

Cycle A 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading I, Is 45:1, 4-6

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp, subduing nations before him, and making kings run in his service, opening doors before him and leaving the gates unbarred: For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not. I am the LORD and there is no other, there is no God besides me. It is I who arm you, though you know me not, so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun people may know that there is none besides me. I am the LORD, there is no other.

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

R. (7b) Give the Lord glory and honor.

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all you lands. Tell his glory among the nations; among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

For great is the LORD and highly to be praised; awesome is he, beyond all gods. For all the gods of the nations are things of nought, but the LORD made the heavens.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Give to the LORD, you families of nations, give to the LORD glory and praise; give to the LORD the glory due his name! Bring gifts, and enter his courts.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Worship the LORD, in holy attire; tremble before him, all the earth; say among the nations: The LORD is king, he governs the peoples with equity.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Reading II, 1 Thes 1:1-5b

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God, how you were chosen. For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.

Gospel, Mt 22:15-21

The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" Knowing their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax." Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." At that he said to them, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

The Scriptures today tell us that God loves us so much that he chose us...He calls us each by name and arms us. We heard how He did this with the Christians in Thessalonica and even with Cyrus a pagan king. We all are made in His image, we belong to him, yet we wear a human smudge. It is only with divine forgiveness, grace and power that we can repay to God what is God's. And so, we respond to His call with generosity and service to others. We were created for this.

In today's Gospel Jesus says, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." There seem to be two kingdoms, God's and Caesar's. Which do we live in?

Are we "Sunday Catholics," giving to God the hour per week at Mass, and then become absorbed with the stuff in our lives: the clothes, the cars, food, sports, houses, work and the almighty dollar? You name it. Are we forever envious and seeking more? Do we find ourselves anxious or afraid? Do we leave it to the good Christians to pray to God, while we live a less than holy life?

Or, do we try it the other way around? Perhaps we are serious about our faith and spirituality, and try to get away from enjoyment of worldly things and to live uncorrupted lives. After all we are spiritual people living an earthly existence. Push this notion too far, of course, and everything of worth and value on earth could become something to shun because we think it is not of God. These are inevitable results, when we picture God and Caesar on opposite sides. But, what would happen if we recognized that we live in His kingdom where both God and Caesar were present together?

A few years ago I was in Naperville; IL to celebrate the 50th reunion of my high school class. Having grown up in Naperville, I recalled many of my childhood activities that weekend. At Ellsworth grade school for example, we became Polio Pioneers in 1954 along with 1.3 million 1st, 2nd and 3rd graders across the country. Polio was a dreaded crippling disease which struck people without warning. I attended the Evangelical

United Brethren church where I began my relationship with God and started hearing His call. On October 4, 1957 the Russians launched their Sputnik satellite. Many of us were tested for math and science. I remember taking 7th and 8th grade math in 7th grade, and Algebra in 8th grade so we would be ready for advanced math in high school. But, my favorite memory of all was on the 1st day of high school meeting my best friend Terry in gym class. We ran track together and jogged by the Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church on the way to practice. One time I suggested we attend each other's church. Terry said he doubted the priest would let him attend mine, but me coming to his church was no problem☺ And I did attend Mass there many times, especially when Terry's dad woke us up early on Sunday morning after coming in late the night before. In 1963 when I declined the invitation to attend a protestant seminary I didn't realize that God would continue to call. I wanted to attend the University of Illinois to become an Electrical Engineer and make a lot of money, after all I was preparing for that since 7th grade. Well, I became a Catholic when I was in college, I graduated with a BSEE, and then He called me to be a husband and father. Finally, some 20 years ago I answered His call to journey with Him even more. Little did I know growing up in Naperville that I would be at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church one Sunday as a Catholic Deacon preaching the Good News on my reunion weekend.

So, what would happen if we recognized that we live in His kingdom, the one kingdom where both God and Caesar were present together? The question then becomes, "what if we were created exactly to be in a place where God is present to the world?" What if, in spite of the voices within us saying that we need more stuff and that we are not worth much without it—in spite of the setbacks of life, the illness, the floods, the death of loved ones, the flatness—what if God created each one of us with room inside where He can come to live, purely out of love for us? In fact, how would it be if God were a companion who truly accepted us and forgave us completely...whenever necessary? Wouldn't this give us another way to look at our life on earth and in heaven?

Yes, I think so. Instead of seeing the people and the goods of this life as answers to our narrow desires, we might gradually allow ourselves to look with appreciation upon them as the blessings they are. As we begin to recognize we are living in His kingdom, maybe we could actually help Caesar to care for the earth and its people. Even small contributions in our life would assume importance because the living God is living among us. This is how being a Polio Pioneer in 1954 was such an important contribution...you see everyone knew someone stricken by polio...like Terry's Dad... but then, within 25 years, by 1979, polio was eradicated from the United States...It was Gone!...and in 2016 only 37 cases of polio were recorded worldwide! Can you imagine...only 62 years to wipe out polio?

The older I get, the more I see how the lessons learned in our childhood formed a foundation for the rest of our lives. I have recognized that we may struggle to believe that God has chosen us and calls us each by name. It takes some serious reflection to recognize God's image in us and others. We will always have a way to go, I know, but His call is here, the time is now, and the grace is ours by God's divine love. You see, repaying to God what belongs to God is called the Christian life. Through the prophet Isaiah God tells us it is He who arms us. And, St. Paul tells us we are loved and chosen by God with Jesus as the King of our realm...and the Holy Spirit is our helper and guide. Instead of greed, instead of having to possess things...generosity and service becomes our identity.

We were created for this!