

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 45:1, 4-6

Cyrus was the founder of the Persian empire and as King of Persia he led the overthrow of the occupation by the Babylonians of Syria and Palestine in 539 B.C. The name Cyrus means shepherd, in Hebrew the name is *koresh* (from which David Koresh of Branch Davidian fame coined his name).

Cyrus is mentioned by name in our reading today even though Isaiah wrote at least 162 years earlier. Even if one accepts the theory of multiple authors for the book of Isaiah, today's reading would have been written some twenty years prior to the Persian victory.

Cyrus was known as a liberator who had a policy of restoring the images of captured gods to their original temples, which he often rebuilt. It is said that Cyrus was so impressed at seeing his name in the Jewish Holy Scriptures that he released the people in 538 B.C. to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. Since the Jews had no divine image to place in their temple, he returned the sacred vessels of the temple which was looted by Nebuchadnezzar.

45:1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus,

Cyrus is the chosen and anointed one to bring about the restoration of God's people.

whose right hand I grasp,

At their coronation, Babylonian kings grasped the hand of the patron god, Bel-Marduk. Here, Yahweh grasps the hand of Cyrus as the legitimate king to preside over the restoration of Israel.

Subduing nations before him, and making kings run in his service, Opening doors before him and leaving the gates unbarred:⁴ For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel my chosen one,

God has made a promise to Jacob on behalf of Israel (see Genesis 28:13-15).

I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not. ⁵ 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, ⁶ so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun men may know that there is none besides me. I am the LORD, there is no other.

God is directing Cyrus' steps. He is making sure that the world history converges on His designs for a tiny captured group of people, Israel. He hasn't violated Cyrus' free will, but He has guided Cyrus' actions.

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b

Today we start a five-week study of Saint Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

Accompanied by Silas, Saint Paul arrived at Thessalonika in the course of his second missionary journey (A.D. 49-52) after leaving Philippi around the summer of the year 50. The city, now known as Salonika, is situated on the Aegean Sea and was a flourishing center of trade in Saint Paul's time. Founded in 315 B.C. by Cassander, Thessalonika was named after his wife who was a sister of Alexander the Great. It came under Roman control in 186 B.C. As far as religion was concerned, it was a typical pagan city. Archaeology has unearthed the remains of many statues of gods and priestesses. Inscriptions discovered indicate that they were very ignorant of religious truth and had no clear notion of the survival of the soul after death.

There were quite a number of Jews living in Thessalonika in St. Paul's time. In keeping with his custom, St. Paul went first to the synagogue to proclaim the Good News: Jesus was the Messiah; the Old Testament prophecies had come true in Him, He had redeemed mankind by His passion, death and resurrection. As a result of his teaching many Jews and Gentiles came to believe, including "not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:4). His success earned him the envy of certain Jews who organized demonstrations and attacked the house where he was staying. This led to St. Paul and his companions leaving Thessalonika before the instruction of the converts was complete. These converts also encountered persecution by the Jews.

Because of this, St. Paul sent Timothy to confirm the converts. Upon his return to St. Paul, Timothy reported that the Thessalonians were persevering in faith and charity despite still being harassed. Timothy also reported that certain questions were troubling the Thessalonians – things to do with life after death, and the second coming (or parousia). These questions prompted St. Paul to write this first letter. It reassures the Thessalonians about the fate of those who had already died in the Lord.

Today we hear the opening greeting of this letter.

1:1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.

The beginning of this letter is in typical fashion of a Hellenistic letter: it mentions the writer(s) , the recipient(s), and a greeting. "Sylvanus" is believed to be the Silas of Acts 15

through 17, the one who accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey after Paul's quarrel with Barnabas and John Mark on the first journey. The letter is addressed to a group, not an individual, a gathering of Christians.

² We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers,

As is typical of Paul's letters, there is a prayer of thanksgiving.

unceasingly ³ calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The thanksgiving is occasioned by the faith, hope and charity of the Thessalonians in their service of God. This is the earliest mention in Christian writing of the three theological virtues.

before our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, brothers loved by God, how you were chosen. ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the holy Spirit and (with) much conviction.

Their acceptance of the faith is a consequence of election by God. This divine election was evident in the manner in which the gospel was preached and received among them. They have not just heard the message, but have acted upon it. St. Paul emphasizes that the power of the gospel lies not in the force of his own rhetoric but in the power of the Spirit of God.

"For to give thanks to God for them is the act of one testifying to how they have advanced in the faith. Not only are the Thessalonians praised by Paul, but Paul thanks God for them, as though God Himself had accomplished everything. Paul also teaches them to be moderate in their self-estimation, all but saying that all their growth is from the power of God." [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 398-404), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians* 1]

Gospel - Matthew 22:15-21

Recall that Jesus is in Jerusalem for His passion, death, and resurrection. It is the Wednesday of the first Holy Week and, as we heard last week, Jesus has been showing the chief priests and elders how God has been extending invitations to His people but they have been ignoring Him. Jesus' enemies are now convinced that they will have to arrest Him.

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap him in speech.

Today, entrapment is a legal defense to escape punishment.

¹⁶ They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians,

Supporters of the Herodian dynasty which was represented at that time by Herod Antipas,

tetrarch of Galilee. The Herodian fortunes were founded on unswerving loyalty to Rome; Herod the Great had proved this by magnificent political dexterity during the civil wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar. The Herodians and the Pharisees make an interesting combination – united only by the cause of bringing down Jesus.

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.

You are faithful to your word and impartial. This expresses the basic aspect of the biblical idea of justice: an impartiality that refuses to take a bribe and tilts in favor of the poorer litigant. The compliment conceals their deception.

17 Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?”

The position of the Herodians on this matter was quite clear. The party of the Zealots refused to admit the subjection of the people of God to a foreign power; the theoretical position of the Pharisees was identical with the Zealots, but they did not believe in the use of force to achieve independence. Either of the two proposed answers is going to offend one of the groups. The flattering words in which Jesus is addressed suggest that He was expected to take the Zealot position, which would subject Him to arrest.

18 Knowing their malice, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?”

Jesus recognizes that both groups are trying to get Him to endorse a position which will offend one of them.

19 Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” Then they handed him the Roman coin.

A denarius. The right to mint coinage is an act of sovereignty, and was jealously guarded by the Roman government. Satellite kings and free cities were permitted to issue coins, but it was clearly understood that this was done with Roman authorization. Unauthorized minting of coins was an act of rebellion.

20 He said to them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” 21 They replied, “Caesar’s.”

The inscription read “Tiberius Caesar Son Of The Divine Augustus, Great High Priest.” Since his image and inscription are on it, the coin must belong to Caesar.

At that he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus’ answer effectively evades the question rather than solves it. He does not appeal to the right but simply to the de facto existence of Caesar’s power, symbolized by Caesar’s

coinage. Whether Caesar has a right to rule is not touched by the answer. Jesus doesn't say what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God; this determination Jesus is left to the personal decision of each man, who must solve the opposing claims of God and Caesar. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:24 is valid here "No man can serve two masters."

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