will and would allow the Jews to return home from exile and to rebuild their temple.

In the opening words of his letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul addresses the Christians there as a church community, called to faith in Jesus by the will and love of God. Paul reminds them that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they are brothers and sisters now, and should strive to live lives of faith, love, and hope. The way that they live should be a reflection of the love that God has shown them in calling them to new life in Jesus.

In the Gospel, after many challenging encounters with Jesus, the chief priests and elders have now turned against him and actively begin to plot against him. They enlisted the help of their enemies, political backers of the Roman ruler Herod, to trap Jesus over a question of taxes. To the Jews, Roman taxes were a despised symbol of Roman subjugation and oppression. If Jesus advocated paying Roman taxes, he took the side of the Romans against the Jews; if he spoke out against them, he openly challenged Roman authority and could be put to death for such defiance. Jesus sidestepped their trap as he acknowledged their reality: as Roman subjects, Jews could still be faithful Jews by returning Caesar's own money through taxes. The more important question: what do they owe to God?

Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

Reading I: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

I have called you by name.

- When Israel was exiled in Babylon, the people found it difficult to understand how God could allow them to be captives in a strange land.
- Isaiah comforts the people with the message that God would use another nation and another leader to restore the people to their own land.
- God called Cyrus, the Persian leader, to defeat the Babylonians and to give the Jews permission to return and rebuild Jerusalem and its surroundings.

Responsorial Psalm: Ps. 96: 1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10.

Give the Lord glory and honor.

Reading II: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b

We thank God for your faith!

- Paul's greeting to the Thessalonians marks the beginning of his thanksgiving to God for their fervent response to his preaching.
- Thessalonica was a crucial place for spreading the Gospel throughout Macedonia.
- Paul is thankful that the Church is flourishing.

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-21

Keep your priorities clear.

- Today's passage from Matthew's Gospel is the first of four stories about Jesus' conflict with the Jewish authorities.
- The Pharisees try to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes.
- Jesus refuses to answer the question on the level that it is presented to him, instead he raises the discussion to a higher level; teaching that in all cases, our responsibility to God is primary.

Reprinted with permission. LifelongCatechesis.OSV.org.



Balancing God and Caesar

The money of the United States bears the official national motto: "In God We Trust." It's a curious and sometimes contentious part of our history. Apparently, the motto first appeared on coins during the Civil War, a not so subtle assertion that God was on the side of the Union. During the height of the Cold War, when the atheistic Soviet Union was our most frightening enemy, Congress passed laws making the phrase the official motto of the United States and ordering that it should be printed on all U.S. paper currency.

When the motto and its exhibition have been challenged in court, the decisions have ruled that it does not favor the establishment of religion and therefore is not unconstitutional. A 2004 Court of Appeals ruling said that references to God on money or in the Pledge of Allegiance "have lost through rote repetition any significant religious content." On the other extreme, President Teddy Roosevelt called references to God on coins sacrilegious. God and country, church and state, the debate has confounded Christians since the time of Jesus.

In today's Gospel, we see the start of a strange alliance between Pharisees and Herodians, groups whose only commonality seemed to be their opposition to Jesus. In one sense, they might be taken as the representatives of strict religion and the folks who could drop all scruples and self-servingly support the local dynasty. When this odd combo of church and state factions questioned Jesus about the legitimacy of paying taxes, they thought they had come up with the perfect dilemma. If Jesus said, "pay," he implicitly acknowledged the legitimacy of the Roman occupation, pagan rule over God's people. On the other hand, those people remembered that less than 30 years before this happened, a man called Judas the Galilean had been executed for starting a revolution based on refusing to pay taxes. His sons met the same fate in the year 47 CE. Tax resistance was dangerous in those days.

Jesus was never one to be bested in political theater. Just when they thought they had him on the hook, he reeled them in. It was time for show and tell. He asked for a coin. Whose picture was on it? The coin they carried displayed not only an image of Tiberius Caesar but also a written declaration that he was the son of the divine Augustus. The other side of the coin had the words *pontifex maximus* declaring that Caesar was the most high priest. The very sight of such a coin would rankle strongly religious or nationalistic Jews. For the Gospel writers, the memory of the coin was the height of irony.

Then Jesus responded to their interrogation. When they admitted that the coin bore an image of Caesar, he handed them a riddle: "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Jesus' response would satisfy no purist. The righteous religious would see him as promoting capitulation to the pagans. The Herodians, the "if you can't lick 'em, join 'em" crowd, would realize they had just been given a very tenuous pass. The underlying question is what could belong to Caesar that does not already belong to God? Jesus left it to each age to discern how to interpret that for their own times.

The Gospel gives us Jesus' response to groups that were out to trap him. What about folks who are sincere in wondering when supporting Caesar stops being legitimate? When must we be conscientious objectors? There are a few details in the story that offer clues to the riddle. First of all, any practicing Jew who heard Jesus say something about what belongs to God would have heard echoes of prayers like Psalm 24 which begins, "The earth is the Lord's and all it holds, the world and those who dwell in it."

The second hint comes through the part of the story that Jesus didn't emphasize. The coin the questioners were carrying was blasphemous to religious Jews. It symbolized all the institutions that tend to divinize themselves as the ultimate in importance or authority. The inscription on the coin could be compared to the statement, "My country, right or wrong," or any other declaration of absolute allegiance to anything on the Earth. That inscription and attitude cross the line giving to Caesar what belongs to God. Seen in that light, an answer to the riddle begins to appear. Caesar, the common good, society, can all make legitimate claims on us. We are responsible to create societies which serve the good of all. That's what we owe to Caesar.

If the God in whom we trust is the God of Jesus, what we owe to God is a blank check.

Written by Mary McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph.

Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Celebration Publications. October, 2017.