

TWENTY-NINTH
SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalm 96:1, 3–5, 7–10

O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts.

Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, “The LORD is king!

The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.”

Reading the Word

Isaiah 45:1, 4–6

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose

right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed:

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.

I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.

1 Thessalonians 1:1–5

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 always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our

FIRST READING

Isaiah 45:1, 4–6

PSALM

Psalm 96:1, 3–5, 7–10

SECOND READING

1 Thessalonians 1:1–5

GOSPEL

Matthew 22:15–21

message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

Matthew 22:15–21

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

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Hearing the Word

“The Scope of Authority”

The question raised in this Sunday's Gospel is whether, or not, to pay taxes to the civil authority. This question, however, is not simply about financial obligations towards the state, but rather a more general question about the competence, and the scope, of the civil authority over the life of the people.

The first reading comes from the second part of the book of Isaiah, which aims at comforting the Israelites living in the Babylonian exile. In the section of Isaiah 44:24 – 45:8 from which today's reading is drawn, the prophet offers a theological explanation for the role that the Persian king Cyrus played in ending this tragic period in Israelite history. Cyrus conquered the Babylon empire and, in 539 BC, issued a decree which allowed the deportees from various nations to return to their native lands (cf. 2 Chr 36:22-23). In the eyes of Isaiah, it was God himself who acted through Cyrus. The text read today contains God's speech addressing Cyrus as “his anointed one”. It might appear strange that a pagan king would be called “anointed” – the title normally reserved only for the rulers of the Israelites. Still, since it was Cyrus' decree that allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland, he played a special role in God's plan and was anointed to act “for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen”.

At the same time, it must be remembered that the call of Cyrus came without Cyrus being aware of serving God's purposes. Isaiah twice states that the Persian king acted “though you [Cyrus] do not know me”. God was able to work his purposes out through Cyrus without Cyrus prior knowledge of the Lord. Cyrus might be called an “unwitting agent” in execution of God's will, for the sake of Israel's liberation. This emphasizes that the real power behind all these events was God's, who steered Cyrus to carry out his will. Israel, who was invited to contemplate Cyrus' favorable action, was reminded that their God stood behind the grant of freedom, and Cyrus' civil authority served God's purpose of liberation and salvation.

The second reading contains the opening lines of the first letter to the Thessalonians. This short letter of Paul to the community in Macedonia is thought to be his earliest letter preserved in the New Testament, written by the apostle from Corinth in 51 AD. Following what will become the standard pattern for his letters, Paul begins with the section called a “thanksgiving”, given to God for his blessing involved in the foundation and growth of the Church in the city. Thus, Paul first gives thanks “to God for all of you”, acknowledging that God himself brought the Thessalonian believers to faith. Second, throughout this thanksgiving, Paul evidences and acknowledges the efforts

and virtues of the believers themselves, acknowledging their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ”. Paul was the founder of this community, yet, he does not show a patronizing, “from above” attitude, as if he was fully responsible for his converts favorable response to the Gospel. Rather, he calls them his “brothers and sisters”. All he says about their faith and acceptance of the Gospel shows Paul's deep conviction that it was not his power of persuasion that persuaded them to believe. Rather, the effectiveness of the “message of the gospel” was grounded “in power and in the Holy Spirit”. Paul knew full well that he and his coworkers were only God's agents and mediators in the proclamation and acceptance of the good news by the Thessalonians (cf. 2 Cor 2:1-5). They used their apostolic authority solely for this purpose.

The Gospel passage narrates an encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees which will initiate a series of disputes reported in Matthew ch. 22. This first dispute has a political character as it revolves around the payment of taxes to the Roman emperor. Taxation imposed by the Romans brought a heavy financial burden on the conquered population and was a painful reminder that the Israelites, though living in their own land, were a conquered and subjugated people.

The trap set for Jesus by his opponents posing a question

about taxes was brilliant. If Jesus said “yes” to the tax, he would appear to accept and agree with the Roman occupation, which would discredit him as a patriot and the Messiah who, in the eyes of most, was to liberate the nation from the hated Roman yoke. But if Jesus said “no” to the tax, he could be immediately accused of being a rebel and revolutionary, and denounced to the Roman authorities. For this reason, the Pharisees sent their disciples “along with the Herodians” who, as supporters of Herod Antipas, were collaborating with the Romans. In his answer, Jesus not only brilliantly avoided the trap, but also used it as an opportunity to deliver his teaching on the limits of the civil authority. His answer matched the brilliance of the trap set for him. He asked for a “coin used for the tax”. His opponents knew and used such coins, even though they should not have, because it bore the image of the Roman emperor Tiberius with the inscription “son of the divine Augustus”. Thus, it was an idolatrous object with an image of a man claiming divinity for himself. By saying, “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s”, Jesus admitted the lawfulness of paying taxes and giving to the emperor what belongs to him – a coin. However, by adding, “give to God the things that are God’s”, he placed a limitation on the emperor’s authority. The ruler may have authority over the economy, but he controls neither human life nor des-

tiny. This answer implied that, despite his claims and beliefs of many of his subjects, the emperor is no God. Since no Jew could ever argue with that view, his opponents were left speechless.

In one sentence Jesus acknowledged the necessity of recognizing the legitimacy of human authority over certain aspects of human life, showing that he was no rebel or violent revolutionary. At the same time, he indicated that humanity owes the ultimate obedience to the one to whom the entire creation belongs – God. In other words, no human leader can claim dominion over the entirety of human life and consider himself/herself equal in authority to God.

The readings of today help us to understand the Christian teaching on the scope and competence of various authorities. Civil authorities can and must collaborate in God’s plan of liberating and improving the life of people, as it was in the case of Cyrus and in the case of Paul who used his powers of speech and persuasion on behalf of God, to instill faith among the Thessalonians. Jesus powerfully stated that civil obedience is the right attitude, but it has limits. No human authority, not even that of the Roman emperor who claimed to be divine, can be considered absolute, and aspire to the position of God. Christians might owe taxes to the civil authority, but they owe their lives to God alone. The Psalmist reminds of this fact with

the call, “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name”.

Listening to the Word of God

The liturgy reminds us today of the place that civil authority holds in our lives. We respect our parents, leaders, church officials, and all those who are responsible for various aspects of our lives as citizens of our countries. Still, their authority is subject to yet higher authority of God, and the respect and obedience we pay to them, must be grounded in how well they serve that higher authority.

The first reading shows how God used the authority invested in king Cyrus for the purpose of liberating and saving the people of Israel from the Babylonian exile. God truly makes people and their leaders, instruments of salvation. We all, past, present and future leaders must know that God placed us in this position solely to serve the good of his people. Often, we look to our kings and leaders, the prominent figures whom we were called to emulate, with admiration. We also see and point out spectacular failures of many of our political leaders, and talk about how they failed in their duty. However, we ought to remember that we are all instruments in the hands of God, because we are also leaders with responsibility vested in us. And, like those great and visible public figures, we are and will be held responsible for our performance as leaders, in whatever capacity we are called to lead.

The readings call us to examine our attitudes towards authority. Some of us are already called to the service of authority, and some of us are aspiring to it. We ought to remember that God gives us authority for a purpose. It is not something that is meant solely for us to lord it over others. But we are called to be like Christ, who came to serve not to be served. It is only when we attune ourselves to God that we will be able to grasp the meaning and purpose of the authority he has given to us. For a Christian leader, the authority should be like that of Paul and his companions – aimed at leading the people towards the greatest good, which is God. There is a Malawian proverb which says that, “he who is leading and has no one following him is only taking a walk.” Let us be people who lead with good example in such a way that our friends and companions will see Christ acting and living in us. Let us be aware that in whatever group we find ourselves as leaders, small or great, we are God’s instruments wielded for the good of his own people whom we are serving. Let us not depend only on our efforts, but learn to lean on God. As to our civil authorities, we have to pay due respect to those in charge of us. However, it is also our duty to challenge their misdeeds such as corruption or neglect, realizing that they do not own our lives and have no right to damage them.

Jesus faced with the challenge from the civil authority taught that God’s own authority places a limit on the civil

authority. He did not condemn the civil authority, recognizing that it has its place and role in organizing the state and maintaining peace in it, so that everyone can live well. However, he denied that it can claim the right to own peoples’ lives. Taking this lesson to heart, we are invited to be critical in our political views and allegiances. In our exercise of the right to vote and choice of our leaders, we ought to examine and evaluate them on the basis on how well they represent and follow the Christian values of service, liberation and fostering life. Our choices ought never to be determined or clouded by ethnicity, social class or empty promises, as these mean nothing when it comes choosing leaders according to God’s heart.

Proverb

“He who
refuses
to obey
cannot
command.”

Action

Self-examination

On what grounds do I make my political choices? Are they based on Christian values?

What are my attitudes towards the rules and regulations that govern the institution or place where I am? Do I have respect for authority?

Response to God

As a believer, I wish to commit myself, be it in the family, school or place of work, to be at the service of all whom I will meet in the course of the day, by being available to them.

Response to your World

I will reflect on my political preferences and choices, are they in accordance with my faith? I will vote in the nearest elections according to the conclusion of this reflection.

In our prayer meeting as a group, let us place a flower vase made of clay or a clay pot and try to visualize ourselves as that fragile instrument (clay pot) in the hands of God. We will then share on how we can avail ourselves to God’s project of liberation and salvation of those around us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I thank you for the precious gifts of those you have chosen to guide us.

Grant to them the graces they need to carry out the task you have entrusted to them.

Help them to realize that you have gifted them the service of authority for the purpose of guiding your people for the common good.

Help us also to be good citizens. This we ask through Christ our Lord.